

# The Beloved Farmhouse

Understand the hallmarks of this informal style, whether you're designing a new home or remodeling a classic

BY MICHAEL MAINES



**T**he American farmhouse style combines comfort, elegance, and nostalgia, all without pretension. It is practical and hardworking. Pared down to the essentials, the farmhouse style is flexible enough to be adapted to a variety of family types and homeowner lifestyles.

New traditionally styled farmhouses tend to reflect homes built between 1820 and 1920, when farming was an inherent part of life for many families. Earlier, Georgian-era homes—typified by the New England Colonial and Federal styles and southern plantation homes—can also be farmhouses. Because the farmhouse is not specific to an era, the style lends itself well to modern interpretation.

Though regionally, the term “farmhouse” brings different images to mind, there are many common details found on most farmhouses. Because farmhouses don’t have the strict design guidelines of other, more formal architectural styles, any of these elements may not appear—but here’s a look at what you can expect to find on a typical farmhouse, or should consider when designing your own project.

## Shaped over time

Even today, a farmhouse is ideally built in a rural location or a suburban area with a rural feel—or a long view. That’s not to say that the farmhouse style is not comfortable in a village or urban setting, but



for the full effect it should appear to be on what was once, if not currently, a farm. Even when the surrounding area has been developed, a farmhouse can retain its presence. A vegetable garden or other casual gardens with flowers and herbs sprinkled around the property can help cultivate the farmstead feel, though an overly stylized garden may look out of place in what is meant to be a hardworking setting. A pair of marriage trees in front of the house or an orchard in back create a sense of purpose, such as providing fruit, fenceposts, or support for a rope swing.

A farmhouse always starts with a basic rectangular form, often between 20 ft. by 30 ft. and 30 ft. by 44 ft. The roof is generally a

simple gable. The one exception is the popular L-shaped plan, which features a projecting cross gable. But even on these homes, one of the volumes is usually dominant. Resecting portions of the main volume, which became popular in high-style architecture beginning in the Victorian era, was too frivolous for most historic farmhouses. Modern farmhouses often play with this detail, carving out a bit of the basic box to create a more dynamic form.

As needs changed over time, gabled or lean-to additions were added to the traditional farmhouse. The biggest box was not always the first shape; a smaller building may have served as a starting point, with a larger addition built when resources allowed. New farmhouses can

# THE TRADITIONAL FARMHOUSE

Classic farmhouses can be found throughout the country. These two projects are excellent examples of new homes that have a traditional style. The simple shapes and exterior details reflect a farmer's practical attitude, while the porches emphasize a direct relationship with the landscape. The interiors are durable and hardworking.



**Design** Classic Home, [classichomevt.com](http://classichomevt.com) **Build** Classic Home, [classichomevt.com](http://classichomevt.com) **Location** Charlotte, Vt.

be designed to easily incorporate additions, or may even be built with the appearance of additions right from the start.

In New England, we have a tradition of connecting the main house to the barn through a series of supporting buildings, known as the “big house, little house, back house, barn” layout, named after a popular book on historic farmsteads. These days, homeowners tend to have garages for their iron horses, rather than barns for animals and fodder, but the organizing principles remain the same.

The life of a farmer is tied closely to the land, so it makes sense to have a close connection between indoors and out. Farmhouses often connect to the outdoors through a long, narrow porch, which

sometimes wraps around a corner or two, known as a farmer's porch. Porches are a flexible indoor-outdoor space. Though they may be the first thing people think of when they hear “farmhouse,” plenty of farmhouses don't have this feature, or have a porch that's been closed in to add interior living space. Porches are also not necessarily on the front side of the house—they can be on the side or back as well. Traditionally, porch ceilings are painted light blue to discourage visits from birds, bugs, and evil spirits, and floor boards often run in the short direction, pitched away from the house for drainage.

Most farms and farmhouses also have one or more outbuildings, dominated by the ubiquitous yet variable barn. Sometimes the barn



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**1** Most farmhouses begin with a basic rectangular shape. A gable roof and porches are common. Here, an entry porch provides shelter and a place to remove muddy boots. A screened porch is intended for relaxing in the shade at the end of the day. The materials used on the exterior are low maintenance, including wood lap siding, metal roofing, and metal-clad double-hung windows.

