



By Jennifer David  
Photography Paul Orenstein

# SWEET TEMPTATION

How one couple renovated a classic cottage to keep their kids coming back summer after summer





# IT'S A STORY

that many cottage families know well: a cottage that shrinks as the family grows. A bunk room that once accommodated four young kids isn't suitable for young adults. A kitchen that once worked for preparing simple picnic lunches of sandwiches and potato chips won't do the trick when dinners for 20 are the norm.

Calgary couple Cathy and Jim Peplinski and their four children know this story too. Their old 1,200 sq. ft. Muskoka cottage was where the kids grew up, but it was small for six people and on a piece of land so damp and shallow that the family affectionately dubbed it "The Swamp"—not a place that warranted redeveloping. Cathy and Jim knew that eventually they'd need more space.

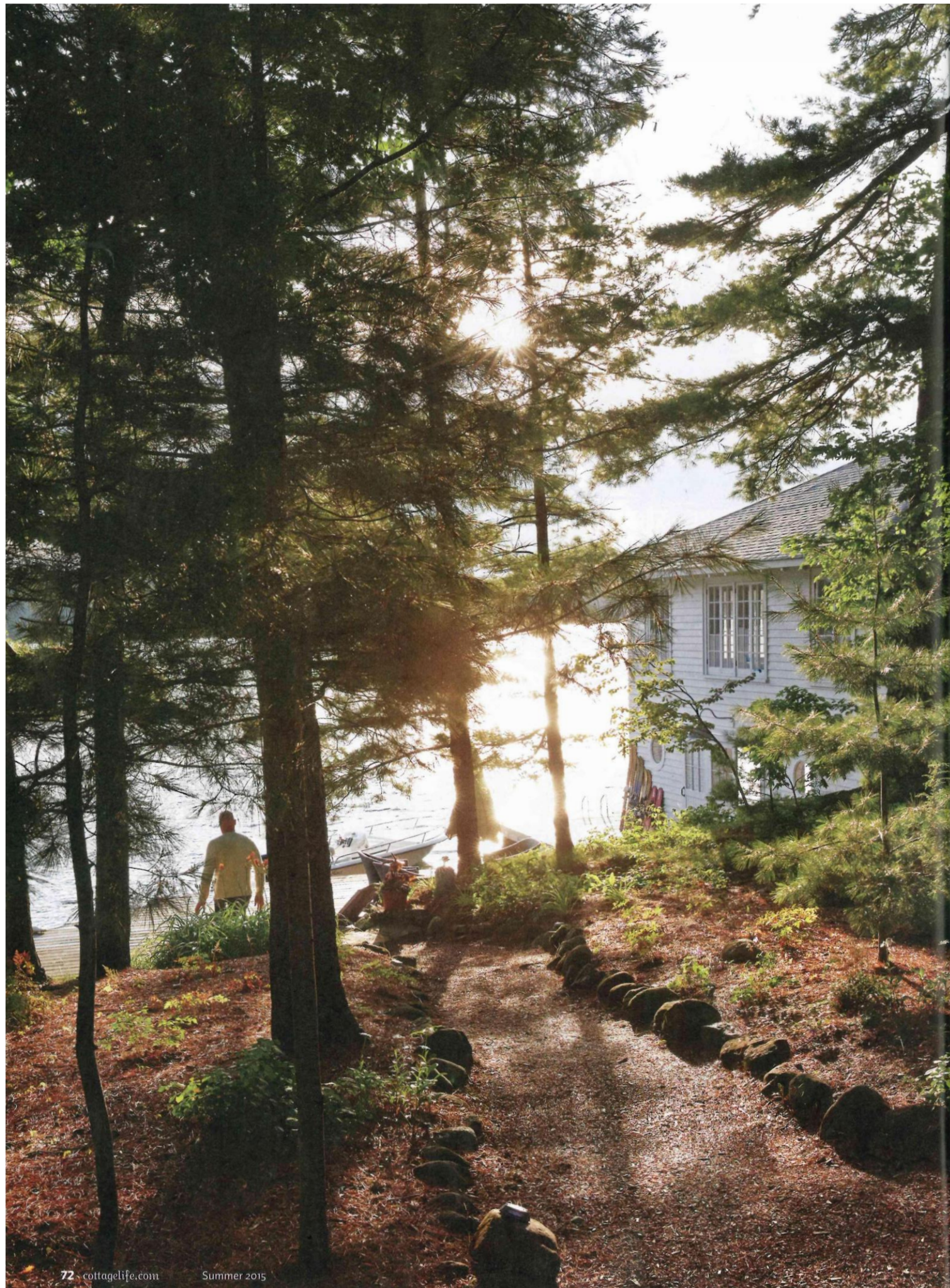
But while they were ready to move on from The Swamp, their ties to the lake itself ran deep. Cathy's parents were close by, and summers provided treasured family time for the children, then aged 7 to 15, who would eventually start to move farther from home as adulthood beckoned. "We asked the kids where they'd like to congregate in the summers in the future, and they all said Muskoka," says Cathy. And so began the hunt for a new family getaway. »

