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GARDENS

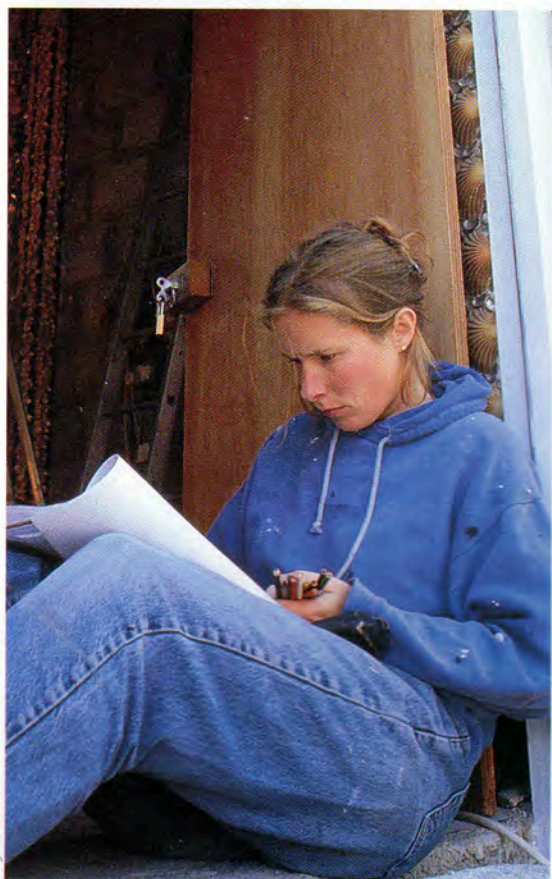
ILLUSTRATED



HOT TIPS

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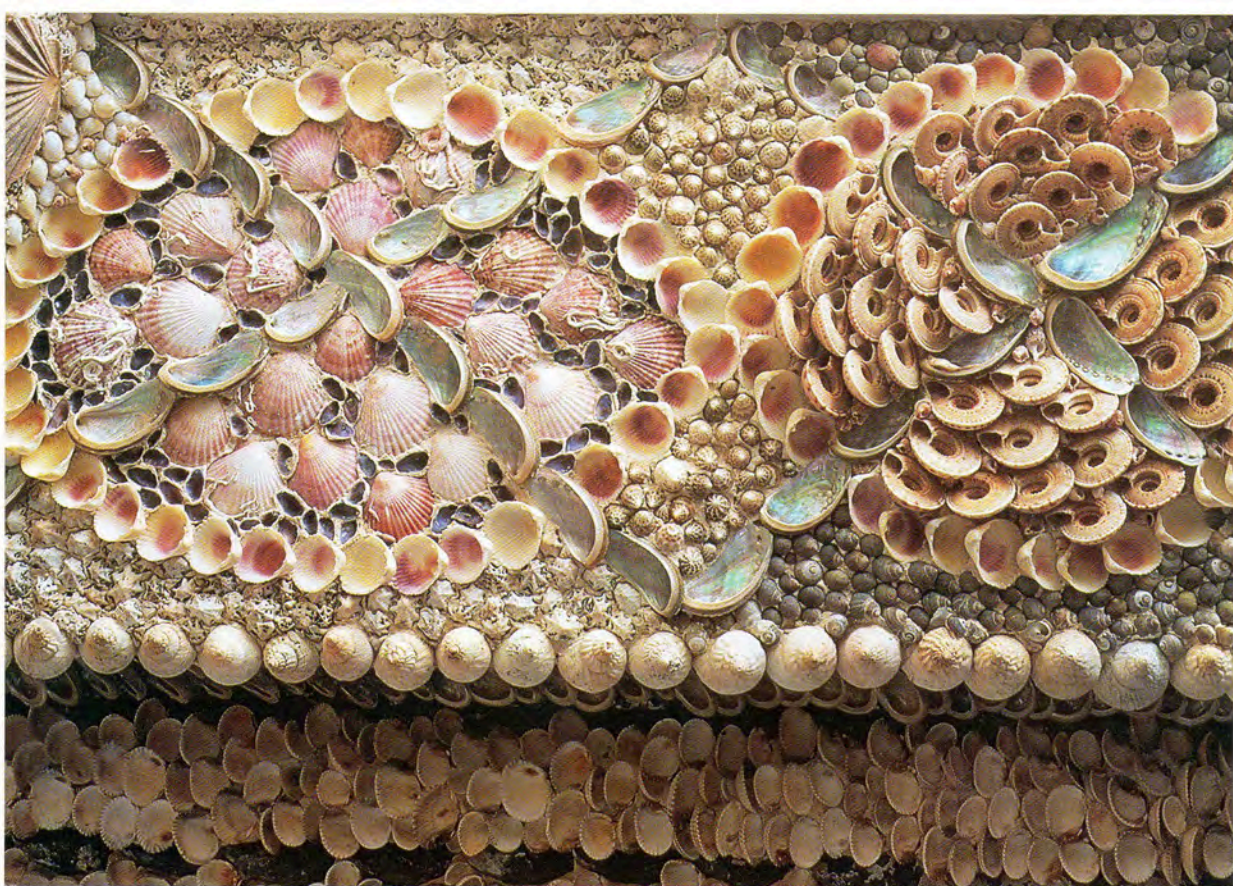
SHE SHAPES SEASHHELLS