**2** The kitchen sink is strategically located for views of farm activity. The countertop in this kitchen is highly durable recycled glass.

**3** Farm kitchens are typically large and welcoming, with plenty of space in which to work. This one has a workhorse of an island instead of a traditional farm table. The cabinets are made of local maple, a Vermont tradition.

**4** In keeping with the farmstead value of resourcefulness, this four-season porch is finished with reclaimed flooring and beams. The hearth and large farm table are hallmarks of a farmhouse interior.

**5** Nestled among mature trees with views across a soy field, this farmhouse has found the perfect setting. The rebuilt home is all Midwest vernacular, including its reproduction beveled shiplap siding and steep gable dormer.



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**Design** Craig Sachs, AIA **Build** Mark Stoltz, Stoltz Construction, Wausau, Wis. **Location** Waupaca, Wis.

is positioned near the house to create a working courtyard. On traditional farms, there may also be a chicken coop, a corn crib, one or more workshop outbuildings, and various sheds for storing materials, supplies, and firewood. Modern conveniences have rendered most of these outbuildings unnecessary, but to me it doesn't feel like a farmhouse without some supporting buildings scattered around the landscape.

### Practical matters

Farmers are practical by necessity, and do not use flashy or unnecessarily costly materials. They tend to stay put for generations, so it makes sense for them to invest in details that save money over the

long term. Therefore, farmhouse materials are low maintenance and natural, often sourced locally if not from the building site itself. Natural stone, brick, and wood are commonly used on farmhouse exteriors. Farmhouse siding and trim tends to be simple and traditional. Clapboards installed 4 in. to the weather are typical in New England, but farmhouses around the country also feature shingles, vertical boards with or without battens, stone, brick, and stucco. Trim may be simple or elaborate, though rarely dressed up to the extent you would expect on a high-style city house.

Farmhouse roofs are pitched steeply enough to shed precipitation, usually with overhangs at the eaves and rakes. In some regions and

# THE TRANSITIONAL FARMHOUSE

Built in all corners of the country for centuries, farmhouses can be a blend of traditional and modern styles and so are a natural fit for a transitional approach to design. By staying true to the farmer's ethos of simplicity and practicality, the new farmhouses shown here balance traditional form with materials and details that reflect contemporary materials and lifestyles.



**Design** Rehkamp Larson Architects, [rehkAMPLARSON.COM](http://rehkAMPLARSON.COM) **Build** Dovetail Renovation, Inc., [dovetailRENOVATION.COM](http://dovetailRENOVATION.COM) **Location** Lake City, Minn.

for cost savings, rake overhangs may be omitted, and some modern farmhouses omit roof overhangs completely. Steel roofing of various types is popular for function and aesthetics on today's farmhouses. Wood shakes or shingles, natural slate, or clay tile may all be used, but asphalt shingles affordably imitate most of these materials and are much more common.

Before the late 1700s, many farmhouse exteriors weren't painted at all, or were painted only in muddy earth tones. Starting in the 1820s during the Greek Revival, off-white and light grays and tans imitating marble became popular; as the Victorian era progressed, earth tones in a wide range of mix-and-match shades gained prominence.

The stark, chalky white of the titanium dioxide pigment we have today has only been available for the last 100 years, but has become a classic farmhouse look.

Windows are usually spaced uniformly across a farmhouse facade, but are sometimes combined in groups—for example, at a bay window or picture window. As a rule, they are simple, vertically oriented rectangles. Multipane windows in various patterns and proportions are common, but modern farmhouses often omit the muntins altogether; since the only purpose they serve today is aesthetic, it fits the practical farmhouse ethos to eliminate them. Windows are usually limited to just a few different sizes, though modern farm-



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**1** This farmhouse is tall and proud, similar in style to a house just down the road. The gable roof, symmetrical window arrangement, and front porch are characteristics of Midwestern farmhouses from the early 1900s, but the porch columns are made of galvanized steel instead of wood.

**2** The kitchen is designed with generous windows so the cook never need wonder who is coming up the drive or what weather is rolling in from the west. Hutchlike built-ins anchor the corners and the traditional farm table is replaced by a functioning island. Exposed timbers and industrial-steel light fixtures are inspired by the unadorned rural barn aesthetic.