From the start of their reno, Cathy and Jim Peplinski (left) agreed to preserve the original character of their Muskoka cottage, but the structure wasn't always cooperative. The north wall (opposite, below) was warped from years in the line of the prevailing wind. Their builder, Tamarack North, used a block-and-tackle system and a boat to pull it plumb before attaching it to a new foundation. The builders also identified faulty structural elements, replacing what they needed

to while preserving what they could. The fireplace, for example, is rebuilt using original stones; many of the porch pillars, however, are original. The couple also wanted a light-filled interior. Their architects responded by increasing window sizes and adding transoms throughout (above). They removed a wall between the kitchen and the living room to improve the flow. Cathy did her part by painting the natural wood walls white.



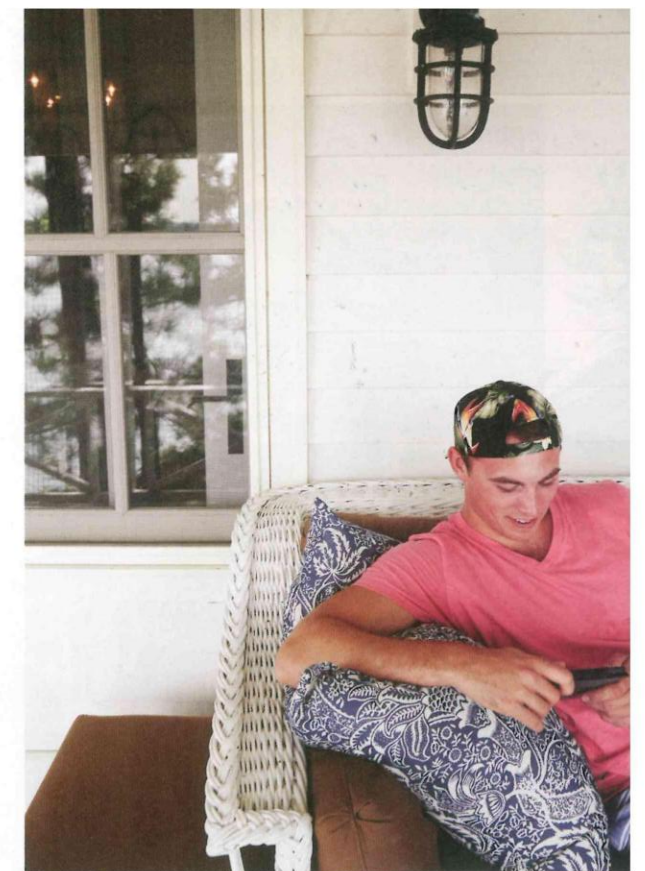




The turret verandah on the cottage's northwest corner is a favoured spot for lounging. The octagonally shaped area is skirted by unique railings that, while not to today's code, are grandfathered in. "There is a slightly art deco and rustic Muskoka mash-up in their design," says architect Christine Lolley. The boat-house (opposite), home base for the Peplinski kids, shares a similar look.



