

CHARTREUSE is her muse

Noelle Penn has been in love with a certain shade of green since she was 12 years old.

Take a look at how the interior designer uses her favorite chartreuse and fabulous antiques to turn her 1974 ranch house into a Victorian manse.

BY SHEILA DE LA ROSA
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID PAPAZIAN



"Those boxes are called Jewelry Caskets," says Penn of the flock of boxes that surround a vintage bust of a shepherdess in a display in the corner of her master bedroom (opposite). "'Casket' is a relatively new term for a coffin; it used to mean a closed box. I've bought a lot of these in France over the years. Every one of them is at least 100 years old." A chartreuse-and-pink arrangement makes a ceramic and floral exclamation point in her office.

YOU GET A CLUE THAT A WOMAN LIKES a certain color when the siding of her house is painted in that shade. But when you see that *same* color—chartreuse, in the case of interior designer Noëlle Penn—artfully popping up in many of her furnishings (think vanity, chandeliers, upholstery, vases and even her potscrubber) in nearly every room in her house (and even as the color of her Volkswagen Beetle), you *get* that Penn is beyond simply liking this vibrant hue.

For Penn, the creative force behind Noëlle Interiors in Portland, chartreuse is her muse. And nowhere is this more obvious than in the 1974 ranch house in Southwest Portland that the designer, a Francophile and collector of Victoriana, spent the last three years remodeling after selling a beloved 1908 Foursquare in Southeast Portland.

"I've told you the story about how long it's been since I've loved chartreuse, haven't I?" she asks. "My mom owned an antiques store with my aunt, so she was into interiors, and I grew up in a house in which there was a lot of color. Chartreuse was in my parents' house when I



Penn

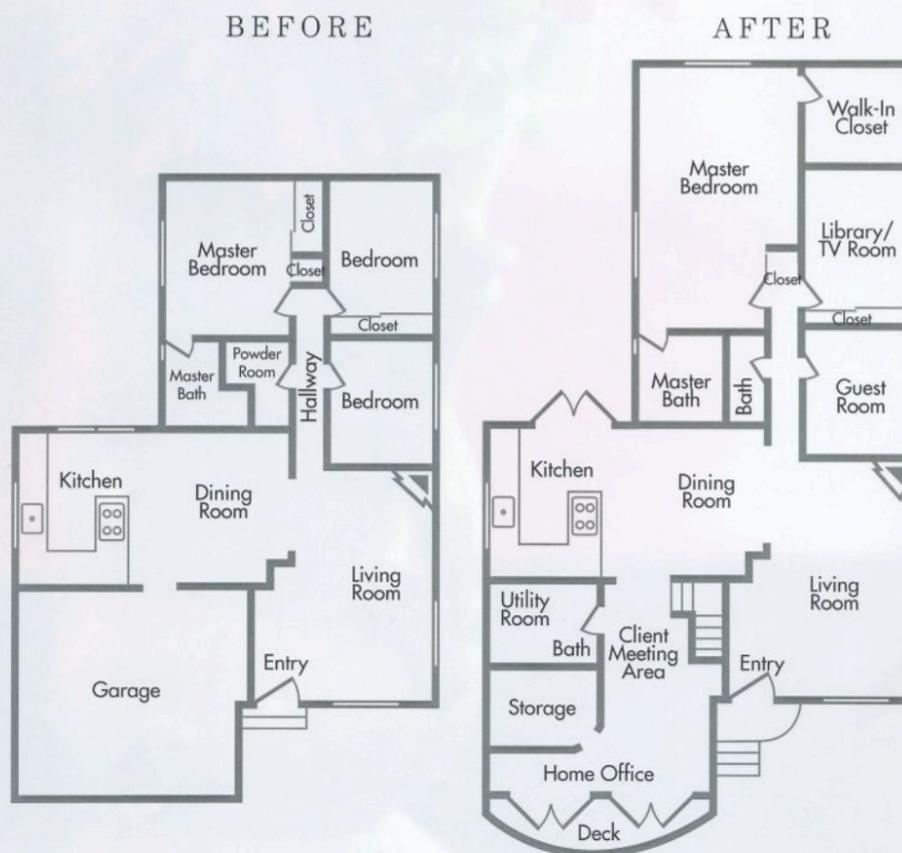
"I knew I had to do something about the steep driveway after two of my friends—in separate incidents!—slipped and fell on their butts when it was wet," says Penn about why she hired Dixon Remodeling to dig out the soil under the old garage (top photo) and turn the former garage into a light-filled office with French doors (bottom photo).



before



after



"I bought the candelabras with the blue flowers at an auction," says Penn. "They came out of a church, where they'd put one on each side of the altar. The needlepoint portrait dates to the 1890s and belonged to my mom. I love the colors in it." Architect-turned-seamstress Tracy Quoidbach fabricated the silk curtains and the lampshade. The Scalamandre sofa is from the Seattle Design Center.



