



Happy newlyweds Ashley Whittaker and Andrew Spence
OPPOSITE PAGE:
A loose, natural arrangement of Asian pears with fruit on the branch, hanging amaranthus, wild grasses, and gathered branches from the Tamarack Preserve

Rustic Redefined

A beloved country cabin gets dressed up for interior designer Ashley Whittaker's elegant wedding in the woods, and floral designer Amy Merrick does the honors



BY KIRK REED FORRESTER
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WHEN ASHLEY WHITTAKER, the celebrated New York interior designer, started to plan her wedding, it would have been easy to imagine a celebration that reflected her signature style. That style—one part Upper East Side sophistication, one part Palm Beach glamour, one part Southampton chic, with a dash of downtown cool thrown in for good measure—is the product of a childhood spent in South Florida and a professional career that began under the envious tutelage of Ralph Lauren and legendary decorator Markham Roberts.

“I would say that I have a tailored, traditional style,” says Whittaker, who has an office in New York City but whose clients live in New York, Connecticut, Long Island, and South Florida. Since striking out on her own in 2006, Whittaker’s designs have graced the pages of *House Beautiful* and *Domino*, the latter of which named her one of 10 “Decorators on the Verge.”

There’s no doubt that Whittaker could probably plan herself a perfectly posh Hamptons wedding in her sleep, but after getting engaged to Andrew Spence, an avid hunter and outdoorsman from the small, well-heeled town of Millbrook, New York, the decorator embraced an aesthetic that was altogether absent from her professional designs: rustic. And I mean, really rustic—as in unpaved roads, no running water, your-GPS-won’t-work-out-here rustic.

After being introduced by mutual friends in 2009 (“on the corner of Madison and 59th Street,” remembers the designer), Whittaker and Spence began a two-year courtship that would traverse the busy streets of New York and the quiet woods of the Hudson River Valley. Early in their relationship, Spence began taking Whittaker to the Tamarack Preserve, a private hunting club in Millbrook where he is a longtime member. One spot became special for the couple: a small cabin that sits on the edge of a lake, a mile from the main clubhouse. “We spent a ton of time there,” says Whittaker, fondly. “We’d hike down and take picnics, and as soon as we decided to get married in Millbrook, we knew we had to get married in the cabin.”

While the cabin, called Turkey Hollow, may have been the romantic choice, it certainly wasn’t a practical one. With no running water and no access road, the challenges of putting on a wedding there seemed daunting. Add in the couple’s brief engagement of only eight weeks, and you have a scenario that would make most brides head for the nearest country club.

But Whittaker was determined. Like any creative professional, the bride knew what she wanted—a look that was organic yet tailored—and she knew how to pull it off. Knowing the florist would be the linchpin of the whole event, Whittaker chose Brooklyn-based Amy Merrick, a rising star in the floral design world whose arrangements are notable for their unstudied, natural beauty and innovative composition. Luckily, Merrick was available for the October 15th nuptials.

ABOVE: A table centerpiece of dahlias, ranunculus, scabiosas, chocolate cosmos, parrot tulips, spray roses, hypericum berries, snowberries, and Asian pear foliage
RIGHT: The ceremony site, a cabin called Turkey Hollow on a quiet lake in the Tamarack Preserve

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1. Floral designer Amy Merrick created wild, natural bouquets of anemones, ranunculus, dahlias, acorns on the branch, maidenhair ferns, and geranium foliage for the bride and her maids. 2. The bagpiper's song signaled the start of the ceremony. 3. The bride and groom exchanging vows. 4. Merrick's masterpiece: a garland of oak and pear leaves with green ribbon and hydrangeas mixed in. 5. Boutonnieres of ranunculus, snowberries, ferns, and acorns. 6. A cozy nook in the cabin. 7. The couple and their two bridesmaids, the groom's teenage daughters, smiling for a family portrait or a family portrait. 8. Smaller versions of the ceremony garland draped the bride and groom's chairs. 9. Whittaker's four-tiered confection was accented with ranunculus and acorns, the latter a symbol of the hunt. 10. A playful pinecone garland over a burlap cloth gussied up the bar.



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From their first conversation, Whittaker knew Merrick could help make her vision a reality. “I’m a designer,” says Whittaker, “so I’m used to being specific, but Amy just got it.” The bride-to-be wanted to embrace Turkey Hollow’s wooded setting, deciding on a simple color palette of brown and green and encouraging Merrick to use local branches and greenery from the preserve.

A carpet of autumn leaves covered the path to the cabin, which radiated with warmth from 30 lanterns hanging inside. Narrow picnic benches doubling as pews created an aisle leading up to the cabin’s back porch where a breathtaking garland of oak and pear leaves was draped to simulate an altar. Beyond the porch, a still lake reflected dramatic fall foliage, while the sounds of a bagpipe echoed through the hollow signaling the start of the ceremony.

After the wedding, guests gathered around a small cocktail tent and a group of picnic tables decked with mosses and ferns from the preserve, sipping hot toddies and munching on hors d’oeuvres like cheese straws, duck quesadillas, and figs with prosciutto.

Hot toddies tipped, the party moved to a large dinner tent with white flags flying over the top and strings of lights hanging from inside. Merrick and her team had cut down 14 tree saplings the previous day (with the club’s permission) to use inside the tent, leading the eye upward and effectively bringing the outside in.

In the midst of the rustic setting, Whittaker’s elegant style and thoughtful touch shone through—in the silk custom table runners, the festive bentwood chairs, and the whimsical pinecone garland that graced a burlap-covered bar. Oak and acorn—symbols of the deer hunt—were woven into the décor as a subtle homage to the groom.

Guests feasted on goat cheese salad, beef tenderloin with horseradish sauce, potato gratin and haricots verts. Soon enough, they would be ushered up the hill and out of the preserve to make their way back to the city and the bustle of real life (each with a sliver of wedding cake tucked into a cake box as a parting gift). In the morning, crews would come to take down the tent and pack up the garland, leaving Turkey Hollow as undisturbed as it had been when Whittaker and Spence used to steal away for picnics.

LEFT: A tent of white sailcloth set just the right tone for an elegant wedding in the woods. ABOVE: Guests mingled inside the tent, which boasted 14 tree saplings brought in by Merrick and her team to bring the outside in.

But no one was ready for that just yet. As the celebration wore on, tall brown candlesticks burned down to their stumps, dripping wax on the tables and casting a romantic glow. It was the sign of a celebration savored and an urge to linger for as long as one could at this magical wedding in the woods. ❧