# "I HAD A ROMANTIC NOTION ABOUT AN ISLAND"



"We made a list of half a dozen things we wanted," says Jim. "My only requirement was that I wanted it to have lots of light." Beyond that, he says, "I'm not sure I'd trust myself to pick a place, but Cath has a great sense of what she likes, and I trust that."

To his surprise, Cathy had shown interest in an island. "I don't know why but I had been curious about it," she says. "I think I had a romantic notion of what it would be like to live on an island." Specifically, she hoped to find a vacant one that would offer the opportunity to build their dream cottage, something "a little simpler and more contemporary in nature." She kept a close eye on the Muskoka real estate market throughout the fall of 2005. When she first saw the listing for what would become their cottage, she told Jim, "This is it. We have to go!"

Jim wasn't convinced. "I said first of all, there's no rush. Second of all, it's an island. You have to handle everything twice." He pointed out that careful consideration would have to be given to everything carted on and off an island.

But then this wasn't just any island. The property had a striking mix of away-from-it-all tranquility and an alluring sense of the past, and its fate was sealed the moment Cathy and Jim saw it. "I felt like we discovered this magical place," says Cathy. This despite the island's trio of weathered traditional buildings, all in need of repair. There was a boathouse with three bedrooms in the quarters above, plus an antiques-filled, two-storey cottage, and, occupying a quiet spot at the opposite end of the island, a small gazebo, all of which the couple found completely beguiling. "It was a very pure

Nautical notes surface in a few places in the completed cottage—in the newly painted white tongue-and-groove ceilings, in the wall sconces, and in the watery blues and greens that Cathy chose to accent most rooms. The biggest upstairs bedroom (opposite), called the "Flag Bedroom" because of its view of the flagpole, features storage in all the nooks and crannies, including under the new window seat and on the corner shelves. This bedroom is actually a few steps higher than the rest of the floor; it was created as part of a renovation. The original structure was built in

1885. The dormer window here goes all the way to the floor, unlike in the other two upstairs bedrooms (which are part of the original cottage), a trick the architects used to unify the exterior look of the building. The dining room (left), boasts a high-gloss, intense-blue table and matching chairs which pair beautifully with the newly exposed, white-painted beams. The Peplinskis raised this ceiling a good eight inches, a move that made a big difference to the tall Peplinski clan, including their 20-year-old son (above).

Blipp the table to see before-and-after photos and floor plans of this renovation







While the completed cottage has a look that implies age, it has none of the usual age-related issues. It's now a comfortable three-season retreat with improved energy features—such as beefed-up sprayed polyurethane insulation—and new electrical, plumbing, and heating systems. The kitchen (opposite) features a mix of classic good looks and modern functionality. There are no upper cabinets. Instead, Cathy insisted on a bank of custom-designed

and traditionally constructed wood windows overlooking the new outdoor-dining deck (above). All storage needs are met by the kitchen island, painted a mossy green. The room's character is enhanced by a rustic, open-beam ceiling, which mixes nicely with stainless steel pendant lights. On the other side of the kitchen island is a new set of stairs, built to replace the rickety exterior set that formerly provided the only access to the second floor.

example of cottaging in another era," says Cathy. "It wasn't winterized, but we actually thought that with a little maintenance we could use it the way it was. And we liked that the island was very untouched. There was a part of me that knew that if someone else bought it, they'd likely bulldoze it."

So despite the couple's love of modern architecture and their desire to build a getaway from scratch, they somehow found themselves with a Muskoka classic that had certainly seen better days. In other words, the kind of place that most buyers in this land of über cottages *would* have knocked down. "The idea became to restore it," says Jim, "and, in many respects, leave it better than we found it."