"I used to have this 1880s mantel in my Foursquare, leaning against the wall in the back parlor," says Penn. "The weird thing is, it fits perfectly in that corner, as if it were made for this house. It's covering a white laminate mantel that I've painted black to make it disappear." The chocolate set on the mantel was her mother's. The electrified candelabra is from an antiques shop. Penn painted the gold-framed portrait to the right of the fireplace. The rug is from Costco.

was growing up. Well, for my 12th birthday, I asked for my parents to hire an interior designer to come to our house and help me redo my bedroom. And I got it! In those days, this would've been the late-60s; the interior designers were either from J.C. Penney's, which was pretty highfalutin in those days or like Elsie De Wolfe, the Francophile 'Queen of Style.' De Wolfe was the first woman decorator of any significance. Her signature thing was adding a touch of leopard in every room. She was everything I ever wanted to be."

She catches her breath and is a million miles away, back in the preteen room that probably did much to launch her toward becoming an interior designer.

"So the designer came out and talked with me about what I liked, and I ended up with this *fabulous* blue-and-chartreuse paisley-patterned linen bedspread and walls that were chartreuse," she says. "I had a big round bolster on my double bed, and full-length traverse-cord drapery made of the same material and a dark blue shag carpet on the floor. And *that's* when I started loving chartreuse."

SO JUST WHAT'S AN OLD-HOUSE lover doing, residing in a 1970s ranch house? Penn's downsizing was the end result of breaking her hip. "I was walking across my living room in my old house and—my hip broke!" she says. "My doctors said it was a spontaneous fracture

and they didn't know *why* it happened."

She underwent several surgeries in 2½ years, which led to her temporarily getting around in a wheelchair. At that point, the handwriting was on the plaster: She'd *have* to move out of her beloved four-level, 3,800-square-foot, 1908 Foursquare, her dream house in which her antiques fit the architecture like a century-old glove.

She needed to downsize to a one-level home that would allow her to get around in a wheelchair. In 2004, after looking at 30 houses citywide, her Realtor showed her an 1,100-square-foot ranch house in the Burlingame neighborhood of Portland. The mid-'70s house was built on a former orchard on a street filled with houses that dated to the 1950s.

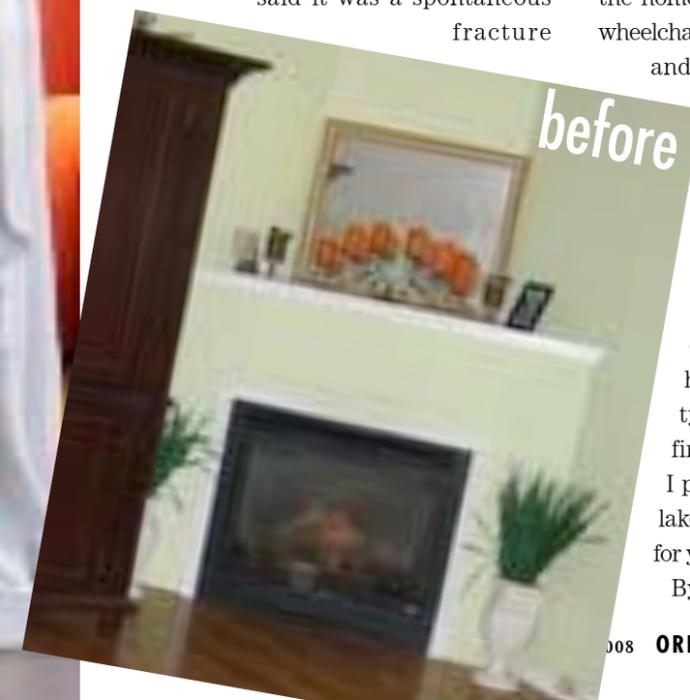
"I literally came up the front steps on my butt to see this house," she says. "Once I got inside, I couldn't get any further than the front rooms because I couldn't wheel my chair past the doorways. I said to my agent, 'Go look at the master bathroom; is it okay?' It wasn't until I was able to get out of my wheelchair that I realized how *low* the ceilings are in this house! They're only 7 feet 4 inches high; my Foursquare had 12 foot ceilings."

