



Fall in Love With Your Old House, Again

BY CHARITY VOGEL

REMEMBER when you first moved in? If you're like me, you were giddy with the promise of it all. Every time you came home, or went up the staircase, you got a flush of excited, eager happiness, filling your senses, making you think: *I can't believe I got this house! Wow.*

It's an awful lot like falling in love. Yes, the first time I laid eyes on my house, I knew, just the way Rhett knew about Scarlett, Bacall about Bogie, Lady about the Tramp. *This is the one. Don't let her go.* So, despite a glaring age difference, we took the plunge, my 109-year-old Victorian and I. A scrap of paper (okay, a mortgage, not a marriage license) bound us legally and morally. Our fates and fortunes became one, and the first year or two, like so many honeymoons, was sheer bliss.

But time passes, and projects happen. Little things that once seemed so endearing—the squeak in the hall floor, that crack in the parlor plaster—begin to grate. Contemplating a stack of contractors' bills led me to more doubts. Since when had this relationship grown so expensive to maintain? I even started to wonder about our long-term happiness.

Then one day I made an important discovery. Walking up the hill behind my house, in the late afternoon sun, I approached the majestic 1898 structure

from a different angle, one I don't normally see. Huge maple trees framed the back wall of the house, which, in the rich golden sunlight, was as neat and fresh as a new notebook page. Obscured were the spots where the blue paint was peeling, the white trim dingy, the kitchen windowsill rotted. All I could see was elegance of form and homespun beauty. This is what I had fallen in love with. That's when it hit me: love affairs with houses are like love affairs with people. Just as fickle, and, underneath it all, just as tenacious.

Affairs of the heart may wither, but you can rekindle them. You must experience your old house in a way that helps you remember why you fell in love.

Trust me: the magic is still there. Maybe we all need a little coaching. This is, after all, one of life's most important relationships. And so what follows are 25 ways, from the low-key to the wild and crazy, that I've learned to rekindle the flame. Remember what drew you, invest in your partnership, and celebrate what you have.

Here are 25 ways to rekindle the flame.

1. FIND BABY PICTURES: an original blueprint or old photos of your house. (Check with town hall, the local historical society, or relatives of previous owners.) Look for secrets and familiar features; marvel at the changes over time.



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2. **RELAX.** Hang a porch swing. Now sit in it for at least an hour. (No cheating: a full hour.)
3. **ADD OR CHANGE THE CURTAINS** in the most prominent windows. Replacing tattered vinyl shades with lace panels will put your Cinderella in a ball gown.
4. **ORDER FANCY STATIONERY** with the name of your house and its address. (Calligraphy is nice; black ink on cream-colored paper always looks classy, or try maroon or navy-blue ink.) What's that, your house doesn't have a name? See number 5.
5. **NAME YOUR HOUSE AND GROUNDS**, like in the old days. Pick a distinguishing feature of the house or its location and let it suggest a name. (Fictional Anne lived at Green Gables, Four Winds, Windy Poplars, and Ingleside, each name a rich image.)
6. **THROW A PARTY.** A good time is after the next renovation project you finish. Neighbors will gawk and you'll feel so proud.
7. **CREATE A SCRAPBOOK**, a fond album for the future. Keep before-and-after photos, samples of old and new wallpapers and paint colors and fabrics, plus a handwritten journal of your work.
8. **SKETCH OR PAINT YOUR HOUSE**—yourself. See things you've taken for granted.
9. **PERFUME COULDN'T HURT:** put out bowls of potpourri for the season, such as pine, lilac, freesia, lily, pumpkin, apple and cinnamon.
10. **HIRE A MEDIUM** or psychic to walk through with you, channeling the history and spirits of various rooms. Take the results as seriously or nonsensically as you like.
11. **CREATE A COZY** and inexpensive vignette, even if good furniture is still in the future: paint a flea-market table and add a lamp, or some vases from a thrift store. Put fresh flowers in the entry hall or on the table.
12. **DECORATE YOUR FRONT DOOR OR PORCH** like you mean it, with seasonal decorations that play up your colonial, Victorian, or Tudor house.
13. **COME UP WITH A TRADEMARK COCKTAIL** for parties at your house, naming it for a unique feature. A Plastered Wallbanger, anyone? How about a Stained Glass Spritzer?

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Low-key romance:

a bowl of potpourri, a time-out in the porch swing. On the wild side: psychics and cocktails.

14. INVEST IN A LAMP that you love, whether new or an antique, and place it in a key window. Leave it on every night, a beacon of friendliness that welcomes you home (and gives passersby the thrill of an illuminated room).

15. PAINT A SMALL ROOM, like a bathroom. Pick one small project and finish it.

16. TAKE "FOUR SEASONS" PHOTOGRAPHS of your house: the same shot, same angle, and the same time of day. Frame them together.

17. REPAINT YOUR FRONT DOOR, and try a brand-new color for maximum effect. Like a new lipstick, it's easy but it'll get noticed.

18. FLY AN AMERICAN FLAG on the porch; it's an old-house tradition. What about ordering a historic flag with the number of stars that correspond to its date of construction?

19. GIVE A QUICK SPIT AND POLISH: move the trash cans, sweep the walk, plant some marigolds, add a wreath or potted vines. Wash the windows!

20. RESTORE ONE ORIGINAL ELEMENT to your house. Use salvaged, custom, or quality reproduction parts. It might be anything from a doorknob to the porch railing.

21. EXPLORE ALL NOOKS and crannies: the cellar and attic, the old wallpaper at the back of closets.

22. STUDY YOUR HOUSE from different angles—looking through a camera lens or framed by your fingers. Notice juxtapositions, angles, and details. Commission a portrait of your house, from your favorite angle.

23. FIND THE GRAVES of the original owners of your home, and plant some flowers there.

24. CHANGE THE TRIM COLOR (experiment!) or pick out details of the cornice or porch next time you paint. It's like a new outfit!

25. BUY A BEAUTIFUL GUEST BOOK for your home—something covered in soft leather or elegant fabric. Keep it in the entry and encourage visitors to write in it. Watch it fill up over the years. ★

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