

Go ahead -- get the furniture wet!

Shore houses decorated for easy living and durability

By MICHAEL T. BURKHART - Courier-Post Staff

Down the shore, summer living is all about comfort and ease.

It's about durable fabrics, bright colors and plenty of seating. It's about deck furniture that won't rust in the salt-laced air. It's about dining room chairs that can withstand wet swimsuits and floors that can handle gritty sand.

"When you're on vacation down there you want to relax and have fun," said Kathy Geller, who along with Jennifer Baxter owns Rooms In Bloom, a Moorestown business that specializes in one-day redesigns and real estate staging. "You want everything to be as easy as you can make it," Geller said.

In a one-day redesign, a dull room is given a quick face lift.

Sandra Cook, who owns Home-Stylist in Voorhees, which also specializes in one-day redesigns, said shore schemes should be simple and easy to maintain, have a relaxed and comfortable feel and bring the outdoors inside.

"That's really what it's all about," said Cook, speaking from a design conference in South Carolina last month. "It's definitely a more relaxed feel."

As small houses are replaced with \$1-million-plus homes, owners are buying new things to fill them, said Mary O'Brien Cabaron, an interior designer from Beach Haven Terrace. But they still want items that require little care. "They want to walk in and feel like they're on vacation, even if they're not on waterfront property," said Cabaron. "It's moving upscale."

Here are tips from the experts:

Furniture needs to be comfortable yet durable. Microfibers, cotton, canvass and slip covers hold up well and can be cleaned easily. "You come back from the beach and you don't want to be afraid to take a seat," said Geller.

Added Cook, "They need to be soft. You're sitting in shorts."

Slip covers are a good alternative for older furniture and can be purchased or custom made, Cook said. Cabaron said leather is also a choice of some owners, as well as distressed tables and chairs. Wicker and rattan also hold up well and have a beach feel. "The fabrics have to be friendly to the environment of sand and suntan lotion," she said. "And on distressed pieces, one more scratch looks OK."

When decorating, think about a few things before you start, Geller and Baxter said. Look at how often you entertain or have people sleep over. That determines the size of the tables, number of seating areas and number of beds. Bunk beds are a good choice for children's rooms. And concentrate on the common areas.

For floor treatments, tile often works best, said Geller and Baxter. It can be cleaned easily, won't be ruined by water and wears well. Hardwood floors are also a good choice. Stay away from shag or plush carpeting, where sand and dirt can become trapped. Simple throw rugs work best.

On the windows, use light fabric for an airy feel.

Shore color schemes differ from year-round homes. Beach houses tend to have a more airy and light feel and things aren't as formal. "It's a forum where you can express a different side," Geller said. "It's not as serious."

Light colors, especially in a bungalow such as the one in Beach Haven Baxter owns, do a lot to make the space feel bigger. One of the first things done in Baxter's home was to replace the dark wood in the kitchen with white.

"That really opened it up," Baxter said. "And we went for a more casual look." Also in small homes, she suggests using wall space for shelves. "Less is more down the shore. You don't decorate to the degree you do here."

There should be plenty of art on the walls, but not as many knickknacks around to eliminate the need for frequent dusting. Nautical themes are out, but beachy items are still very much in. Subtle coral motifs can be found on pictures, towels and accessories.

Cabaron recommends staying away from hot colors such as reds and blacks. Cool colors are much better for the shore. Yellows and oranges are reminders of sunsets over the bay and are good choices, said Cabaron, who grew up in Pine Hill.

Look for tables and chairs that work inside or out. If there's not a lot of room, a table that can be expanded with several leaves is a good option. "You always have company at the shore," said Geller.

Glass-top tables show fingerprints, but can be wiped easily. Distressed wood is also a good shore house look. In higher-end homes, many people use granite for counter tops, said Cabaron.

Typically, owners do not spend as much money on a shore house as they do their permanent residence.

"It's a second house, which means it's a second outlay of furnishings," said Geller. "You tend to scale it down a bit. But it has to be comfortable." The women recommend Ikea and Target for second-home items. Use throw pillows to make a bedroom look fabulous. "It's an inexpensive way to make something look rich," said Cabaron.

Finally, outside furniture made from PVC and aluminum is best. Cast aluminum is also popular. "The salt air is a killer," said Geller.