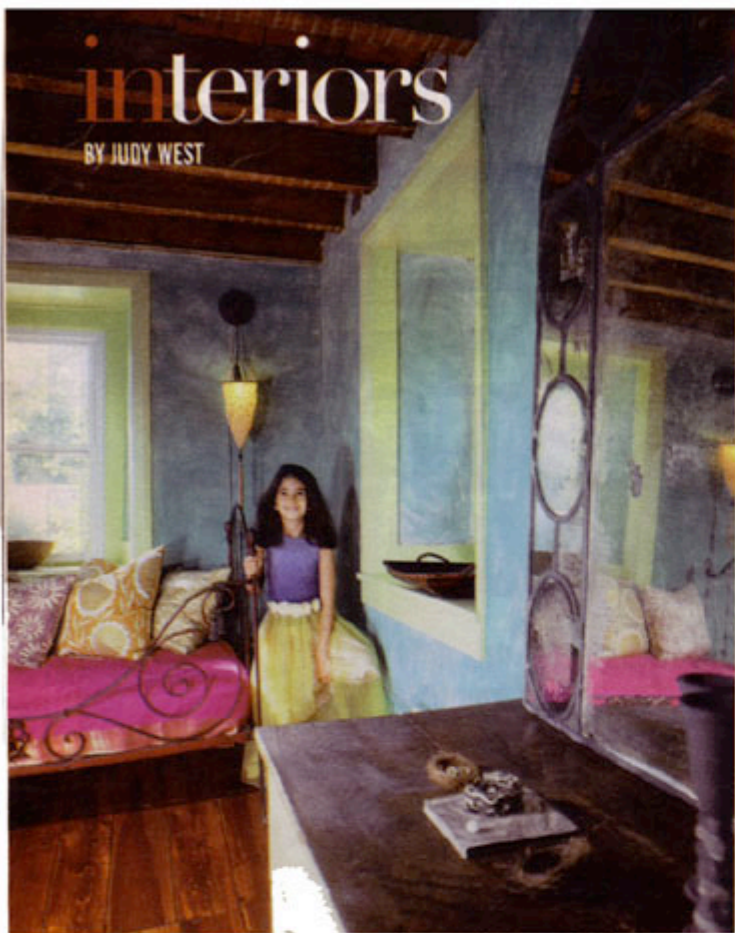


# interiors

BY JUDY WEST



Showing off the parlor is the Togninis' daughter Isabella, 7.



Greg Leavitt's sculpture is part of Eileen Tognini's annual gallery display.

## Their secret garden

A Fishtown couple looked to move closer to Center City — and found a Hawk Mountain cottage.

**“E**ven a blind squirrel gets a nut every once in a while.” That’s how Tony Tognini explains how he and his wife, Eileen, came to own an old stone cottage at the foot of Hawk Mountain in Berks County.

Fishtown residents, the Togninis found themselves four years ago trying to sell their house and move closer to Center City. They weren’t having much luck buying or selling. That’s when Tony spied the listing in the newspaper: “150-year-old farmhouse next to nature reserve in rural Pennsylvania.” Not what they were looking for at all.

“But sort of on a whim, we drove up and were swept away,” says Tony, a scrap-metal recycler and something of a dreamer. Eileen’s animated features light up as she remembers her first impression of what was to become their weekend home. “We saw the garden, and I said, ‘Tony, unless it’s a shambles inside, I think we just bought a house.’”

The garden is indeed spectacular. “It started out as the impassioned palette of a horticulturalist with an interest in rare native plants,” says Eileen, a marketing director. “So the bones of the garden were already here.”

It’s a place of secret spaces — a vine-draped arbor, a water garden ringed with tall grasses, a

copse of mountain ash and lilac. Monarch butterflies cluster around airy clumps of milkweed. Hummingbird moths hover above fragrant phlox. Within this dense tapestry, Eileen points out joe-pye weed, plumed poppies, hardy orchids, and wild ginger. Virginia creeper climbs relentlessly up the stone walls of the old house.

Eileen and Tony, and their 7-year-old daughter, Isabella, now live the urban life Monday through Friday and head for the hills every weekend. “And Isabella,” she says, “has gotten very comfortable with being in the country and picking up worms and centipedes.” On a windowsill sits Isabella’s collection — a nest, a dragonfly, a bumblebee, a cocoon, a chunk of honeycomb.

The cottage is tiny; just three rooms stacked one on top of the other. Exposed beams, wide-plank floors, and deep windowsills that flare slightly speak of antiquity. The previous owner added funky accents such as a fireplace mantel for a kitchen backsplash, aboriginal paintings on the shower surround, and old heat registers set into a wall.

An old French campaign bed from the 1800s is all the furniture that’s needed in the tiny parlor. Draped with a fuchsia child’s sari, the bed is in striking contrast to the turquoise sponged walls. Silk Fortuny

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The 150-year-old cottage of Tony and Eileen Toppini sits amid a lush garden in the Berks County countryside.



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lamps cast a soft glow. Eileen went “bohemian” in this room, she says, because “I had to say, ‘No more Tuscany!’”

For two September weekends each year, the house and garden become a gallery for area artists. “Long ago, artists would fill their summer homes with creative friends or hold salons, and they’ve left little legacies in modern-day history, so that was really the inspiration,” Eileen says.

This year’s lineup included Michael Brolly’s majestic doghouse in the shape of the Sydney Opera House and an installation of plastic flowers and flocked bunnies by Karen Stone that flowed in a gaudy river down the hillside. What started out as an experiment has become an annual tradition with such well-established regulars as Warren Muller and Isaiah Zagar.

For the artists, it’s a chance to show their work beyond the walls of a gallery. For Eileen and Tony, it’s a way to share their weekend haven and become, as she puts it, “agents of history.”

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The living room becomes an art gallery for two September weekends with lamps, prints, sculptures and other works on view and for sale. The lamp at left is by Warren Muller. The print over the dresser is by Diane Pieri. The hanging sculpture at right is by Jeanne Jaffe.