

How Do You Choose A Color Palette?

By Kathy McCleary

It's one big, gigantic blank slate. Our new home has eight rooms (not including the bathrooms), no unified color scheme (navy blue in the office, green in the bedroom, beige and pink in the dining room, gray in the hallways) and a lot of dark colors that aren't really my style (hunter green and maroon).

While I'd love to have a team of decorators and painters sweep in and do it all at once, our budget doesn't quite cover that, so it's going to be a gradual, room-by-room process. Still, I'd like to have a plan in mind, so that as we paint each room there's a sense of continuity. Which means I probably shouldn't use bright cherry red accents in the living room and then paint my office a deep cayenne orange.

I called Mark McCauley, author of *Color Therapy at Home, Real Life Solutions for Adding Color to Your Life*. He offered some extremely helpful advice for those of us staring at a parade of walls with no clue where to begin.

- **Start with the formal areas of the house:** The living room, dining room and entry hall. Choose a color palette for those areas first, then pull one color from those areas. For example, take the red sofa and tone it down (say to burgundy) for your palette in more private spaces such as the den, office or bedroom.
- **Choose colors from the largest pattern in the space:** If you've got patterned upholstery, an oriental rug or large piece of artwork, "pull" a color from the pattern. If you're looking for a neutral paint color for the walls, look for the beiges and whites in the pattern.
- **Throw open your closet and study the color of your clothes:** Most people buy clothes in colors they like to wear and think they look good in. Similarly, you should decorate your rooms in colors you look good in. "If you don't wear yellow, don't get a yellow sofa, you're going to look sickly on it," McCauley says.
- **Decorate your space from dark to light vertically:** A real "cookbook" way to make any space look good without much risk, McCauley says, is to use darker color values for the floor, medium color values for the walls, and light values for the ceiling. "Any interior space replicates the outside world. The exterior environment is generally darker below our feet (the earth itself), medium valued as you look straight ahead (buildings/trees) and lighter values skyward."
- **Use the color wheel:** In general, analogous color schemes—those that use colors next to each other on the color wheel, such as blue and green—are more casual and relaxing

and work best in informal or private spaces. This is a good strategy for a bedroom, where you want to rest and recover. Complementary colors—those opposite each other on the wheel, such as red and green—provide more definition and tend to make rooms more formal and exciting. This is a good plan for areas where you plan on entertaining.

- **Use the rule of 60-30-10:** "When decorating a space, divide the colors in the space into components of 60 percent of a dominant color, 30 percent of a secondary color and 10 percent of an accent color," says McCauley. The walls will most likely be the majority, the upholstery would represent the secondary color and accessories such as a floral arrangement or throw pillows would make up the rest. "Works every time!" McCauley says. "The colors are properly balanced and there is a shot of color (the 10 percent color) for interest."
- **Go with the architecture:** If you have a small room in your house, don't paint it white to make it seem bigger. Instead go with the architecture and paint it a rich, warm color to make it cozier. Let your big rooms expand with light, let your small rooms wrap you up and nurture you.
- **Follow your own personal style:** If you decorate honestly, other people will appreciate it because it's you, even if they'd never decorate their own house in the same way. That means that if you want to make every room in your house red, white and blue, go for it. You can make any color look good as long as it's your taste.

Whatever color scheme you choose, McCauley advises to put something black in every room. A black lampshade, a black box on the coffee table, a black picture frame. "The black clarifies all the rest of the colors in the room."