



# Out on the



# porch

BY DEBRA JUDGE SILBER



## A Virginia family's screened porch recalls simpler days

**F**rom the time he started sketching plans for his family's modest farmhouse on the Potomac, architect John Rust knew he wanted it to include a gathering spot—one that couldn't possibly be confined within four walls. Set on a thin peninsula between a marsh and the silver-blue river, the little house had an allure that lay in its seclusion and in the sweeping views that captured the occasional passing eagle and heron.

His answer was a screened porch 12 feet wide and nearly 30 feet long extending across the back of the house. There, John, his wife, Mary, and teen-aged son, John Jr., enjoy crab feasts with guests and quiet afternoons among themselves, cooled by ceiling fans and surrounded by nature. "What's special about where we live is the environment," John says, "and the porch puts you right into that environment. Without the bugs, that is."

But it isn't just the natural beauty of the remote site that has made the back porch a favorite retreat on sultry evenings. Beyond the reach of local electrical lines, the Rusts—until late last summer—relied solely on electricity produced by solar panels. While they had no trouble keeping their lights on and refrigerator running, the energy draw of even one small air conditioner taxed the system. So, as in decades past, they sought relief on the porch, which became the best place to eat meals, entertain guests, and simply pass the time.

The quality of those timeless summers is preserved on the Rusts' porch with its rustic design, a tribute to the rural

**THE PLACE TO BE** "We have a living room, but somehow, we're always huddled on the back porch," says Mary Rust, looking out to the table where husband John, son John Jr., and friend Cynthia Din are engaged in a game of cards. The long oak table, a relic from Mary's childhood, is the centerpiece in this gathering spot.



## SCREEN DESIGN MESHES STRENGTH AND BEAUTY

The basis for our porch design was both aesthetic and practical. The cedar log posts were chosen as a way to connect to the natural setting and were left untreated so they would weather to a natural gray patina. The framework between the posts supporting the screens is as slender as possible and painted dark green to blend with the foliage beyond.

### FRAMING THE SCREENS

We used select-grade pressure-treated yellow pine for the screen frames because of its rot resistance and strength. The vertical supports, spaced 36 inches on center between the log posts, provide enough support to keep the black fiberglass screens from billowing in the wind. We installed a horizontal support high enough to provide protection from chairs that might be shoved into the screen but at the same time low enough not to obstruct the view. Below this horizontal support we installed additional vertical pieces 12 inches apart to create a railing effect. In addition to giving the impression of a railed porch, this adds strength to the slender framework and prevents our dogs—we have four—from rolling over and going through the screen.

—John Rust, owner and architect

**SWEET SOLITUDE** *Mary Rust retreats to the porch to write letters, pay bills, or just listen to the birds. The spare, bare-wood furniture suits the character of the porch and adds to the feeling of living the simple life.*



**REAL COUNTRY** *Surrounded by water on three sides, the Rusts' home is so far removed from its neighbors it didn't even have electricity until last year. But the undisturbed location was just what the family was looking for.*



Shenandoah Valley resort once operated by Mary's parents. Simple, bare-wood furnishings and shiny, blackened floorboards recall the rented cottages at Bryce Mountain Family Resort, where Mary, her sisters, and her brother pitched in every summer tending horses and waiting on vacationing families. Artifacts rescued from the old resort have a new home here, such as the old dining hall table where the Rusts play cards, the wooden screen door, and the road sign above it that promises "Bryce's Resort 10 Miles."

"My mother is a saver," Mary explains. "As they started to take down the cottages, she saved things—the screen door off the old store, some of the board and batten pieces that were good, just interesting things. When we were building this house, she said, 'Here, take it.'"

### Adding furniture to the mix

Mary added country pieces she had collected while running an antiques store in Alexandria, Va., where John has his architectural office and where they lived before moving out to the river. Other furnishings she and John scooped up at auctions; still others Mary found at local discount stores. There are hurricane lanterns hanging from pegs, oil lamps clustered on a burnished sideboard, an upright oak rocking chair, and a slatted hanging swing. At this point, Mary can't say exactly where it all came from. "The wonderful thing about it is when you sit out there it all looks very rustic, very natural. It all looks like it fits."

Especially fitting the character of the porch are the debarked cedar posts positioned at the four corners and around the entryway. John cut them down one summer

"I never really pictured  
We wanted to be  
but we wanted it to be real."


—Mary Rust, homeowner



**RUSTICITY RULES** The aged patina of the porch floor comes from a traditional water-proofing “recipe”: a mix of turpentine and raw linseed oil, applied weekly, then monthly until the wood is saturated. Mary finished the job with a coat of oil-based sealer for sheen.

## myself living my whole life on a cul-de-sac.... in the country,

and tethered them in the river to remove the bark. But he encountered two glitches, the first when a hurricane washed the logs away. “We found most of them miles downstream,” he recalled. The second obstacle was the builder’s refusal to use them. Again, John went with the flow: “He put in his posts, then I took them out and put in ours.”

But can the family resist the comfort of air-conditioning, now possible with their connection to the electrical grid? “I should put a sign on it that reads, Emergency use only,” Mary says. But neither she nor John thinks modern temperature control will lure them inside indefinitely. “You’ll still find us out on the porch,” she predicts, “eating crabs and playing cards.” 

*Debra Judge Silber is an associate editor.*



**WHIMSICAL WOODCRAFT** Mary used a cardboard chessboard mounted on a thick piece of wood as a template for this Adirondack-style game table. She then pieced it together a few twigs at a time, gluing those on the playing surface and securing those on the sides with tiny nails. She also followed one important rule: Twigs gathered in winter retain their bark better.