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A Connecticut couple find refuge from winter in their own John's Island golf cottage.

ON COURSE IN THE VILLA VERDE

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If you had told **Sandra Morgan and Claggett Wilson Read** 10 years ago that one day they would own a home in Florida, they would have told you that you were crazy. As far as the life partners were concerned, the Sunshine State held little appeal; besides which, both were far too busy to seriously consider having a pied-a-terre other than the home they currently enjoyed in Connecticut. Enter fate in the form of family and a cottage too charming to resist.

"Claggett's mother had been coming to Vero Beach for years, and his niece had purchased a place here," Sandra smiles, recalling what she thought would be a quick, onetime visit. "The two of them kept saying you really need to come down and see what's here. Also, Claggett had done some design work on an oceanside villa for a client and he was somewhat familiar with the area, so we said all right, let's give it a try and listen to everyone, and that would be it."

Arranging their schedules to fit in the visit wasn't easy. As an ASID designer, Sandra spends her days working with clients and architects, while



Claggett, now retired, gathers information

For Sandra Morgan and Claggett Wilson Read, the cottage they affectionately refer to as Villa Verde was just what they had been looking for. The green striped wallpaper provides the perfect background for Sandra's penchant for English pine furniture, and the eye-catching entrance hutch is a perfect example.

about his great uncle Claggett Wilson, one of America's first "Modernist" painters.

"Our first trip here was six or seven years ago," Sandra recalls. "That time we stayed at Grand Harbor; the next time we rented a friend's home at Windsor. That's when we started thinking, well, this place is really quite nice. We loved the Village Beach Market, Riverside Theatre and the Vero Beach Book Center - and when we discovered the museum, we were blown away. All these little things sent us the message that this is a place that has everything. It's sophisticated and everyone is so friendly, warm and genuine. How could you not respond?"



Sandra's fondness for blue-and-white china sets the scene for a delightful dining experience. A mirrored wall reflecting the light streaming in through doors that lead to a terrace visually expands the space. "Everything here has a story that reminds me of places we were when we bought them, like the dining room chairs," says Sandra, going on to tell of their chance encounter with a small Italian town artisan who built furniture with painted fabric. As a result of what she refers to as "a multi-lingual challenge," the couple ended up with the right fabric but the chairs were lighter than they had requested, which made them perfect for their Florida home. "I love mixing the dark of the table with the light wood," says Sandra. "It brightens up the atmosphere."

were new and so were the kitchen and bathrooms. I had so many projects going on that the last thing I wanted was a fixer-upper. The beauty of this place was that it had the bones for me to build on. I had all of this blue-and white china and I knew I could recycle other things I loved. For me it was Nirvana - all I had to do was redecorate."

Sandra makes it sound simple, yet a great deal of effort went into creating the enchantment exuded by this two-bedroom cottage. For starters, when the couple purchased the property four years ago, there was little in the way of landscaping. Today, topiaries, white impatiens and trellises fragrant with jasmine punctuate the ribbon of green that winds its way around the residence. Chunky ceramic pots overflowing with pink and white blossoms adorn the sprawling terrace which is embraced by palms and neatly trimmed boxwood.

"We felt it was a good fit so we began to look around in earnest for a place of our own. It was this cottage, which we affectionately call Villa Verde, that really turned the key for us."

That's because the minute Sandra stepped inside and saw the verde strie wallpaper she knew their search was over. "The previous owner was very daring with color. Where someone else might have thought oh, my goodness, these green walls are just too much, all I could think was oh, how perfect.

"Claggett and I are both very visual people. I could just see that painting by Gail Darden, which we both love, on the wall over there," says Sandra, referring to a large eye-catching canvas splashed with shades of blue, green and rose.

"The artist's spirited interpretation of a greenhouse really evoked the lush atmosphere of the cottage.

"One of the things that also attracted me was that the cottage had already been updated - the floors

This is a testimony to Claggett's special touch. With an artist's eye he created a landscape design where colors, shapes and textures mix and mingle; shade-preferring plants have their place and sun-loving ones theirs. The result is a visual feast that enhances both the exterior setting and interior décor.

"Originally, there was almost nothing planted outside. Everything you see we added bit by bit. Claggett's a magician in the garden and a bandit in the kitchen," Sandra enthuses.

