





MASTER CLASS LAVINIA DARGIE

Lavinia Dargie reveals twelve decorating tips to JUDITH WILSON

'The secret to good design is knowing when to stop,' says Lavinia Dargie, of Dargie Lewis Designs. Judging by her razor-sharp decorating tips, it also has much to do with simple common sense, exploiting the unusual, and serious comfort. After twenty-four years running her Fulham-based company, Lavinia knows precisely what will and won't work, and so do her faithful, repeat-business clients. She's a key figure on the London interior design scene, and an IDDA (Interior Decorators and Designers Association) subcommittee member. She's also an enthusiastic, hands-on designer, whose simple ideas flow freely, from making loose covers from robust antique French linen sheets, to using classic tea towels for giant napkins, or

sandwiching photographs within a large Perspex folding screen. While her distinctive style is relaxed, it is rich and elegant, too. Cushions are plump, curtains are interlined, and walls often fabric covered. Her palette, all ochre, moss and terracotta, is as cheerful and stirring as it is unusual in today's white-obsessed rooms. As a designer with her roots in the traditional, does she dislike the current mood for paring down? On balance, she believes, the timing was just right. 'People will never want to throw away favourite things,' she says. 'But we're all putting them back into a fresher setting, and simplicity always wins out.'

Dargie Lewis Designs (tel: 020-7736 3225)



1 Nobody ever has enough storage space. It's worth thinking carefully at the planning stage about what you need to store, from major items right down to everyday paperwork. Designate one area in the house for daily items, and provide storage that is easily accessible to everyone. I like to use decorative box files displayed on open shelves. These look pretty, and provide a great way of storing school notes, holiday information and bills.

2 I designed these handles by adapting the pattern from a pair of antique Chinese curtain tiebacks. Beautiful handles make all the difference to a simple piece of furniture, and can be 'dressed' with key tassels. If I can't find a handle I like, then I'll design something and get it made up:

3 It's vital to have comfort. Try to fill your house or flat with fresh flowers, music, delicious scents from scented candles (I like 'Palais d'Eté' by Manuel Canovas) and lots of books. Add plenty of plump cushions, and deep sofas

PHOTOGRAPHS CAROLINE GAVAZZI

PORTRAIT: ANTOINETTE EUGSTER



with feather-and-down cushions. Allow yourself the occasional little luxury. For example, I've just bought a set of linen sheets from The Linen Mill (tel: 020-7731 3262); they are heaven.

4 To add an intimate and luxurious feel to a room I often use paper-backed fabric on the walls. This gives a less formal effect than the bump-and-batten method, but imparts great depth to the colour and pattern of the fabric. It is an especially good device in small areas like a downstairs cloakroom, or cosy rooms like a study. Although you must get a specialist to do the paper-backing, and the hanging, the process isn't ruinously expensive and it lasts well. I paper-backed a Fortuny silk in one London house I

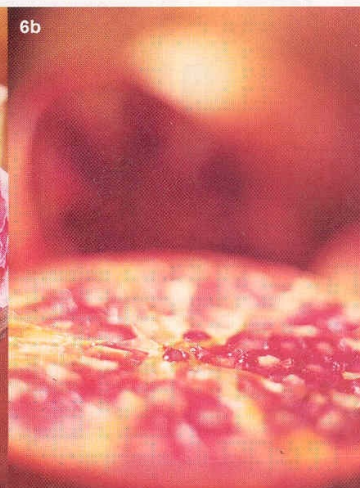
decorated and, twenty years later, it still looks fabulous.

5 I love using plenty of mirrors. Placing a narrow strip of mirror between adjacent windows livens up a potentially dead area. The resulting reflections always suggest a wonderful sense of space, and at night, used with candlelight, mirrors impart a romantic, glamorous mood. Try to think of unusual places to use them. Don't just hang them above a fireplace or on the wall; set mirrors into a bath panel, a screen, or even use them as table mats.

6 Always be alert to new decorative inspiration, and keep an 'inspiration' book of images and ideas. Travelling never fails to inspire me. Exotic ingredients

in a market may start off a decorative scheme, as can a local style of textile, or unusual fruit or flowers (6a and b).

7 I love using unusual buttons to customize fabrics, curtains, bed-covers or cushions. They can be bought inexpensively at department stores; look out for quirky designs when you are travelling abroad. Now trends for window dressings are simpler, using buttons is one way to dress up plain curtains. I recently designed a pair of curtains in neutral silk, with large faux-wood buttons sewn across a fold 45cm above the hem. And on a bedcover, where standard-width fabrics have been joined, buttons sewn at intervals down the seams can become a clever part of the design.





8 If you have a divan bed but no longer want the fussiness of a valance, there's a simple trick to achieve a more streamlined outline. Ask the bed manufacturer to upholster the divan in a fabric to coordinate with your scheme, in place of the traditional ticking. If you're concerned that casters will look ugly, have them replaced with neat bun feet. Upholstered headboards look smart but have a tendency to become marked. One tip is to quilt fabric into big squares, then have it made up into a simple, oblong loose cover with ties; this will be easily removed for laundering.

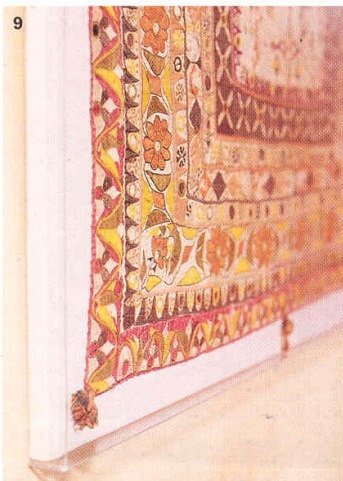
9 I adore unusual or antique textiles, and sometimes use framed examples in place of more conventional

artwork or paintings. For example, in my kitchen I have hung antique Indian embroidery, and in the hall I have displayed a Nepalese collar. Framing fragments of material is often a less expensive way to fill a large wall space than a picture. Display textiles simply, sandwiched between sheets of glass or Perspex.

10 (not illustrated) When planning a kitchen, work out which equipment needs to be out all the time – the kettle, toaster, food processor and so on. If you don't want them on view, incorporate a pull-down, shuttered door (a tambour door) within the overall kitchen design – wood or stainless steel look equally smart – so that equipment remains plugged in and ready for use, but hidden.

11 (not illustrated) A simple solution to the vexed question of whether or not to hide the TV: site it on a central shelf within a purpose-made Perspex side table. (Nigel Carew-Jones in Walton Street – tel: 020-7225 2411 – can make these to order.) Encased in Perspex, the TV becomes less obvious, and the side table can double up as storage for magazines and so on.

12 (not illustrated) In a garden room where you frequently entertain and regularly need to rearrange tables and chairs, consider rattan or wicker armchairs and sofas. They are much easier to move than heavy indoor ones, and can be made comfortable and stylish with tie-on, padded loose covers and cushions □



'Brought up in the Far East, I love these warm colours, shades that conjure up the piles of spices in the markets.' FROM LEFT 'Green Stone' (No 12); 'Drab' (No 41); and 'String' (No 8). All 'estate emulsion', £17.99 per 2.5 litres, by Farrow & Ball (tel: 01202-876141). 'Gardenia' (10B15), vinyl matt, £11.80 per 2.5 litres, from the Dulux 'Calm' collection (tel: 01753-550555). 'Chinese Lacquer' by Nina Campbell, and 'Othman Brae' by David Oliver; both flat emulsion, £19.99 per 2.5 litres, at Paint Library (tel: 020-7823 7755).

