



THIS PAGE Cabinets in the sitting room display natural finds including a Victorian butterfly collection, shells and pressed leaves. OPPOSITE Botanical images and pressed leaves provide inspiration



# Natural selection

Junk-shop bargains, design classics and collections of found natural objects have been cleverly combined to bring a distinctive decorative flourish to an old Cornish farmhouse

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Evidence of Julia Bird's lifelong passion is to be found all round her Cornish home. On shelves and mantelpieces, in jars, bowls and vases, framed and pinned on walls, in cabinets and cupboards, there are shells, conkers, leaves, seed heads, bark, pebbles, feathers, sea-glass fragments and even a couple of cast-off skins from local grass snakes. "I'm obsessed with nature," Julia admits. "Whether going for a walk in the woods or on the beach, I have to stuff my pockets with something. It's my inspiration and I love to live as close to nature as possible – to have a bit of the outdoors inside."

The fact that Julia, who has two children's shops in nearby Fowey and Wadebridge, is also a professional interiors stylist is clear from the elegant way in which her collections of found natural objects have been effortlessly integrated into this comfortable, functional home, adding the subtlest of colours and the most delicate of decorative flourishes. They blend perfectly with her instinctive palette of warm browns and greys, cream, charcoal and the occasional highlight of blue or green. The look is laid-back and loose, open and easy-going, with antique hand-me-downs, second-hand finds, design classics and new-ish pieces artfully combined. "For me, it's really important to combine old and modern elements," she explains. "In a house like this, especially, it could feel too rustic if you didn't add one or two pieces that are more contemporary."

The 18th-century granite farmhouse sits on ten acres of moorland and woodland in a remote part of mid-Cornwall, surrounded by hydrangeas and rhododendrons, with views of sky, hills, trees and old Cornish stone walls from every window. Julia and her husband Graham bought it eight years ago, having fallen in love with the area and then with the house itself, which has wonderful high ceilings. "It was important to us to have space around us and here we're surrounded by countryside," she says. "I love the peace and tranquillity. The other thing that sold the property to me was the little Aga – I'd always wanted one and now our lives revolve around the kitchen: it gives the house a real core of warmth."

The couple didn't need to do much structural work, although they ▷



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP  
LEFT Julia at her  
desk; allium seed  
head; the dining  
table was made  
by local company  
Landmark Kitchens





*Walls that have been whitewashed or stripped back to reveal mottled pigments on old plaster are the perfect backdrop for Julia's natural finds*



OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Billy likes to sleep beside the Aga; vases and jars hold fragments of china and sea glass; Jack snoozes on his sheepskin. THIS PAGE Natural colours and textures are key to Julia's style





knocked down a wall between the sitting and dining rooms to create a larger living area, put in some extra windows and added French doors at the front and back to allow in more light. They installed a simple white kitchen with a stainless-steel worktop, a woodburning stove in the living room, and the bathroom was based round an old cast-iron bath that came from a nearby vicarage, with exposed copper pipework as a towel rail. Fortunately, many of the original features were intact, from the stone flags on the ground floor to the built-in, glass-fronted cupboard in the living room, Bakelite light switches and intricate metal door latches. To increase the overall sense of brightness, the house was painted white or cream throughout, with a pale sky-blue hallway, though first they had to scrape off layer after layer of paint that had built up over the centuries. What they revealed was an appealing patina of mottled pigments on old lime plaster, which they left bare in several places because they liked it so much. "It reminds me of a beautiful summer sky at sunset," Julia says.

This relaxed attitude applies equally to the furnishings: ancient sofas loose-covered in charcoal linen, simple homemade cushions, a hanging rail rather than a wardrobe in the main bedroom, and china and glasses stored in a junk-shop cupboard. Even the art on the walls consists of paintings by their children, Arthur, 14, and Madeleine, 11; dried and pressed seaweeds in minimal white frames, and pinboards of postcards, cuttings and bits and pieces that provide Julia with constant inspiration.

The farmhouse is essentially finished, though it changes organically as Julia brings home fresh finds and tries out different ideas. Having run her business successfully for five years, she now feels ready to embark on the next venture. "The shops are about colour and nature and sell an original mix of carefully sourced children's clothes and gifts but I want to expand into interiors – something that reflects my style at home," she says. A plan is evolving gradually but, whenever it comes about, the results are bound to be subtly pleasing, easy to live with and, of course, naturally irresistible. 🐦

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CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT The cast-iron bath came from a nearby vicarage; an old tailor's dummy in the bedroom is festooned with strings of shells; Julia always has a project on the go

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