"One of the things we needed to do was install an extensive lighting system, both inside and out. Other than that, we've basically had fun.

Both of us are very aware of our environment and one of the things we do is recycle what we have, turning things inside out and giving them a new life. We've given the cottage its own personality by layering it with possessions the two of us had gathered over the years from our travels and experiences, as well as with family heirlooms.

"The two chairs in the living room were my mother's and they're at least 60 years old. I'm not the first person to discover re-upholstery, but fabric to me is everything, and what I chose for the curtains and chairs is fresh and airy, giving an instant feeling of tropical coolness."

Sandra's fascination with fabric dates back to the time she was a student at Connecticut College in New London. There, she was introduced to its ability to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary during a summer internship working for fabric manufacturer Franco Scalamandré.



With an artist's eye and green thumb, Claggett took a basically bare exterior canvas and created an appealing landscape design where shapes, colors and textures offer appealing and often surprising scenarios.



The pine armoire in the living room is another of the cottage's versatile pieces. "It's been in a bedroom filled with clothes and has also been used as a bar. Here it houses the television," says Sandra, who commissioned inspirational artist Carol Auer to paint the Bermuda landscape hanging over the turn-of-the-century English bamboo bookcase.

"My parents were very friendly with the Scalamandr  family and persuaded Franco to hire me to work in his New York showroom," she says. "I was fascinated with the beautiful fabrics that were created by this prestigious firm. That summer I became smitten with the world of interior design.

"After I graduated I went to work for House and Garden magazine, starting out as a go-fer. I ended up being an assistant in the fabric department before moving over to Mademoiselle, where I became the associate fabric editor. I also started writing a column, 'Chez Mlle.,' which was geared towards giving decorating advice to the young

gal at home in New York. Even though I transitioned into fashion, I learned a great deal about fabric, color and texture while working for Cond  Nast. Then I got married and started a family. By then we had moved from New York to Greenwich."

As the children grew older Sandra became involved in their schools and volunteering. Fate stepped in again when a designer friend asked if she could help out with a large project she had undertaken. Sandra didn't have to think twice.

"That got me going again and then I started my own business," she says. The business was an antique shop specializing in English antiques, fine art and decorative accessories. This summer Sandra expanded her current Connecticut showcase, the Penthouse Gallery and design studio on Greenwich's Arch Street, by leasing the ground floor and opening SM Home, a showroom specializing in Swedish antiques and painted furniture.

Through the transitions, her basic design philosophy has remained constant. "I respect tradition and classic design. I'm always aware of trends but I'm not dictated to by them. I like to give tradition a fresh, updated look and blend the simple with the grand."

That fresh look is evident in her Vero Beach cottage. Though similar in appearance to several others, it emanates a distinct personality, and Claggett's gardening genius is a clue that the inside has to be equally as special.

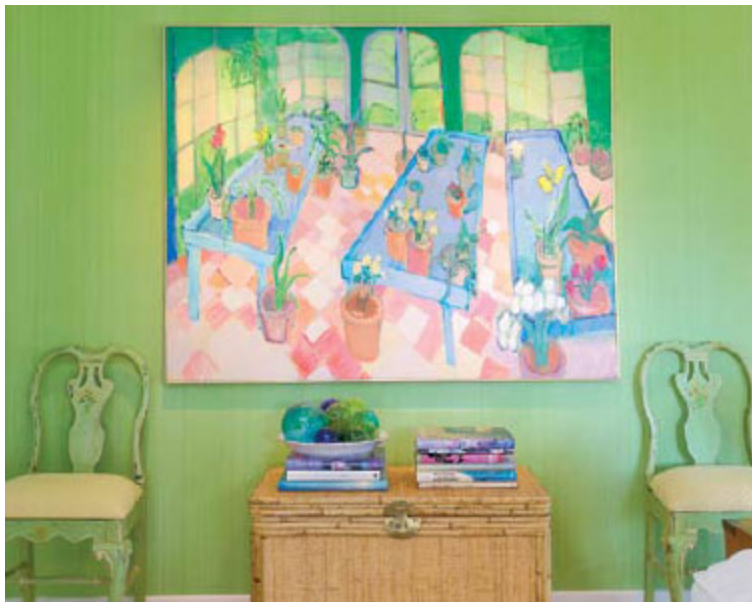
"The footprint is the same as when it was built years ago," Sandra says. "Our cottage is unique in that it's the only one we've seen that doesn't have a full lanai going across the back. We were thrilled with that as the dining room has a full vista of the golf course and trees. There are basically 1,600 square feet in all but it feels larger because of the vast terrace outside and the mirrored wall in the dining room, which enlarges the space and catches the light, making things glitter and sparkle.

