Spring Island Splendor

Discover one couple’s family-friendly retreat, nestled among the storied Southern oaks. Allison Hersh explores this relaxed Lowcountry haven.

» Photography by Richard Leo Johnson

Susan and Mike Neilson lived in a traditional Colonial-style home in Connecticut for many years before they decided to head South for retirement, building a stylish barrier-island retreat in the heart of the South Carolina Lowcountry.

“We love typical Southern architecture,” Susan raves. “We wanted a home that would be defined by casual elegance.”

A Natural Compound

However, “typical Southern architecture” didn’t mean exclusively Southern. The Neilsons wanted a relaxed home that would reflect the architectural charm of a Lowcountry plantation and the informal style of Caribbean. But first, they needed an ideal location. The couple found the perfect placement for their quiet retreat in Spring Island, a luxurious community near Beaufort offering a wide range of amenities within an eco-friendly 3,000-acre setting.

“Spring Island is a unique community, unlike any other,” Susan says. “It’s basically a nature preserve. It’s beautiful, and there’s a strong commitment to maintaining the island the way it is and to being responsible stewards of the land.”

The Neilsons’ Stats

Owners: Michael and Susan Neilson
Location: Spring Island, S.C.
Year built: 2003
Square footage: 5,464 heated and cooled, plus 3,814 unheated, including porches
Accommodations: 5 bedrooms, 5.5 baths
Time to complete: 18 months
When the Neilsons first glimpsed the 2.5-acre property, it was a dense, thick forest. In the Spring Island tradition of respecting the natural landscape, they worked closely with design principal Jim Strickland of Historical Concepts, a traditional Southern architecture firm in Atlanta, to preserve as many existing live oaks as possible. They integrated the trees into the design of the main house and the surrounding outbuildings.

The guesthouse is one such outbuilding that quite literally embraces the surrounding trees. The innovative H-shaped layout wraps around two massive live oaks. A narrow breezeway tucked between the tree trunks connects the two halves of the guesthouse.

“The house has a strong sense of place and becomes one with nature,” says Strickland, a founder and senior partner at Historical Concepts. “Beneath the shade of the live oaks, it has a subdued elegance.”

Southeast Meets West Indies

A rich interplay of materials, styles and cultures runs throughout the home. In a tribute to Southern plantation style, the outbuildings are reminiscent of the utilitarian workers’ cottages that once dotted the Carolina coast. The main house also draws heavily from Southern vernacular
style, featuring handmade brick steps leading to an oversized veranda that invites visitors to linger over a glass of sweet tea. The metal roof and tabby accents serve as tributes to indigenous Lowcountry materials, but a row of glass and mahogany French doors—outfitted with Caribbean-style shutters—brings a flourish of international flavor to the exterior façade.

The interior design also adds visual interest at every turn. The main house is an open, airy design evoking Caribbean architecture, complete with exposed rafters, ceiling fans and distressed surfaces. However, classical elements such as painted wood siding and Greek Revival-style pilasters embellish the interior walls, embracing traditional Lowcountry style. The color palette—earth tones reminiscent of tidal grasses and palmettos—evokes the comfort and ease of marsh-side living.

Strickland and his team incorporated elegant influences by adding antique doors from Paris and ornate antique moldings throughout the main house. These vintage touches contrast nicely with more modern elements like the steel-and-wood spiral staircase, creating subtle yet eye-catching dichotomies throughout the residence. The end result is a warm, inviting environment that encourages guests to linger and revel in the details.

Not a single room goes unused or unappreciated, including an adjacent carriage house outfitted with oversized barn doors and a striking rooftop “lantern” structure that contains a family room, guest room and office.

Little Big House

Much to Mike and Susan’s delight, their “guests” often include family. Children and grandchildren enjoy holidays and vacations at the relaxing refuge, taking advantage of the comfortable yet luxurious guesthouse protectively nestled in the trees.

“There’s plenty of room for everyone,” says Susan, who also enjoys cooking and entertaining at home. “This is a wonderful place in which to entertain. It really opens up, and the rooms all flow into one another. We’ve had dinner parties for six and parties for up to 100 guests.”

On a daily basis, however, life at the Neilson home is a much simpler affair. Susan, a retired lawyer, and Mike, a retired banker, enjoy sipping coffee and reading the newspaper each morning in the bright day-room, with its high ceilings and generous windows. In the evening, they often escape to the family room for cocktails. Not a single
room goes unused or unappreciated, including an adjacent carriage house outfitted with oversized barn doors and a striking roof-top “lantern” structure that contains a family room, guest room and office.

“Mike and I use all the rooms in the house,” Susan explains. “Sometimes we eat dinner in the kitchen, sometimes we eat outside. We love the blending of indoor and outdoor living. It is a very livable style.”

Susan loves the fact that the compound is divided up into a main house with several smaller outbuildings. She cherishes the breezy blend of sophisticated and rustic details that make this house a home. Above all, she adores the casual comfort of this Spring Island sanctuary, which lifts her spirits every time she enters the front door.

“When you walk into the house, you can smell the fragrance of the wood and see the tall ceilings,” she enthuses. “It’s a happy and airy house. It truly has exceeded our expectations on every level.”

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**Home Tour**

**The Neilsons’ Referrals**

Architects/planners: Jim Strickland (design principal) and Marty Mullin (project architect), Historical Concepts

Interior designer: Miriam Jordan Ricks, Miriam Jordan Interiors

Contractor/builder: David Steele

Paint/wallpaper: Sherwin Williams

Windows/doors: Kolbe & Kolbe Windows, custom doors by architect/builder

Kitchen/bath design: Historical Concepts

Lighting design: Eloise Pickard, Sandy Springs Gallery

Landscape/hardscape design: Don Hooten, Hooten Land Design Inc.

Landscape: The Greenery

Art: Jim Palmer “Quiet Sentinel” and Addison Palmer “Barn”