



Ridgeway Farm

Leslie and
Dan Gregg's
home is a
true labor
of love

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As Leslie Gregg flips through the pages of her photo albums, she muses, “Taking care of a house like this really is a labor of love. You are constantly redoing things.” The albums, which catalog the renovations of Ridgeway Farm, span the 18 years she and her husband Dan have owned the property in central Albemarle County.

Discovering Buried Treasure

Leslie and Dan have been in Virginia 24 years, arriving in Orange as newlyweds so that Dan could start his tree nursery business, Grelen Nursery, now located in Somerset, Virginia. Here you will also find The Market at Grelen—a popular garden shop, casual café and special-events venue, as well as walking trails and pick-your-own orchards—and nearby Spotswood Lodge, the Greggs’ charming farmhouse rental property. Leslie says, “Dan loved the land. His grandmother had given him seeds when he was 13 and he loved to garden. His grandparents, who lived in Manhattan, had a farm in Orange, Virginia, called Grelen, which is a combination of his grandfather’s surname and grandmother’s maiden name put together: Gregg and Allen. He always wanted to move to his family farm.” Dan purchased some of the land from the family farm to start his nursery and they lived there for a year. As the cattle farm had previously been a

vacation spot, they were the first people to live there permanently. Formerly in advertising and having lived in Chicago and Europe, Leslie says that the shift to Orange was quite an adjustment. Settling in Virginia, she decided to attend UVA’s Darden School of Business, so they moved to downtown Charlottesville for three years.

The Greggs stumbled on their beautiful home completely by accident. Their grand, pale yellow, two-story farmhouse with a walk-out basement boasts tall, original windows that open onto spacious porches with ornate white columns and wrought-iron railings, covered decks and gorgeous adjacent gardens. Leslie explains, “We were looking at a house in Stony Point that had been suggested to us by our Realtor. We didn’t like it, but on the way back to town, we passed by an old dilapidated FOR SALE sign at the end of a driveway and wanted to check it out. I was in love immediately.” The house, which had been on the market for seven

years, was badly in need of repair and looked to the naked eye like a disaster. Covered in waste, the house carried odors of neglect as well. However, Leslie could see the treasure beneath the trash. In addition to the house itself, she loved the large size, texture and feel of the windows that were original to the house. “It looked really scary to most, but Dan and I saw the house for what it could be,” she says.

Leslie loves to redo spaces and Dan had renovated houses in Baltimore, so they decided they were up for the challenge. They discovered that while the house clearly needed a facelift, the systems were in good condition. She says, “The previous owners had done a lot of the work that you don’t want to do. They had bought the house 10 years prior and had spent the first three years renovating. In doing so, they had updated the electrical and plumbing and had repaired some of the foundational issues. What was left was the fun stuff.”

When their friends and family viewed the property for the first time, they were worried. Leslie says that when her mother, who was a Realtor in Cincinnati, came over for the first time, she advised them to cancel the deal. She says that even a good friend who celebrated their new purchase with them and supported them confessed years later that, at the time, he thought the couple was insane for purchasing a house that needed so much work.



First Things First

Upon purchasing the house, they immediately brought in a cleaning crew. For three days they emptied the junk and dirt that had accumulated in the house. She says, "We removed most of what was in the house. The only things we kept from the owners who lived in the house before us were one chandelier and the tin ceiling in the kitchen. Everything else had to go, including dark Victorian wallpaper and fake plastic molding." Before they moved in, the only structural part of the house they modified were the floors. Leslie had a decorative painting business, so she and her business partner, John Owen, who had painted Foods of All Nations and had taught her decorative paint technique, worked together to set up her new house.

The house was originally built in 1809 by Peter Minor, a friend of Thomas Jefferson's. Originally Federal style, brick, bare and stately, the house was modified in the 1850s, when porches and peaks were added to the exterior. Evidence of the house's history can be discovered throughout. There are working fireplaces, original to the house, in every room. The built-in cabinet in the dining room has Peter Minor's name and "To Julia", who was his wife, etched in the glass. When the Greggs moved in, this cabinet was painted black, a change they believe was made when the house was renovated in the high Victorian era of 1850s. They hired a professional, Michael Keith, to remove the black paint and restore the cabinet to its original style.

