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PROPERTY

Ornamental flair with flotsam

With imagination
and talent, junk can
be transformed into
attractive
decoration, says

Kay Marles

Imagine using a sheep's horn as a coat hook, a collection of rusty ships' propellers as the centrepiece on a coffee table, or an old greenhouse bench as a rack for kitchen pots and pans. Bizarre, you might think, but such are the tricks and experiments of people who decorate with junk.

Junk has always held a fascination for imaginative, inventive home-owners: now it is truly coming into its own. The beauty of junk, of course, is that most of it can be found free in your own backyard or lumber box, or littering local beauty spots or open spaces, or can be picked up for next to nothing in markets and car-boot sales. With a bit of effort and cleaning up, bargain furnishing can become a real pleasure.

An interior designer who has made something of a speciality of decorating with junk is Derek Frost, who numbers among his clients Sir Edward Heath and Pink Floyd's Nick Mason. In Mr Frost's country house, an 1870s coast-guard's cottage low on a bank of the Solent, his furnishings include dried roots, parts of bricks, old wooden key plates, and even a discarded hairbrush with no bristles, that have all been carefully arranged to look like *objets d'art* on tables and mantelpieces and in the kitchen.

Collecting debris is all very well, you might think, for someone with a designer's eye and ingenuity, but what about the rest of us? By spraying pieces of driftwood, hauling in armfuls of foliage from the garden and using heaps of old berries and pine cones in collections or decorative patterns, it is possible to transform a dull sitting room into a space bursting with new colour and shapes.

Mr Frost recommends several other hunting grounds. "Beaches provide an excellent source for decorative objects," he says. "Anything that has been subjected to the effect of water tends to take on a changed character. Boat marinas and scrapyards are also often

littered with shells, stones and pieces of driftwood that will polish up like leather. You can give them a lovely patina with teak oil and polish or just leave them rough."

One feature of using junk decoratively is that quantity tends to be all important. It is often only when similar objects are grouped together that they look like anything at all. With shells, for example, Mr Frost recommends either hoarding them together in baskets in the bathroom, or using them in copious quantities, filled with Polyfilla and glued to the wall, as part of a frieze. "Anything that is beautiful, or just well made for a function, such as old hand-tools, can be made to look good," he says. "But it is better to have several and to make a pattern from them than to make them look as though they have just been left lying around."

Another weekend cottage dweller who has become addicted to junk is Charles Worthington, one of London's leading hairdressers, who visits car-boot sales every weekend to furnish his cottage in Sussex.

"Country car-boot sales tend to be free from dealers," he says. "I get pretty unhappy if I have to miss one. It is a wonderful feeling to get home with a box of goodies that have cost £5. And I get much more satisfaction from my own creativity than from buying someone else's."

His purchases have included 15 baskets, bought for £4, which he hangs from the beams in his 1830s kitchen. He has bought a well weathered and battered slatted shelf from a greenhouse for £2, which he uses for

storing pans. In France, he picked up ten florist's buckets for £1 and countless worn terracotta pots for 5p each, which he has filled with church candles and dried flowers bought from New Covent Garden market.

"It can be difficult to pick out something nice when everything is surrounded by rubbish," he says. "You have to be able to block off everything else you see. Certain objects, once out of context and in your own home, can be transformed. I scan quickly and get around in about 45 minutes. Mostly I look for distinctive shapes. Then I go home and do up what I've bought."

A couple who fill their house with accumulated objects are children's book illustrator Nicola Bailey, who collects theatrical clothes, skulls, stuffed birds and matchboxes, and

her husband, opera critic John Hilton, who has papered his study with postcards, posters and opera programmes.

In a similar vein, Mr Frost recommends decorating walls and furniture with playing cards and racing cards, or using leaves and feathers as stencils to make patterns. He too uses skulls, bones and horns for decorative purposes, as well as bowls full of seeds and pips, old nails from hardware stores to make studded patterns on doors, dried starfish, gourds and old jars and bottles — in fact, almost anything he comes across.

"The appeal is that it is cheap and individual," he says. "But you need to play around with things until they look right."

You also need to appreciate the potential of familiar objects that we have all taken for granted for years.