Her designer's eye told her that she could turn the house into a place she could enjoy living, and she purchased the home. A year later, she hired Dixon Remodeling of Portland to take on Phase One of remodeling the home to meet her needs: building a wheelchair ramp to the left of the garage and bumping out the back of the

house 14 feet into the backyard to create a 28-foot by 14-foot master bedroom, and a tk-foot by tk-foot walk-in closet.

Penn set to work on cosmetic fixes such as rethinking the laminate mantel (*left*) that drew your eye as you entered the house. "The fireplace had a pretty frightening white melamine fireplace surround and mantel, so I painted it black and put an Eastlake fireplace mantel that I've had for years in front of it," says Penn.

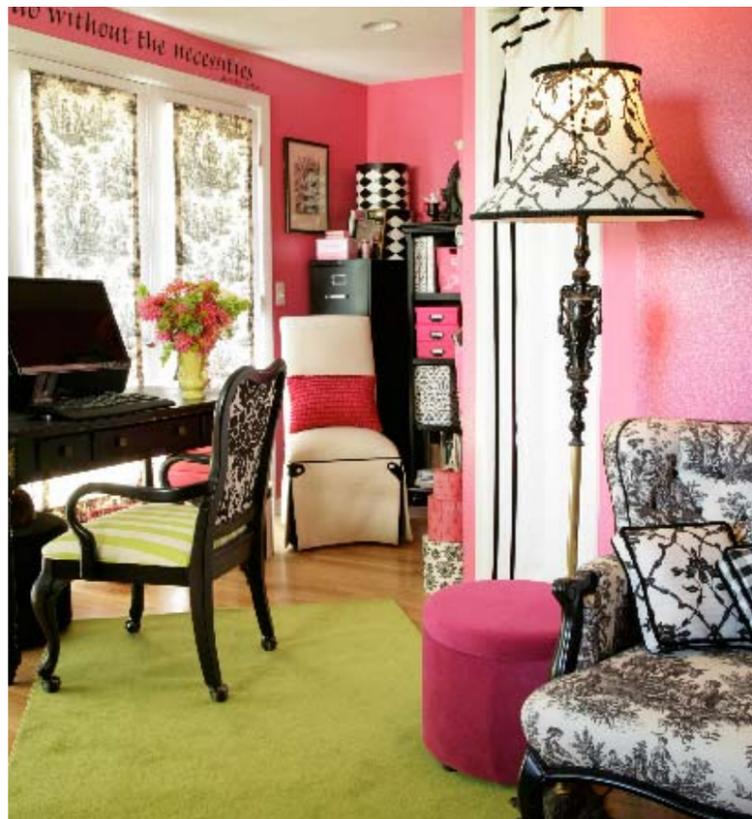
By spring of 2007, the designer



tackled the next home improvements on her list. She widened the doorway between the dining room and the living room so that the two spaces are more open to each other. “The doorway into the kitchen was *really* narrow and the dining room had fancy crown molding that was totally out of sync with the rest of the house, so I had that removed,” she says. “The Dixon crew also replaced the rust-and-gold tile floor with hardwoods.” Penn took down the kitchen cabinets and painted them, what else, chartreuse!

Penn also pirated 200 square feet from what had been the house’s primary bathroom to enlarge her master bathroom. The original bathroom, which had a purple marble-tile floor when she bought the house, became a tasteful powder room done in **wall color Tk and new flooring material tk**. “It used to have a shower the size of one in a trailer,” she says. “The skinniest person in the *world* could not have bent over and picked up a bar of soap without flooding the room.”

Her Phase Two whole-house remodel yielded to Phase Three during the fall of 2007: doing something about her bunny-slope-steep driveway (*below*). “The steepness of the



Roman shades in a black-and-white toile cover French doors that open onto a narrow balcony overlooking the new driveway 14 feet below.

driveway was just horrible, especially since I was in a wheelchair,” says Penn.