The house had some safety issues when they first moved in. There were no railings on the porches, and they wanted their three small children, Ali, Hank and Carter, to be able to run and play, so they immediately got to work installing railings to make the house safe for the family. As part of the porch project, they redid the front steps, which were cement block, ripping them out and replacing them with wood steps. Additionally, they replaced the entire porch ceiling and added a sleeping porch to the left side of the house on the second floor. Leslie says, "The house was not balanced. There was an addition on the right side that added to the second floor, but nothing on the left side. That bothered me." The back porch of the house was dilapidated and they knew they would rip it out and restore it, but they made the area off-limits for awhile while they took care of the most pressing issues.



A Series of Renovations

Leslie and her husband, over the course of nine years, renovated the house in several phases that seemed to roll from one to the next. When their daughter, who was less than 2 years old when they purchased the house, went to her first sleepover at age 4, she came home and told her mother in amazement that the other family did not have ladders everywhere. Leslie laughs and says, "Scaffolding was a permanent part of the house!"

After the porch work, the second phase of renovations modified a poorly constructed addition on the right side of the house, which had added bathrooms to the first and second floor, as well as a laundry room. Leslie says, "The addition looked crummy and was falling off the house when we bought it. We took down this addition and redesigned it and put it back on, adding a sunken garden (to create a workout room and office in the basement) and a porch on the top of the addition to match the porch on top of the sleeping porch. This addition on the right side of the house also includes our pantry, laundry room and master bath."

The interior of the house was closed and dark when they purchased the property. As part of renovation, they expanded the living space, transforming an enclosed porch along the back of the house by rebuilding it and pushing out the walls of the house. They relocated the pillars of the porch, reinforcing them with steel, and reused the original windows along the newly expanded walls of the interior. They used reclaimed wood from Mountain Lumber Company to maintain the original feeling of the house. The end result cleverly conceals that the work is an addition.

The Greggs redesigned their house incrementally without the use of a formal architect. Floyd Hill, a contractor who specializes in old houses, brought Leslie's visions to life. She says, "He's great. I knew what I wanted and he knew how to handle the engineering. I didn't have to give him specifics, and he was able to create what I wanted." For example, he reproduced an original entryway and mimicked the design so the new door frames, when they expanded the interior of the house, matched the original design. Also, when they rebuilt the back porch area, he knew they would need to remove the pillars and reinforce them with steel.



Mixing formal furniture with real life, Leslie transforms an inherited table by placing family photos under a layer of glass.





Saving the Best for Last

The final phase of renovations updated some of the most-used areas of the house: the mudroom and laundry room downstairs, and above them, the master bath suite. Leslie says, "I know a lot of people like to get all the renovations done early. Sometimes it is better to live in a space for a while. We waited until year nine to redo our most utilitarian spaces. It allowed me time to really focus on how I wanted to use the space. Nine years prior, I wouldn't have known what I wanted." She says that she shared a bathroom with her daughter for years while they waited to work on the master bathroom. The master suite, now complete, has a seating area with a chaise lounge and modified claw-foot tub that look out floor-to-ceiling windows on two walls, dual sinks in a dark granite countertop resting atop hand-painted cabinets, his and hers closet areas, and a glass-door double shower. She adds, "One of my favorite things about the house is the bathroom with the view. We are early birds because of our careers, so we get to watch the sunrise every morning as we are getting ready."

Downstairs, Leslie transformed what had been a bathroom and a small laundry room into a mudroom and pantry that demonstrate her keen ability to visualize what she wants in a space. The mudroom, in which she used theater seats recovered in leather, opens up to a massive pantry that contains a mixed look: modern white cabinetry with silver hardware and glass doors combined with wood countertops, patterned wallpaper, funky painted walls and floors, and a chandelier she designed using maroon- and mustard-colored beads. She says, "The old Grelen farm had a fun pantry. I knew I wanted to add one here."

