



# Perfectly Polished

Designer Mary Evelyn McKee's Birmingham home is



The barrel vault-ceilinged foyer leads directly to the garden, with the living room to the left and the stair hall and dining room to the right. RIGHT: Designer Mary Evelyn McKee enjoys her garden, which was designed by Mary Zahl. The outdoor rooms are filled with old-fashioned perennials and lush ground cover.



BY LYDIA SOMERVILLE  
PHOTOGRAPHED BY TRIA GIOVAN

as serene and sophisticated as the woman herself





McKee's long-haired dachshund, Nicholas, sits on a daybed in the living room. OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: A linen rug anchors a grouping of overscaled furniture. All floral designs are by Sybil Brooke Sylvester. OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM: A pea gravel motor court leads to the front entry, which is flanked by boxwoods.





designer Mary Evelyn McKee's Birmingham home is clearly an extension of her own calm, polished style. As she stands in her sun-filled living room, the serene décor is the ideal backdrop for her chic dress, discreet jewelry, and sweep of honey hair. As she guides you through the house, explaining the provenance of each piece of furniture and art, you begin to appreciate how place, family, and experience have subtly informed her approach to interior decorating.

A fourth-generation Birminghamian, McKee grew up visiting the homes of





Skirted chairs surround a French walnut table ready to be set with old family silver and Herend china. Blinds behind the curtains filter light without blocking the view. OPPOSITE PAGE: An antique English sideboard and silver samovar are de rigueur in a traditional Southern interior. McKee's color palette and the Arthur Stewart watercolor reflect her unique approach to style.



her parent's friends—the gracious and grand dwellings that typify this surprisingly Francophile Southern city. When it came time to build a house for her own family—husband David and teenage sons David, Andrew, and Austin—she enlisted the talents of Birmingham architect and friend Hank Long, who had designed previous houses for the McKees. “He can complete my sentences in regard to what we do and don’t like,” she says.

Long designed a Norman-style house, with both the formal entry and the mudroom entrance off the motor court. The crunch of pea gravel underfoot is a fitting preamble to the genial experience of the house. “We started with the foyer,” McKee recalls. “I

wanted to enter the house and be able to look from the motor court through to the garden.” The house is sited on a broad, level hilltop with spacious landscapes on all sides. “The garden is one step away from every room,” she says. “In fact, garden designer Mary Zahl planned each outside area to complement the room it adjoins.”

To the left of the entry is the living room, a long room with strong symmetry. The ceilings are high but not intimidating: “They are 11 feet—12 felt too high and 10 too low,” says McKee. The comfort factor is powerful: The sofas invite you to sit, and French doors embrace the garden vistas as part of the room’s décor. “David and I use this room as













McKee wanted an old-fashioned, eat-in kitchen, so she placed an antique table in the middle and set off the tile with dark grout. LEFT, TOP: A kitchen cabinet serves as a workstation and dish pantry. "I have a lot of dishes that I've collected, and I wanted to have them easily at hand." LEFT, BOTTOM: The mud-room, with its cabinets and baskets, keeps clutter out of the kitchen.





a grown-up reading room," she says. "I started with overscaled furniture, muted prints, and lots of texture. The tones of the room—stone, straw, and white—are very soothing colors to me. The furniture is an amalgamation of things we've loved and blended from previous houses."

The dining room, with its mushroom-gray walls and gray-and-white fabrics, serves as a great foil for plays of strong color, such as the burst of yellow from the watercolor over the sideboard. "I don't use that many prints," says McKee, "and when I do, I only use two colors."

The family usually eats at the kitchen table, which is set in the center of the room by the stove. "With a

busy family, it makes life easier to have the stove and the table so close," she says. A charming terrace right off the kitchen, accessible through the French doors, permits dining outdoors.

Upstairs, the master bedroom is a sea of blue-greens, from the misty color of the walls to the blue-on-blue print on the bed. Against the soft backdrop, the designer's favorite paintings stand out like postcards from her life's journey. "These are both by Alabama artists," she says of two vivid canvases near the bed. "I would buy these again today. When you consistently pick the same things over 20 years, you really start to trust your taste."

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*For details, see Sourcebook, page 210.*





McKee painted the bedroom a shade she calls the "holy color." "It's the color of the Virgin's veil in Renaissance paintings," she says. "It's a soft blue-green that we mixed until I liked it."

OPPOSITE PAGE: Shades of blue on the Fortuny upholstery and the silk Roman shade play off the wall color. McKee has owned the paintings by Alabama artists Anton Hardtt (top) and John Wagnon (bottom) for 20 years.