

This Old House

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THIS PAGE: A clapboard wall and beadboard ceiling suggest that the dining room was once a porch. Rustic posts and beams define—and support—the opening to the kitchen.

TOP RIGHT: The house's original front facade remains largely intact; the current owners added the metal roof.



BETTER THAN EVER

A 109-year-old house grows into its own, gaining living space and creature comforts while honoring its heritage

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RENOVATING AN OLD HOUSE is not unlike rejuvenating a mature garden: Both require careful pruning, the vision to direct new growth in the right direction, and a commitment to preserving the beauty and historical integrity of the overall structure.

The similarities are not lost on Michael Beck, executive director of the Berkshire Botanical Garden, and his husband, Beau Buffier, an antitrust lawyer who is also an enthusiastic gardener. When the couple decided to renovate and add on to their circa-1810 house in the tiny hamlet of Richmond, in western Massachusetts, they quickly saw parallels: “Working with an eighty-five-year-old botanical garden means being sensitive to history but also understanding how to bring something



that old forward in time," says Michael, who also supervised the restoration of the botanical garden's oldest building, which dates to the 18th century.

Right after moving in, the pair set about addressing immediate needs, replacing the sagging asphalt roof with standing-seam metal, and opening up the kitchen by removing a wall, then adding a spacious prep island in the center. "We love to cook, but we're messy," says Michael of the improved workspace.

Recognizing that a cozy first-floor study would likely become a regular go-to spot in the house, they decided to create one that would be especially welcoming for themselves and guests. Key to the dramatic transformation of what had been an unused sitting room was installing wall-to-wall bookshelves and cabinets, including a bar, fashioned from old floorboards and ceiling joists with no finish on them, just the natural patina of time. "We chose wood based on its character," says interior designer Matt



ABOVE LEFT: Michael Beck sits on a custom sofa in the Moroccan-themed screened porch, where glass panels are swapped in for the cooler months. A bluestone floor and a beadboard ceiling reinforce the space's identity as a breezy outdoor room, though it serves nearly year-round.

ABOVE RIGHT: Original wide pine floorboards—with gaps from decades of seasonal movement—give a guest bedroom a warm patina of age. An antique rug under the bed boosts both warmth and quiet.

been. "Overall, the project was not so big a deal architecturally," he adds. "It was more like building a piece of furniture, with every part needing to be taken into consideration" as the old structure was married to the new. Few pieces of furniture, however, require the owners to move out for eight months—from October to the following May.

While Michael and Beau wanted their home to be updated, they wanted the changes to remain in keeping with the prevailing early-19th-century look of the house. Centuries ago, the living room, in the oldest section, had served as a millinery store for women traveling along what was then a turnpike between Albany, New York, and Hartford, Connecticut. A large notch in the ceiling marks where the entry to an upstairs storage area for hat-making supplies had been. The wood-lined study was the store office.

The couple teamed up with architect James Dixon, a friend who is an expert at restoring old houses in the region, and his colleague, project architect Matt

Herzberg. "When adding a new part to a home, we're often asked to create the illusion of a house like this having been built up over time," says Dixon. In the new dining room, narrower pine boards were laid perpendicular to those in the adjacent sitting area, off the kitchen. "We deliberately kept the floors from matching," says Dixon, "as a way to see the 'memory' of an old room that is actually new."

"Melding the floors where we made changes was the biggest interior challenge," adds Boxer. "You pull out a partition wall in one room, and you start to get concerned that it's all going to look like a hodgepodge. One way to take care of that problem is to use a stain that unifies the spaces." The dining room sits in the new front of the house, away from a busy road that runs along the back. In a further nod to the illusion that new spaces are old, Larkin brought an expanse of the clapboard siding into the dining room—as if that portion had once been part of the exterior of the house, a notion



reinforced by painting the wall the same gray that is used elsewhere on the exterior.

"The dining room is our favorite new room, since we entertain a lot," says Beau. "With the flooring and the expanse of clapboard siding inside, it reads as a porch now enclosed—we love that effect."

Another change, creating a three-season room at the back of the house, where the garage had been, has resulted in a new twice-a-year ritual for the homeowners. "Since the mosquitoes up here can eat you alive, we were intent on having a screened-in porch," says Michael. "But when it gets cold, we didn't want to have to give up using the space, so we put in glass panels for the off-season."

Indeed, for most of the colder months, the room is cozy enough, thanks in part to a new fireplace. Michael uses it as a kind of greenhouse, lining up pots on the bluestone floor, nurturing bay and fig trees, along with fragrant rosemary bushes. The room offers views of the surrounding gardens, where raised beds yield bounties of fresh vegetables,

OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT and BOTTOM: The master bath is defined by a central partition wall with a wide floating vanity on one side and a large double shower on the other. Low awning windows and a built-in bench take advantage of the shower ceiling's slope. Dramatically veined marble lines the passageways and serves as the vanity top, bench seat, and shower window casings. Sinks, faucets, and shower fittings: Kohler. Sconces: Restoration Hardware. Tile: Bellavita Tile

OPPOSITE, TOP RIGHT: Vaulting the master bedroom ceiling and lining it with white-painted planks brightened the once dark space. Windows were replaced and relocated to enable better flow and furniture placement. The floors are original. Paint (walls): Benjamin Moore's Bleeker Beige

RIGHT: The patio outside the dining room offers additional gathering space. "When it's warm out, it becomes our main seating area," says Michael Beck. Greenery growing between the irregular bluestone pavers and perennials along the perimeter help soften the hardscape.



and espaliered fruit trees form a living fence.

Upstairs, the master bedroom's low ceiling came out, and white-painted planks that follow the roof pitch add a reflective element that makes the room feel brighter and airier. New window locations in the space afford better light and traffic flow. An expansive en suite bath went in adjacent to the bedroom, above the new screened porch. "We didn't need a bathroom that large," says Michael, "but there was this embarrassment of additional space."

Michael and Beau relied on Boxer, plus friends Larkin, Grant, and Dixon, to honor the house's past

while making it more livable for today. Did hiring friends pose problems? On the contrary, says Michael: "Having people help you who really know you makes it easier—they can figure out what you need before you even know what you want."

With the major work inside now done, Michael and Beau continue to add to and edit the plantings outdoors. "As with any old house, you're always finding new projects," Michael admits. "But given our love of being out in the yard—with our dogs and with friends—the more that grows and flourishes here, the more this house feels like our creation." ■