Leslie admits that she and Dan have personalities that can handle the chaos of updating an old house. "I am such a believer in taking the time to really enjoy the process. For me, the design portion is really fun. I love being able to imagine what it could be and making it functional but also aesthetically pleasing. The aesthetics are so important to me. I want to live in a place that feels really good," she says.









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Decorating the Interior

Almost all the furniture in the house is antique. Leslie says that she likes a mix of styles, using funky chandeliers, which you will find in every room, with vintage and distressed items. She says, "It's such a grand house. We didn't want it to be too formal. We are blessed to have such beautiful pieces, and I wanted to ensure that we could use every room. I wanted my toddlers to be able to run around wherever they wanted."

Many decorations and furnishings originated at the Grelen Farm. They stored tables for years in their barn in preparation for the renovations. When the family sold the farm, Leslie and Dan selected family portraits, which fit perfectly with the age of the home, to line the walls of their farmhouse. Leslie also decorates with her collection of silver, including a piece that was once owned by Queen Charlotte, which has equally historical and personal value.



The kitchen is as eclectic as the pantry, mixing styles and finishes for a look that is truly unique: a large island with a Corian countertop serves as a breakfast bar which is lined with metal barstools, while across the kitchen, an original fireplace rests beside modern-looking light brown cabinets. When designing the kitchen, Leslie worked around the white Corian countertops, and updated by painting the cabinets black. As she tells it, she hand-drew her ideal chandelier, and two days later, she walked into a vintage store off Main Street and saw the chandelier she had envisioned. Once she had it wired for electric and fitted with hooks for her kitchenware, it was ready for perfect placement above the center island. Leslie loves to decorate with bird houses and cages. She also displays a painting of local artist Cynthia Burke.



Garnishing with Gardens

When the Greggs purchased the property, the exterior of the house needed just as much updating as the interior. The trees around the house had overgrown so much that views of the mountains had been obscured. A nursery owner and tree expert, Dan removed scrap trees and overgrowth to reveal magnificent views while maintaining the integrity of the natural growth. In front of the house, they regraded what is now the circular driveway and parking area with the help of landscape architect John James of Orange.

Dan, who naturally loves trees, began to plant trees as soon as they moved in. In their gardens you will find a vast assortment, including 100+-year-old specimens planted by the Minor and Blue families in the 19th and early 20th centuries complemented by a collection of younger trees selected from the Greggs' nursery. Whether it is the magnolia grove comprised of 11 different cultivars and varieties of magnolia trees, the stroll garden consisting of many 20-foot-tall specimens of weeping conifers, or simply the grand size of the 20-foot-tall American boxwood maze, you are sure to encounter plants rarely found in local gardens. Dan says, "Leslie and I love our trees; we enjoy walking through the property observing the many different characteristics of each tree and how those features change throughout the seasons. Trees add so much interest to the garden; whether it is the spring bloom, summer fragrance, fall color or winter bark features, trees provide reasons to lure us into the garden year round."





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Delights abound at every turn at Ridgeway Farm, including lush plantings, breathtaking views, and artistic touches inside and out.





Echoes of Thomas Jefferson

Only four families have owned the Greggs' house since it was built in 1809. Even though it has undergone many changes, the Greggs have labored with time and love to ensure that their house maintains its historic feel and style. Leslie and Dan have brought new life into an old house.

Leslie's passion for decor is evident in the interior designs, from the large renovations to the decorative paint that appears on the floors and cabinets. Her unique taste and passion for preservation can be found outside on the porches as well. Turquoise vintage doors, acquired at Pickers Paradise, a big show at The Market at Grelen that she holds with Shabby Love, a store in Orange, serve

as window decorations, posing as shutters. Nearby, old turquoise garden stools, which she discovered at Leftover Luxuries, add interest, extra seating and pops of color to the vintage porch.

With Dan's love and knowledge of trees, they transformed their farmland and restored old gardens that were hidden beneath overgrowth. Amid boxwoods from Jefferson's time, Dan unearthed an 18-inch-deep pattern in brick from the 1800s. He kept the original pattern, layering stone above it. You can almost feel Thomas Jefferson's footsteps in the hardwoods as you look out the house's original windows at the breathtaking views of the gardens. 🏡