"I'm very sensitive to light, color and design - it's kind of ingrained in me. To me the more interesting parts of this cottage are the western vistas. What comes through these windows, the play of light, is what gives everything life. I remember when I was 6 years old telling my mother that I wanted to decorate my bedroom in shades of brown. She very quickly said no, dear, that simply won't work."

Sandra laughs. "Imagine an all-brown room for a 6-yearold girl! How somber that would have been. Mother was a decorator and over the years I was always aware of her changing things with the seasons, so for me it's been a natural evolution."



Sandra enjoys spending as much time as possible in what she fondly refers to as the little nook: "It's a den, a library, an office, and I love to sit at the desk because the room is all glass and I feel like I'm outside."



Sandra knew that the painting by Gail Darden would provide the perfect complement for the couple's Vero Beach home. Splashed with shades of blue, green and rose, Sandra says, "The artist's spirited interpretation of a greenhouse evokes the lush atmosphere of the cottage."

Sandra's relationship with Claggett turned out to be another natural evolution. The two have known each other for 30 years, their friendship growing as their paths crossed, until 10 years ago those paths converged. "Our life is a collaboration. We actually work very well together and we don't even have to communicate. We can go off in different directions, knowing what we're each good at.

"When we first reconnected I owned a house and decided to sell it; it was full of things I loved. We integrated as much as we could into our home in Darien." Sandra explains that, because of space, several possessions had to be put in storage.

Though they were out of sight, they were never out

of mind, and she immediately knew which ones would find a home when they bought the cottage in Vero Beach.

One of her favorite pieces is an English pine hutch in the entrance hall. Its shelves, she explains, are perfect for displaying her blue-and white china. "The English called it a dresser because that's where the food was 'dressed.' It's been with me in six or seven different places, looking quite different in each of them."

The same can be said about the pine armoire in the living room; it, too, has had other lives in other settings. "It's been in a bedroom filled with clothes and has also been used as a bar," says Sandra. "Here it houses the TV.

"That painting of Bermuda over the bamboo bookcase was done by Carol Auer, an inspirational friend in my life. I commissioned her to paint it and obviously nature's sky blues, grassy greens and sunny yellows



Sandra's talent for mixing compatible colors and textures is seen in the master bedroom, where a canopy of blue-and-green fabric stretches across the king-size bed and repeats in the bed skirt. The diamond-and-rose pattern on the headboard and shams are the perfect counterpoint, as is the all-white spread trimmed in blue. The inviting white-and-blue chaise longue formerly belonged to Sandra's mother.

have stayed with me all these years. They complement our turnof-the-century English bamboo furniture, which I've always loved. The mellowness of the old bamboo marries well with the colors of the pine and the mixing of the dark and light finishes, keeping it interesting and fun.

"Everything here has a story that reminds me of places we were when we bought them, like the dining room chairs. Claggett and I were traveling in Italy when we came upon a little town and found a creative artisan who built furniture with painted fabric. We fell in love with a particular chair and asked him to make six for us. It was kind of a multi-lingual challenge since he spoke no English and we spoke minimal Italian. As it turned out we ended up with the right fabric, and though the chairs were far too light, they were perfect for Florida. I love mixing the dark of the table with the light wood - it brightens up the atmosphere."



This hutch, called a "dresser," holds a commanding position in the entrance hall. "The English called it a dresser because that's where the food was 'dressed'," Sandra explains, "It's been with me in six or seven places, looking quite different in each of them."

of sight when visitors arrive.