Artist and decorator Blot Kerr-Wilson spent an idyllic four months creating a fantastical shell house in the grounds of the renowned Ballymaloe Hotel and Cookery School. Bronwen Riley tells the story

Photographs by Melanie Eclare

Above left: Blot Kerr-Wilson. Right: the scallop-shaped roof tiles of the octagonal building give a clue to what's inside. Opposite: looking up at the mussel and scallop dome from the outside.





It all began with a message on Blot's answering machine: "Buy a ticket to Ireland. I want you to make me a grotto." The urgent voice behind the message was Darina Allen, the owner of Ballymaloe Hotel and Cookery School in Shanagarry, Co. Cork. She had read about Blot (short for Charlotte) in an issue of *GARDENS ILLUSTRATED*, and wanted her to create a shell house as a surprise present for her husband, Tim. A secret weekend visit and many faxes later, Blot received the final summons – "You must come now. There's no time to lose." Blot, an artist and decorator who has become known for using shells and pebbles to cover floor and wall surfaces, immediately loaded up her car and drove non-stop to Ireland.

As soon as she arrived – absolutely exhausted – she was ushered outside by the Allen family to see

the house that she was to decorate. The small octagonal building, standing beyond the main gardens in a field, was designed around four Gothic windows which Darina had bought some months previously. "My heart sank when I saw it," Blot says. "There was no roof. And I absolutely had to have a roof as my starting point."

In the two weeks it took to build the roof, Blot hid herself away by the "acres and acres of green-houses" and sat washing hundreds of scallop and mussel shells that had been collected from the school and restaurant for her. She also managed to keep a sharp eye on the builders' progress with the roof, suggesting that the old Irish slates they were using could be rounded at one end to make scallop-shaped tiles – at first the builders balked at this idea, but once she had shown them how easy they were to make, everything went smoothly.

A window surround shows the extraordinary detail in Blot's work; many of the shells were collected from the cookery school, then washed by Blot, with help from the Allens' children.



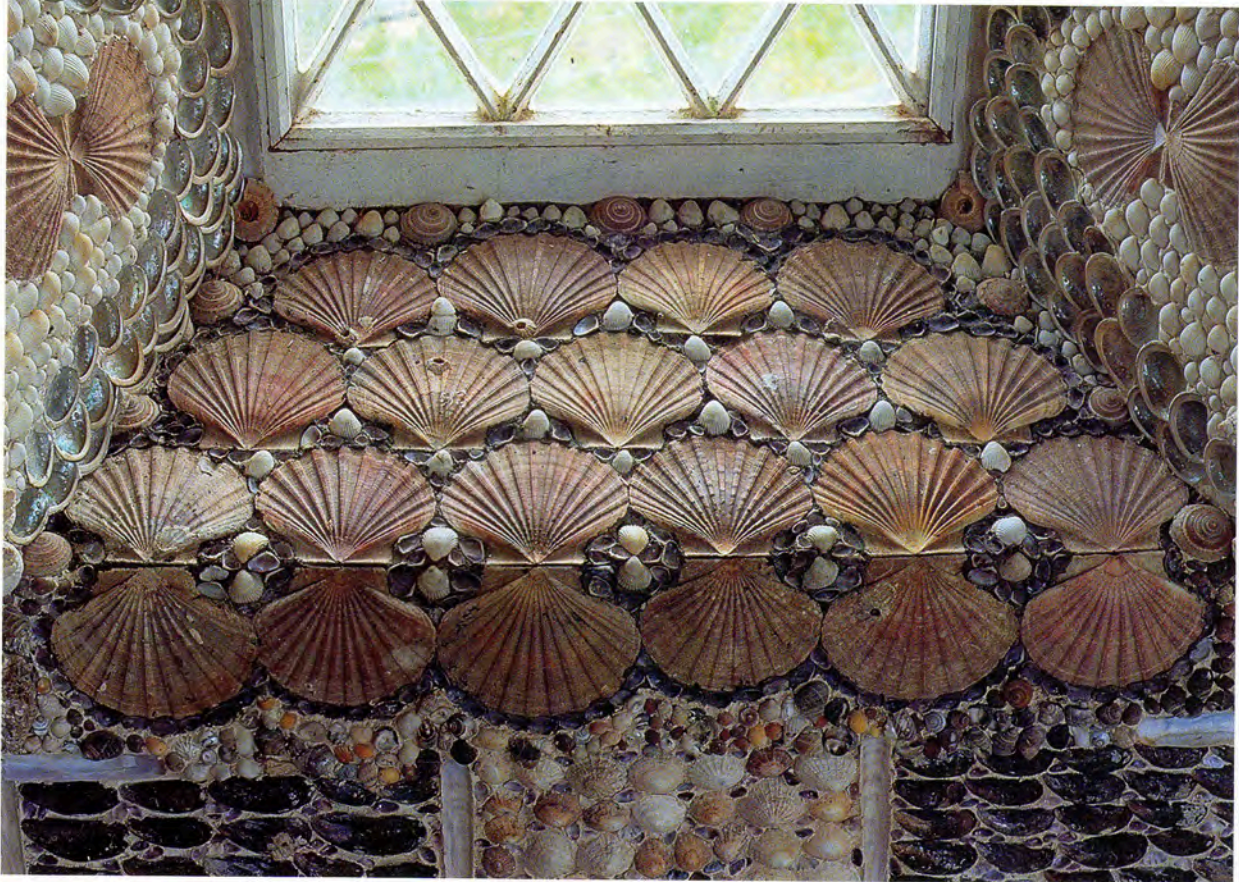
Once the roof was complete, she was able to start her work in earnest. The floor would be covered in pebbles, with a central pool and fountain, and the walls and inside of the roof would be entirely covered with shells of different shapes and sizes. Working out the patterns in her head, Blot then drew the schemes on the wall in chalk, before sticking on the shells with cement. She is a perfectionist. "If it doesn't work, I have no qualms about smashing the shells and starting again."

