

A CONNECTICUT FAMILY  
RINGS IN THE SEASON  
WITH GREENS GALORE,  
A LIGHT-LADEN TREE,  
AND TWO EAGER BOYS  
ON SANTA WATCH

# jingle all the way

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Frank Sinatra crooning “Jingle Bells” is the cue (as if any child needs one) that Christmas morning has arrived at Lisa and Eric Hilderbrand’s home in Silvermine, Connecticut. While Sinatra’s swinging version of this holiday classic might seem out of place in a home that dates to the 1770s, it’s a family tradition that Lisa could never give up.

“Christmas was a major production in our house, masterminded by my father,” recalls Lisa, who grew up in Dallas. “When my sister and I were little, we would wake up well before dawn. I can remember the crackle of the sound of the needle hitting the record, followed by jingling bells and Frank singing. It is so mellow and cool. That *is* Christmas morning.”

Although Lisa’s father passed away a few years ago, his practice of choosing the biggest, fullest tree and lading it with decorations and strings of lights is another joyful tradition Lisa continues with Eric and their two sons, Robert, 5, and Patrick, 3.

“Our tree is always two feet taller than our ceiling height, which is 11 feet. I’m serious,” Lisa says, laughing. “We cut the top and bottom off so we have the fullest tree possible.” Then there is the ritual

**Kitchen** Lisa and Eric Hilderbrand make breakfast for sons Robert (right) and Patrick, who shares a bite with Rudy, a rough-coat Jack Russell terrier. Holiday greenery covers a pot rack made from old floor joists. **Foyer** A wooden industrial mold that was made into a mirror and a mid-20th-century octagonal center table mingle with 18th-century antiques. “I like the modern additions. They add youth,” Lisa says. **Living room** An antique library table anchors one end of the 20x40-foot room. **Stairway** A garland winds up the new stair rail. **Preceding pages** At Christmastime, the Steinway piano, the antique Persian rug, and the custom walnut coffee table are all overshadowed by the Hilderbrands’ spectacular Christmas tree.



**Hutch** The dining room was added in the early 1800s and has original wood-paneled walls and ceiling beams. "It is dark, but I decided to embrace that," Lisa says. "That's really what I love—rich, warm, cozy rooms." An antique hutch holds family heirlooms. The sisal rug is from Merida. Dining table Antique Fitzhugh china sets a festive table. Family Eric reads the boys a Christmas story.



of stringing yards and yards of lights, using Lisa's dad's technique of weaving strands deep into the branches.

Mantels and stair railings are decked with garlands of fresh-cut greens, holly branches, giant pinecones, and pheasant feathers. "Our white New England farmhouse is made for Christmas. When we landscaped the house, we put in eight big conical hollies, and the first thing I thought was how they'd look lit up for Christmas," Lisa says.

The house was hardly dressed in holiday finery when Eric and Lisa bought the property in 2004. A local builder was ready to tear it down for a housing development when the Hilderbrands stepped in. As an interior designer, antiques dealer, and former rug specialist at Christie's, Lisa brought plenty of expertise to the table. "I definitely made the decorating decisions, but Eric had some real kernels of wisdom," Lisa says. One of his suggestions was ensuring that the biggest room of the house—added in the 1920s as a ballroom—would be where the family lived.

"We didn't want it to be a formal, unapproachable room, so we decided to make it casual with lots of comfortable seating, a TV over the fireplace, a big bar table," she says. Behind the sofa is a



games table where the family works puzzles and plays everything from Scrabble to “a mean game of Go Fish.”

The grand proportions of the 20x40-foot room demanded large furnishings, so Lisa filled it with a nearly grand-size piano (“It’s bigger than a baby grand,” she says), an 18th-century chest-on-chest, a Regency library table, a 9-foot-long leather sofa, and high-back wing chairs. “I was thrilled to have a room that would accommodate furniture of that scale,” Lisa says.

To keep things youthful, Lisa mixes in new and 20th-century furnishings throughout the house. A coffee table in the living room (the erstwhile ballroom) was custom-made and given an impervious finish. “That table gets hot pizza boxes, cold beer bottles, Play-Doh, and sticky fingers. It needed a tough finish.”

Anchoring the room is a late-19th-century Heriz rug that Lisa bought at a Christie’s auction. “I started my career working as an assistant in the antique rug department at Christie’s, so to be in the sale room raising my paddle to buy a rug for my house was pretty special.”

The Hilderbrands salvaged as much as they could throughout the project, including most of the original windows, moldings, and

hand-hewn ceiling beams. Nearly all of the wide-plank floors—a mix of chestnut, pine, and oak—had been painted many times, but they were stripped and polished to a rustic luster.

Like most historic homes, the three-level structure had been added onto over the decades, creating a rambling and less-than-modern floor plan. The Hilderbrands added a main staircase, opened up rooms, added doorways, and moved walls to create better flow, and they revamped the kitchen, bathrooms, and HVAC system.

“Everything in the kitchen is new. We expanded it 8 feet and gutted the whole thing,” Lisa says. New yellow-pine floors were laid (the original floor was buried under three layers of peeling linoleum), and Lisa stained them in a checkerboard design.

The library is likely the oldest section of the house, dating to the 1770s. There, Lisa took to the ceilings with a crowbar, ripping out plaster and exposing original beams.

One of the Hilderbrands’ favorite spaces is the original outdoor pavilion with brick floors next to the living room. To make the room functional for more of the year, the Hilderbrands added a fireplace made with large stones that Lisa handpicked so they



would look original to the house. “We use that room almost year-round, especially in the fall when we roast marshmallows.”

Lisa’s mother generally comes from Texas for the holidays, sharing in the celebration that’s so intertwined with the family. “Christmas and my father are inseparable in my mind,” Lisa says. “I feel close to him when I listen to Christmas carols and decorate the house. The torch has been passed, and I carefully walk the line between storybook and fanaticism. I can only imagine how he would laugh at how our Christmas decorating obsession has put us in *Traditional Home* for all to see!” ❧

**For more information, see sources on page 122**

**Library** An antique Tabriz carpet from J&D Oriental Rugs embraces the house’s oldest room. Drywall was torn out to expose original wood beams, posts, and a brick fireplace with an iron crane in the firebox. “It must have been used for cooking at one time,” Lisa says. **Outdoor pavilion** The Hilderbrands added a fireplace to the existing pavilion space off the living room, carefully selecting stones that replicate the original walls. **Exterior** Walnut double doors were added to create a front entry, which the house previously lacked. The 7,200-square-foot clapboard home sits along the Silvermine River, a historic area settled by Europeans in the 17th and 18th centuries.