The décor in the guest bedroom is fresh and light. Sheer white canopies frame the twin beds, while pale yellow spreads, pillows splashed with a bright floral print, and pine furniture complete the picture. In the master suite another canopy stretches above the king-size bed. The same blue-and-green fabric is seen in the bed skirt, with the headboard and shams covered in a diamond-and-rose pattern, the perfect counterpoint to the all-white spread trimmed in blue. An inviting white-and-blue chaise longue that belonged to her mother beckons in a corner.

"To create a pleasing effect, I like to mix styles that are compatible with one another," Sandra explains. "Not necessarily of the same period but of similar spirit, so that all can exist happily together. I think the fun of decorating is trying to balance the colors and textures – the rough with the smooth.

One of Sandra's favorite places to spend time is in what she fondly refers to as the "little nook." "It's a den, a library, an office, and I love to sit at the desk because the room is all glass and I feel like I'm outside," she explains. "Even though the nook is small, it gives me everything I need to carry on my business. Designers do long distance work all the time. I can be based in New York while working on a project in Shanghai; similarly, a project can be based in Greenwich and still be engineered here in Florida."

No matter where Sandra is based, Tiger, the couple's personality- plus Shih Tzu, is close behind. "He goes to the office with me every day, says hello to the FedEx man and the UPS man. He gets very depressed when he doesn't go to work; he enjoys the activity."

Tiger is as at home in Vero Beach as he is in Darien and Greenwich, knowing that the activity never stops. While Claggett updates the website he created to honor his great-uncle and is planning for an exhibition of his art, Sandra is busy with design projects. The computer, fax machine and printer keep them constantly connected. Tucked behind a closet door in the guest bedroom, most are kept out

"A house is really a canvas and you're often trying to create an illusion, trying to take advantage of whatever view you have to the max, having an artist's eye combined with a technician's know-how and a sense of layout, space and connection to the outdoors. This is especially true in Florida where we come for the outdoors. We want to feel like we're part of it, and respond to the different light values that play throughout the day.

"I've been in the design

business for a long time and I never tire of it. I'm voracious about collecting magazines and books, looking for new ideas. I have to admit I do sometimes get tired of the behind-the-scenes nitty-gritty, but the creative aspect of it is very energizing. You have to have a passion for doing this; you have to work hard at making things happen.

"I often think of my father, who was a doctor who made house calls - that was back in the days when doctors did that sort of thing. My dad used to take his little medical bag with him and here I am, always carrying these big straw bags full of fabrics, floor coverings and color samples to client meetings. I feel I'm following a family tradition." This past winter Sandra and Claggett hosted a cocktail party for 70 people. While some may have wondered how they were going to handle such a crowd in their little cottage, they didn't turn a hair. "We put a marquee up over the patio and 90 percent of the people were out there. It was so stunning that we didn't want to take it down.

"It's funny - we never thought we would want to spend a lot of time in Vero Beach, yet little by little we fell in love with the area, the people, and this house." Sandra smiles as if seeing Villa Verde for the first time. "This is where we were meant to be. It's our little nest in Florida."

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A FAVORITE UNCLE

Claggett's great uncle, Claggett Wilson (1897-1952), is considered one of America's first "Modernist" painters. Early in his career he taught painting and drawing at Columbia University, then served in WWI, for which he was awarded the Navy Cross, the Silver Star and the Croix de Guerre. Upon returning from France, he began documenting his war experiences with paintings that were met with high acclaim and led to his being recommended for the Nobel Prize.

With his career in full bloom, wealthy patrons of the arts came knocking at his door, requesting his paintings and murals; among them were Solomon Guggenheim, Adolph Lewisohn, Edgar Rossin, James Cox Brady, and Rodney Sharp. In 1935 two of Broadway's brightest and most talented stars, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, asked him to design the costumes and sets for their production of "The Taming of the Shrew." Three years later he began a two-year project at the couple's Wisconsin home, Ten Chimneys, adding his artistic touch to their historical residence.

Today, Claggett Wilson Read maintains a website dedicated to his famous relative: www.claggettwilson.com. He is also planning an exhibition of the artist's work.



Claggett Wilson was a portraitist, a muralist, a designer/decorator, as well as a costume and set designer. New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Brooklyn Museum, and the Smithsonian Museum of American Art own a number of Claggett Wilson's paintings.