

How to Decorate Western

by Chelley Kitzmiller



There's no place like home—a Western home that is. I'm not talking about a home located in the West, I'm talking about a home decorated Western. It doesn't matter where you live—

New York, Georgia or Tehachapi—or what you do for a living—stockbroker, construction worker, or receptionist—if the spirit of the West is alive in your heart, then maybe a Western decor is for you.

Return with me now to yesteryear as Ben Cartwright and his sons gather in the living room of their Ponderosa Ranch to discuss the latest cattle rustler or homesteader. A massive stone fireplace dominates the room with an opening near big enough to hold a cord of wood. The smoke-blackened mantle is fronted with a pair of mounted longhorns to remind visitors what the Ponderosa is all about. Facing the fireplace a red and white striped Victorian sofa and a pair of man-sized, red leather chairs beckon guests to come sit a spell.



Though just a set, the Cartwright's living room exemplified the Old West. Granted, not the real Old West, but the Old West of our imaginations, our hearts and Hollywood. You can bet the set designers knew exactly what they were doing when they built and furnished the living room and all the other rooms that the cameras took us into. The stone fireplace conjured up images of a rugged, outdoor life. The hand-hewn mantle and the longhorns spoke of hard work and a way to earn a living. The Victorian sofa reminded us that like Ben, most Westerners were Easterners first. The red chairs evoked feelings of warmth and comfort at the end of a long day of herding cattle.

"There's a lot more heart in Western decorating than any other kind," says former Tehachapi interior designer, Elaine Palance. "It's a classic style that is forever." If anybody knows what Western decorating is all about, it's the wife of wild west super star and Academy Award winner, Jack Palance. The Palance's home is an eclectic mix of accessories and collectibles. Boots,

saddles, spurs and hides are displayed with Lalique, Moroccan and Lladro. "Western decorating started as function over form," says Elaine, referring to the trappings created by the men and women who settled the West. "The careless tossing of boots taken off after a long day of riding has become a "look" that says Old West.

Finding Western furniture and accessories is not the challenge it used to be. But if you want your rooms to have "heart," you need to haunt junk and antique stores, get up early and hit the garage sales and flea markets and explore the back of your local feed store. That's where the treasures are. Old cowboy boots have far more character than new ones. They've been places, seen things. Collecting them—all sizes—all makers—can be fun and make for a unique decorating focal point.

Cutting horse competitor and Hart Flat resident, Margie Sweetland, hired a decorator to "Westernize" her new home. "The woman was at a total loss as to what constituted Western decor," said Margie. "When she brought a huge flower arrangement that looked like it belonged in a jungle, I knew it wasn't going to work, so I decided to do it myself." Margie started with a leather couch and chair. "Leather is comfortable and I like the smell." Little by little she added accessories, some of them coming right out of her closet and tack room. Margie prefers earthy colors and lots of wood. When she gets a better handle on how she wants her living room, she'll paint the walls an earthy color and go looking for that perfect Western scene for over the couch.

If bold and brazen color is more to your liking, grab your bag and go shopping for striped serapes. Use them for tablecloths, couch throws and pillows. Or cut them into wide strips, sew the ends together, wind the fabric around a closet rod and you've got yourself a unique window treatment for less than the cost of a good steak dinner.

When creating a western look, one should never conform to rules. Think outside of the box and give everyday things an unexpected use. An old cast iron stove makes a terrific bedside table or end table. Throw a colorful serape over your dining room table and serve potatoes and rolls in graniteware.



Never mind the chips and scars, all the better for effect. While some of the best serving pieces lived their former lives as spittoons, chamber pots and thunder mugs, it would be wise to refrain from telling your guests what they were used for until after they have eaten. Do you have a collection of mate less spurs? Clean them up and hang them on a wooden rod over your window, or use them for curtain tiebacks, or mount them atop leather covered blocks and use them for bookends. Horse bits make great towel holders and toilette paper hangers.

Call it cowboy style, cowboy chic, lone star living, bunkhouse design or simply Western decorating—it's a style that brings the past into the present, that reminds us of our roots, our heritage and of a simpler way of life. And besides all that—it just feels good.

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