

Decor Score: Outdoor furniture that's good enough for indoors

by *Rose_Bennett_Gilbert*

Q: We are getting ready to move furniture to the front porch for the first time - we bought the house last fall. I have a couple of questions: What color should we paint the ceiling? It's white now, but aren't all porch ceilings supposed to be blue? Also, what's the best furniture to use? We have old wicker, the real thing, but have been thinking about some of the new plastic wickers. What do you think?

A: Traditionally, porch ceilings are painted sky blue, presumably so you feel that you are truly sitting out in the open.

GET OUT - New all-weather fabrics and fibers put the posh into an al fresco living room. CNS Photo courtesy of Ken Gutmaker. There's no "rule," of course. But you might consider this before you race to repaint: Wonderful as they are, porches have a dark side, literally. The overhang tends to darken indoor rooms. You are getting a lot more light "bounce" from your present white ceiling than you will from even a light sky blue replacement color.

About the best furniture for outdoor living? Buying smart is much easier today, thanks to technological advances in weather-resistant fibers, fabrics and other materials. In the photo we show here (borrowed from a breath-of-fresh-air book called "On the Porch" by James M. Crisp and Sandra L. Mahoney, The Taunton Press, \$30), the handsome wicker settee and chairs are the real, old thing.

But fret not if you didn't inherit such treasures. Today's new wicker might not be wicker at all, but a tough, man-made look-alike that can take Mother Nature's bad moods in stride. Companies like LaneVenture (www.laneventure.com) and 100-year-old Lloyd/Flanders (www.lloydflanders.com), to name a couple, weave outdoor furniture from synthetic wicker that looks and feels like nature's best, except it's smoother to the touch and practically impervious to weather.

That goes for today's outdoor fabrics, trimmings and tassels, too. They're so attractive, and with such a soft hand, that top designers like Joe Ruggiero use them for pieces that will live pampered indoor lives. See what I mean at www.sunbrella.com.

Other manufacturers are heeding the call of the great outdoors. Check out the outdoor rugs at places like Capel (www.capelrugs.com). La-Z-Boy now offers a recliner designed for the laid-back lifestyle. Weighing in at 82 pounds, this is not a chair to be taken lightly.

We've come a long way from the day when porch sitting meant a creaking swing and lemonade.

Q: Can you spot legitimate decorating trends in designer show houses?

A: Think of designer show houses as a wetted finger in the winds of trends. Keep your eyes peeled as you tour, and you'll soon see that many of the design pros are hearing the same drumbeat, even though it shows up in different guises.

One handsome example is Designers' Showcase 2007 in what was home to Marshall Fields III and his wife in the early 20th century. Created by famed traditional architect John Russell Pope, Caumsett is one of many stately Long Island, N.Y., homes that have been rescued by the design team called Mansions & Millionaires, who stage them as designer showcases. (Caumsett is open through June 10. For more info: www.caumsettfoundation.org.)

Trends to pick up as one wanders through the almost endless - and endlessly elegant - rooms: crystal chandeliers are hanging in, pun intended, but they are showing up in smart, contemporary versions. Mirrored furniture a la the 1940s adds subtle bling to bedrooms and beyond. Khaki and what can only be called "West Elm" green (www.westelm.com) seem to be the colors of the moment. And uniformly wrapped books - a favorite, if frustrating, idea from the '70s - just might be making a comeback. Designer Billy Ceglia filled the shelves of his "calm, cool, collected" sitting room with rows of books, all clad in white jackets.

Smart thing: He did number each spine so you don't have to search forever to find a favorite read.

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