Her big idea for the renovation was to excavate a new level 12 feet beneath the original garage for a new garage and a driveway that would be flat enough so that she no longer had to use her emergency brake whenever she left her beetle in the drive. The old garage would morph into a new light-filled space thanks to two sets of French doors that would open to a balcony accented with new ironwork. She’d use the reinvented space as a home office.

“See that white curtain?” she asks, pointing to doorway on a right angle to the room’s corner that Penn currently keeps private with white curtains edged with two rows of black ribbon (*left*). “That’s a walk-in closet that I use for storage, but I planned this space so that, in resale, new owners could turn this into a master bedroom and my storage area would become a walk-in closet. I do everything in

here from artwork—I paint pastels and make decoupage screens—to meeting with clients.”

Jason Reid, the production manager of Dixon Remodeling, a residential remodeling company in Portland that specializes in residential remodeling on older homes in Portland, says the foundation work was the hardest part of the job. “Noelle’s plans for the house were really interesting,” he says. “The grade on her old driveway was 4 degrees over 20 feet. We had to do the new foundation in sections because too much of the house’s load had to be transferred. First we did the two-thirds of the foundation closest to the street. Then we did the remaining third. We ended up taking out 17

boxes of dirt, 170 cubic yards.”

The new balcony has pressure-treated floor joists and cantilevered beams that extend 12 feet. King Metal Works in North Plains, Ore., fabricated the new iron railing. “I just *love* my new balcony,” says Penn, raising a toile shade so she can open a set of French doors and water the flower baskets that overflow onto the 22-foot-long by 5-foot-wide balcony. “Whenever I come out here, I feel like giving a papal blessing.”

FROM THE VIBRANT WALL COLORS in Penn’s home, you’d think her people came from Jamaica or Mexico, but she’s actually a descendant of William Penn on her father’s side. (Her paternal grandfather is from the Austrian-German clan who homesteaded what is now Ridgefield, Wash.) Her bedroom is—*duh!*—chartreuse. Her living room and dining room are a “Wake-up-and-smell-the-oranges!” pumpkin. Her office is a Barbie doll pink. “I hire my cousin Jimmy Moore’s painting company—Jim the Painter—to do all of my painting,” says the designer. “He’s the ulti-



Paris calling! Hot pink, chartreuse and black-and-white finds—and lots of Eiffel Towerabilia—give Penn’s office a Clignancourt sensibility. Penn bought an olive-green fruitwood desk from her landscaper for \$25 and painted it black. Her seamstress covered the front of her office chair in a chartreuse-and-white stripe; its back was done in a black-and-white toile.



PULL OFF A VICTORIAN CLASH!

WALKING UP THE NEW CONCRETE STEPS THAT CURVE AROUND A ROUNDED OFF retaining wall, you expect to see white walls serving as a minimalist backdrop to Eames rocking chairs and Florence Knoll desks inside the 1974 house. But then you wouldn't be entering the home of interior designer Noelle Penn. In her now-1,800 square feet of ranch house, she mixes Frida Kahlo wall colors—Chartreuse! Orange! Hot pink!—with her 100-year-old collections of Victoriana and vintage finds.

We talked with her—and her seamstress—about how the designer gets the look done.



Go bold with your wall and fabric colors. Maybe you've got all of the white linen dresses from "Howard's End" stuck in your head, but Penn says that Victorians were crazy for color until the early 1900s. "It wasn't until Queen Victoria went into mourning over the death of Albert that everything went all blah and dull," she says. "The Victorians frequently had deep teal or orange walls. Women's clothes were all in brilliant shades of color like what you see in *My Fair Lady*."

In a world of interiors that often stay within a narrow spectrum, professional seamstress Tracy Quoidbach appreciates Penn's love of color. "What's great about working on projects with Noelle is that she *always* picks such wonderful colors," says Quoidbach, who does custom sewing for some of the city's best designers. "Who knew that Victorians used such vibrant colors?"

Think like a Victorian when it comes to details and embellishments. Around Penn's dining room table are four chairs wearing slipcovers fabricated in two ways: a couple are made of magenta cotton velvet with an orange vent and the other two are made of orange cotton velvet with a magenta vent. Why bother to mix it up? "I love details like that," says Penn. "I've embellished every chandelier I've ever owned. To me, an all-brass light fixture with white shades shouldn't be allowed to be *called* a chandelier."

Quoidbach is always up for executing what Penn dreams up. "Noelle usually has me do creative details on what I sew for her," she says. "Even her shower curtains have three rows of tailored ruffles on them a foot from the bottom."