In the summer of 2008 work got underway—repairing docks, installing a new septic system, completing a renovation of the sagging boathouse, and doing a general cleanup—work that kept the kids busy for a few summers. Eventually, though, the cottage's limitations could not be ignored. "We were a little naive, thinking we could live with it," says Jim. The kitchen was pokey and lacked storage and counter space. The three upstairs bedrooms and the bathroom were accessed by an exterior set of stairs—a layout that was unpleasant in foul weather and that concerned Cathy, who was thinking about small children visiting. In typically quirky early-cottaging fashion, all occupants of the second floor had to pass through one bedroom to get to the others. And, despite the fact that the island's light was one of its best features, much of the cottage interior felt dim and chopped up. {Continued on page 122}

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## SWEET TEMPTATION

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Tearing down to build new would have solved their problems. But “we feel we’re custodians here—we’re responsible for this original 1885 cottage,” Jim says. So the family turned to Toronto-based Solares Architecture, a firm whose work they’d seen in a magazine and that they had considered for renovations at The Swamp. Solares was still in its infancy at the time, but something about the outfit’s young partners, the husband-and-wife team of Christine Lolley and Tom Knezic, and their thoughtful ideas about sustainable residential design, inspired Cathy and Jim’s confidence.

“I remember being really excited,” says Knezic of the project. “But it was one of the most complex buildings we’d seen, not because of the scale but because none of the rooms aligned with the others.” He adds with a laugh, “Fortunately, we have powerful modelling software.”

“The trend in Muskoka is to tear down,” says Lolley, “but we would have had to conform to the current setbacks.” And everyone was in agreement there: the cottage’s proximity to the water was one of its best features. They decided to take the place apart and redesign and restore it on the same footprint. Their goals included improving the flow, brightening the interior, increasing efficiency, and reusing materials where they could to retain the feeling of the old cottage. “We wanted the building to look like it hadn’t even been renovated,” says Knezic.

By looking at the cottage as a whole, exploring the ways the family likes to live there—how and where they like to congregate, how they use various spaces, how many people they need to accommodate—Knezic and Lolley were able to take the building’s original envelope and reconfigure it for modern family life. “We were correcting history a little bit,” says Knezic. “We rebuilt it the way it should have been originally.” From the outside, you can hardly tell the 130-year-old cottage has had a major overhaul. But inside, the place has become a functional and much-loved family gathering place. Let the memories begin. 🐾

*Toronto-based writer Jennifer David is a passionate Stony Lake cottager.*

## WHO’S THAT MAN?

{Continued from page 80}

Ontario, near Belleville. Champlain described the land as “a well-cleared country...fair and fertile” and “peopled with a countless number of souls”—by his estimate, at least 30,000. Vast cornfields surrounded the well-fortified settlements: Huronia was the breadbasket of other indigenous nations. It also produced squashes and sunflowers, plums and berries. Champlain particularly admired the way that the Huron, as he called the Wendat, were “covered in the pelts of deer and beaver, which they acquired from Algonquins and Nippissing for Indian corn and meal.”

He makes southeastern Ontario sound like Holland, doesn’t he? An intensively cultivated territory, thickly peopled by savvy traders. Yet two centuries later, British settlers found an “empty land” awaiting discovery and conquest. European diseases and conquest had devastated the Wendat, and most of their land had reverted to bush—the same backwoods tangle of trees and scrub that Susanna Moodie called a “dark prison.”

Today, this region has changed again. Beyond the sprawl of the Golden Horseshoe, small towns and holiday properties cling to the shores of gurgling rivers and gin-clear lakes. On a recent visit to Stony Lake near Peterborough, I talked to a cottager who recalled his mother boasting that Champlain had been there in late August 1615. “She claimed that he had planted yellow day lilies along the shore as he paddled through.” Perhaps: Champlain was a great gardener who loved roses and fruit trees, and Stony Lake’s day lilies are a striking chrome yellow. But it isn’t the same shoreline. When the Trent-Severn Waterway was being built in the late 19th century, the water level at Stony Lake was raised six feet.

The only elements in our cottage country that the 17th-century space traveller might recognize are the blueberries and the day lilies. Subsequent generations of settlers, miners, farmers, builders, and anglers have remodelled everything else. 🐾

*Charlotte Gray is the author of nine non-fiction books. Her most recent, The Massey Murder, has won four awards.*