"The ceiling is my real pride and joy. I tried to create an optical illusion inside, giving the impression of more space by increasing the size of the mussel shells as I worked my way down, so that by the time I reached the bottom, they were almost the same size as the scallops." Some of Blot's sense of achievement stems from the fact that the decoration of the ceiling was her least favourite part of

the job. "I was really frightened. The walls are about three metres high, and from the top of the walls to the top of the dome is another two metres or so. The builders had left me some rickety scaffolding, and there weren't any ropes to fence me in. They left me up there, saying 'Ah, don't you worry, now. If it falls, it won't fall completely.'"

The Allen family gave Blot endless inspiration and are commemorated in the shell house in many ways. At the entrance are Darina and Tim's initials over the date stone, while inside, the initials of their four children form part of the design around the windows. During the four months she was there, Blot was rarely lonely. Soon after her arrival the school holidays began, and hordes of children descended on Ballymaloe. "One of their holiday jobs was to put all the shells collected from the restaurant into the dishwashers to clean them."

Left: scallops, cockles, mussels and silvery abalone shells. Right: contrasts of size, direction and colour give a startling three-dimensional effect on one wall. The 'pillars' are concealed drainpipes.



Blot's work never ceased to interest and amuse them. "I love to work at night and they would sneak out in their pyjamas, while their parents were at dinner, and cycle to the field where I was working. It was just like *ET*. I would see the lights of their bicycles lined up outside the shell house and hear them whispering 'Shh, Shh', very loudly."

Another member of the family, the grandfather, would sit on the window sills to rest when he came to inspect the house, which gave Blot the idea of transforming them into seats. From here, if you can distract your eyes from the dazzlingly patterned walls, there is the restful sight of a fountain in the middle of the room. Water drains from the pool into a slate gully which runs out of the front door and round the back of the house.

Towards the end of the four months there was a huge rush – Darina decided she wanted to hold her 25th wedding anniversary party there. Blot

finished in time, and was able to join in the champagne celebrations in and around the shell house.

Now Blot is back at her home in the Loire – "the most beautiful place ever" – working on a large underground shell room in a château. But it is a personal project in her own garden which really sounds the most intriguing – like something out of a fairy story. She is building a house of straw. "I'm making it out of bales of straw and rendering them with lime cement which I'll paint in really bright colours," she says. Inside, the floor will be pebbled and the walls shelled. "There will be a sofa and cushions so that you can sit and read, and glass doors which open out at the back onto a wood. It will be my secret entrance to the trees."

Blot Kerr-Wilson can be contacted at Le Bois Perché, 37800 Saint Epain, France. Tél (00 33) 2 47 65 69 82. See page 111 for details of her shell-decoration course at Ballymaloe Cookery School.

Above: Blot made this windowsill seat for Mr Allen senior, owner of the hotel. Right: yellow snail shells above a gothic window form the initials of two of the Allen children, Toby and Emily.