Don't sweat being a maximalist in a minimalist era. "Oh, I *don't* have an issue with living with stuff!" says Penn. "I love having my collections around me in every room, especially because many of them started with family pieces. Like my dining room wall that's filled with landscapes. If hanging one landscape is good, hanging 35 of them is better! How could I only hang one landscape on that wall? Knowing me, I'd have to change it out with a different landscape every day."

—S.M.D.

mate fisherman and he-man, but after he put up the pink paint in my office, he said, 'If you ever tell anyone, I'll kill you, but I kind of *like* this hot pink!'"

Surprisingly, the clash of vibrant color and Victoriana works just fine in the 1974 house, not the least of which is because of her stuff. She treasures family heirlooms such as her great-grandfather's glass walking cane. She collects 100-year-old glass boxes called caskets. Oil paintings of landscapes hang frame-to-frame like wallpaper in her dining room (*right*). Perfume bottles fill one corner of the vanity in her master bedroom.

"I have all these secret collections on all of my tables," she says pointing to a display of what looks like brooches. "Those are sash pins. Women used to wear them on their belts. These are agate pins. My grandmother used to give me one whenever I was good—that's why I have so many! They came in flower sacks when *she* was little; she got them from her mother. A lot of my collections start with something from my family, then I add onto them."

Vintage books—including a fantastic collection of red-bound tomes—fill nearly floor-to-ceiling bookcases in her TV room. She picks up a book in a place of honor atop a desk. "See my dad's cool signature?" she asks. "It says SCY PENN. This is an old,



"When I was in high school, my mom and aunt had an antiques shop and I bought my first landscape—the gilt-framed one to the left of the largest river scene—for \$30," says Penn. "I had to pay it off week after week. *That's* the painting that started the whole landscape collecting thing." The orange tablecloth is from Paris. The rose-and-cockscomb arrangement on a pillow of scotch moss is typical of the floral work and Christmas tree-decorating she takes on during the holidays.

WHERE'D SHE GET that?

... the chartreuse chandelier. From Globe Lighting (go to globelighting.com) in Portland. "It was marked down to \$25 from \$418—but it didn't look like *this!*" says designer Noelle Penn. "I changed out everything. When I bought it, the chandelier was painted in a faux-copper 'patina.' I painted the arms and ceiling medallion chartreuse accented with gold, and added the big crystals that dangle from the bottom of it. Then I had little chartreuse lampshades made at the Rainbow Lampshade Shop, which cost five times as much as the chandelier. The woman who sews all the curtains and accessories for my clients, Tracy Quoidbach, made the cord cover. I love how it turned out."

... the needlepoint portrait of a lady and a deer. From her mother. "This is a circa 1890s draft-diverter," says Penn. "Even though the woman is with a deer, she's always reminded me of the woman in the unicorn tapestries at the Musée de Cluny in Paris. There's something serene and magical about her! The piece is probably English, probably made for a large, formal room in a wealthy family's home, and was probably put directly into its finely carved frame as soon as the needlepoint was done. I've seen a lot of draft-diverters, and I've even owned a couple of others, but I've never seen another one that had such fine needlework—and so fine a frame."

... the silk-velvet pillow with the wirework and the chenille embroidery. From an antiques dealer at Expo about 15 years ago. "This silk-velvet textile was obviously a 'piece' of something larger such as an altar cloth," says Penn of one of her favorite Victorian pieces. "The grapes are made of metallic heavy thread over wads of raw cotton. The leaves are made out of chenille and silk embroidery threads. About four years ago, I had Tracy make it into a pillow. I love the depth of its colors, its richness and that it's 3-dimensional."



old book that he loved."

Having an eye for antiques and collectibles is in her genes. Her mother, as noted, was an antiques dealer. Her grandmother bought her extended family's most valuable treasure—a beach house on a double lot in Gleneden Beach, Ore.—for the whopping sum of \$800 at a garage sale. "That was *way* before Salishan made that area a hot spot," she says.

Penn is an equal-opportunity collector, shopping the bins at Goodwill with as much gusto as neighborhood yard sales or her favorite antiques shops such as Justin and Burks in Sellwood.

