Samples of the outdoors make great indoor decor

by Mary James

If you walk on the beach, there's probably a jar full of shells somewhere in your house. If you've camped in the Sierra Nevada, maybe there are framed pressed wildflowers hung in the hallway. Or perhaps there's a needlepoint pillow of a hummingbird on your couch, a reminder of favorite garden visitors.

When folks who love the outdoors come inside, it seems natural to have a bit of nature at hand. This season, it is chic as well.

Bringing motifs and materials from the garden, ocean, jungle or forest home is a growing interior trend - and more.

"We think it's building into a lifestyle," says Robyn Arvedon, spokeswoman for HomeGoods, the decor and accessories chain. "There's a search for a more organic lifestyle in general, and people want to go back to something more simple, with ties to nature.

"And with all the news about global warming, everyone's senses are heightened and awareness raised. That's prompting it, too."

Susan Young of Fine Living, a San Diego boutique, sees natural decor as a perfect fit for people who enjoy outdoor living.

BACK TO NATURE - Earthy color, rich textures and objects from nature or reflective of the natural world fill a showroom at Fine Living in San Diego. The look 'mixes with almost any decor,' says owner Susan Young. CNS Photo.

"It's a look that works both indoors and outdoors," she says. "People like that natural feel because it brings with it good, warm feelings. And they want that in their home."

The look can be found in summer collections of retailers large and small. Pottery Barn touts Natural Style - everything from botanical prints to rattan furniture - that draw on nature's "immense power to both calm and inspire." A new line of hand-painted paper party accessories by Belgian artist and designer Isabelle de Borchgrave for Target has table and chair covers splashed with cabbage roses and nasturtiums. Trend reports from Lowe's and Home Depot see the demand for "green" products exploding.

While the natural look isn't necessarily "green," it's connected to the eco-chic attitude and eco-smart wares that reflect burgeoning concern for the environment.

"If the natural look is something you can buy into, this is an easy way to show you care about the environment," says Arvedon. "These things celebrate the natural world. Then maybe the next step is a hybrid car, etc."

Natural-look decor is versatile and can be spread throughout the home, Young believes.

"This look mixes with almost any kind of decor - Asian, Arts and Crafts, traditional," she says. "Some people might bring it into a room with furniture, some with accessories and some will use both."

Envisioning a natural-style room, Young aims for a lively interplay of textures. She may start by covering a wall or walls with grass cloth, a 1950s decor staple. "It's huge again," she says of the covering made of woven reeds or jute.

Occasional chairs could be of wicker, bamboo or woven fibers like abaca, a tropical plant related to the banana. A pillow covered with a fern print, a lamp with a wood base and a textured shade, a wood-framed mirror and woven roman blinds add to the mood.

Accents could include plants in natural clay pots or baskets, or dried magnolia leaves or grasses in wall-mounted woven urns.

"I think the result is warm and homey," she says.

Rooms like baths and dining rooms become eco-chic with natural and nature-inspired accessories, says Arvedon. Hand-painted dinnerware with a leaf pattern and coordinating bowls with lettuce-like ruffled edges are perfect mates for all-organic meals. Center the table with Chinese fir tree root bowls filled with apples or walnuts.

In the powder room, trays, containers and other accessories made of bamboo and a mirror circled with gilded twigs "communicate the beauty of nature and the outdoors," Arvedon points out. "All are so simple and elegant - and very affordable."

Beach lovers might prefer elements that evoke salty sea breezes, such as wool area rugs splashed with shells, coral and star fish; a lamp with a glass base filled with shells; or a carved wood sea-horse sculpture with a distressed finish.

"The navy blue, white and silver colors are very reflective of nature," she says of the trend HomeGoods calls coastal living. "It's much less nautical looking this year."

Generally, the color palette for natural style is soft and earthy, but quite different from the once popular burnt orange, avocado green and harvest gold.

"We've gotten into new greens - pretty sage green, or gray green paired with black," says Young. "There are nice rust shades and a brown-gold that's warm, not brassy. There are even some warm reds."

Overall, she and Arvedon favor an eclectic decor.

"There are no strict rules," Arvedon says. "You can mix and mingle styles and incorporate a piece or two of this trend.

"I grew up in a home that didn't change for 35 years. Now we can swap out pieces and accessories to reflect the seasons and current trends. And we can do it quite affordably."

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