As her altarlike living room fireplace attests to, she's also drawn to religious artifacts. "I bought that little holy water fount at the Clignancourt flea market in Paris," she says. "I found the altar piece with the blue flowers on it that's in the living room at an auction in Portland. You know, I was raised Catholic and I have all this religious stuff, but I'm the biggest agnostic in the universe. Who's the painting of above the mantel? I don't know.

I call her The Lady of Perpetual Help because, well, I *need* perpetual help!

WALK INTO PENN'S NEW MASTER bedroom and you feel as if you're, well, in the bedroom of a 1908 Foursquare. First, there's all that space. "Before I bumped out the back of the house 14 feet into the backyard to enlarge the bedroom, the only things that fit in the bedroom was one small chair and my sleigh bed," she says. "I couldn't have a dresser in there. I couldn't have my dressing table. *Nothing!*"

Then there are the quality antiques that give the room in the 1970s house its Old World sleeping chamber vibe. "That's where Kit, my 19-year-old cat lives," says the designer, nodding to a half-opened drawer cushioned with a little blanket in a massive flame-mahogany chest of drawers that she purchased from Justin & Burks. "I found this flame-mahogany sofa there, too, and had it re-upholstered in Fortuny fabric that I bought in Venice." A mirrored dresser from Paul Schatz fills the wall between her enormous sleigh bed and the

entrance to her new walk-in closet.

Her favorite piece in the bedroom is, indeed, the 9½-foot-long Georgio Collection sleigh bed that she picked up at the Seattle Design Center. "That was another one of my 'I'll give you this much money for it' kind of purchase," says the frugal designer who loves to save herself—and her clients—money. "The first time I saw it on the sales floor, I fell in love with it, but the pricetag was \$13,000. Eventually, it ended up in the room they set aside for discontinued items. I watched it and watched it as the price kept falling. Every time I went there for clients, I'd say, 'Is *my* bed still here?' I bought it when it got down to \$2,000. I absolutely love it!"

And what to-die-for bed doesn't need a wardrobe of equally sumptuous bed clothes. "Because Tracy is the Seamstress of the Universe, I have about 15 complete changes of bedding," says Penn.

The wall opposite the flame-mahogany chest is a vignette straight out of a Victorian lady's boudoir: a chartreuse vanity disappears in front of the chartreuse wall,



Flower baskets jazz up a new balcony off of Penn's office, which used to be the garage. New concrete steps curve to the front door.

turning an antique globe lampshade into a beacon among the sea of Penn's perfect shade of green. "There's an auction house near Lincoln City that has the *best* auctions," she says. "I bought that vanity and the mirror there. The vanity was originally white, but it had been in a smoker's house for so long that it turned a yellowy vanilla color. I got the paint the furniture the same color as your wall idea from Monet. When you visit the house he lived in, all of the furniture is painted the color of the walls they're in front of. It makes the rooms look bigger and the paintings and what's on the tables come forward."

As great as her stuff is, the room's intense chartreuse walls are what makes the room come alive. "Chartreuse is *not* a color I can get tired of!" she says. "I know most people wouldn't agree with me, but in *my* brain, chartreuse is a neutral." □



"You've heard that Monet used to paint his furniture the same color as his walls, haven't you?" asks Penn. "That way, the artwork stood out. I've borrowed that idea for years!" The metal chair—which Penn bought at a yard sale for \$10 and spray-painted chartreuse—wears a flounce of silk that seamstress Tracy Quoidbach whipped up.

meet the professionals



The Contractor

Jason Reid, production manager, Dixon Remodeling, Portland

Years in the trades: 13 **Years at Dixon:** 5

On working with Penn: "Noëlle is such a great, outspoken lady, and she's got a real knack for design and color," he says.

Contact info: 503-768-474

The Painter

James Moore, owner, James E. Moore Painting, Milwaukie, Ore.

Years in business: 27

On what's around the corner with color trends: "I'm starting to see a move toward clay colors such as putty and taupe," he says.

Contact info: 503-522-8191



The Seamstress

Tracy Quoidbach, seamstress

Years having own business: 7

On going from architect to home sewer:

"I'm *still* building something," she says. "I love combining fabric and some kind of construction."

Contact info: She prefers that you contact her through Noëlle Penn at decoratrice@aol.com.

The Landscape Designer

Amy Over, owner, Garden View Design, Portland

Years in business: 14

On Noëlle's gardening style: "Like me, she likes to use a *lot* of plants in her garden!" she says. "Most people use too many onesies."

Contact info: 503-253-3530; overs@uswest.net.