**3** Mixing traditional and modern features allows this kitchen to feel timeless and fresh. The home-office nook reflects modern life while the informality of a kitchen table in lieu of an island and the refrigerator tucked around the corner give the new farmhouse kitchen an old-time feel.

**4** A wraparound porch takes advantage of different light and temperature conditions throughout the day and the seasons. This porch is detailed to allow unobstructed views. The metal posts and beams are a modern upgrade that set off the warm wood color of the decking and ceiling.



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**Design** Eric and Rebekah Rauser, Rauser Design, rauserdesign.com **Build** Risinger & Co., risingerhomes.com **Location** Austin, Texas

houses often play with the scale while keeping the proportions of traditional windows.

### Warm and hardworking interiors

Unpretentious and welcoming, farmhouse interiors have a sense of warmth and openness, with inspiration drawn from traditional details and natural materials. Historically, the front rooms in the house are the more formal, public spaces, and the back is more utilitarian, but in today's floor plans these rules are often broken.

Though the way we cook has changed dramatically over the last three centuries, farmhouse kitchens may still reflect some elements of their

old-time counterparts. They usually include a place to eat, whether it be an island, peninsula, or small table—sometimes, the kitchen wraps around a large worktable. There may be a fancy dining table used on special occasions, but the everyday table should be a workhorse, as useful for breaking down an animal carcass as for dining.

Some details you might expect to find in a farmhouse kitchen include painted cabinets with a mix of paneled or glass doors, open shelving, and plenty of drawers. Sometimes simple Z-back doors are used, but this occurs more often in a pantry than a kitchen. Plate and pot racks keep everyday items on display and within reach. The cabinets have face frames, ideally with inset doors and drawer fronts,

# THE MODERN FARMHOUSE

As seen in these two new homes, the essentials of modern architecture—including symmetry, clean lines, and ingenious details—are in keeping with the farmhouse spirit. Wood, stone, and metal are materials commonly used to create both modern and farmhouse styles, and even reused materials—part of farmstead culture—have a place in modern design.



**Design** TruexCullins Architecture + Interior Design, [truexcullins.com](http://truexcullins.com) **Build** O'Neill Builders, [gogreenoneill.com](http://gogreenoneill.com) **Location** Jericho, Vt.

and may have a furniture-like appearance. Durable stone, wood, tile, or metal countertops; glazed apron-front sinks or sinks with an integral drainboard; a range with the presence of a wood- or coal-fired cooking stove; and vintage-style, decorative lighting all have a place in today's farmhouse kitchens. Nothing is wasted on a well-run farm, so repurposed or somewhat worn items fit right into the farmhouse aesthetic. A generous but simple pantry is useful and appropriate.

There should be enough windows in the farmhouse to make the space light and bright, with available views of the farmstead. A true farmhouse also has a mudroom of some sort—an informal side or garage entry with heavy-duty surfaces and room to store outerwear

and other essential items. Cubbies, a freestanding or built-in bench, and durable wood wainscoting on the walls all fit the farmhouse look.

Historically, many farmhouses had plastered walls and ceilings—but spaces were also often left unfinished in anticipation of renovations made regularly over time, so surfaces of all types are appropriate. Exposed beams and grooved boards on ceilings, simple wood wainscoting on walls, and painted or natural wood floors are all common—the more worn in, the better. Colors range from all white to rich, bright, or cool earth tones. Distressed wood, galvanized or pewter-finished metal, and classic lantern-style lighting are all appropriate touches. Modern farmhouses don't necessarily need to use period fixtures,



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**1** This new home is a great example of how setting and form establish the farmhouse style. A simple rectangular main volume, a cross gable “addition,” consistent window arrangements, lap siding, and an outbuilding keep the farmstead tradition in an otherwise supermodern home.

**2** A hearth at the heart of the gathering space and simple, utilitarian bookshelves are true to the traditional farmhouse interior, even with this home’s modern interior design and decor.

**3** A salvaged window sash is repurposed in this staircase to soften the look of the hardworking wall of bookshelves. In the kitchen beyond, an industrial-style pendant light reflects both the minimalistic modern and utilitarian farmhouse aesthetics.



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**4** With open shelves, furniture-like cabinetry, and a casual kitchen table, the high-style urban interior design remains informal and functional.



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**5** This modern home stays true to the farmhouse style through the use of natural materials, including wood lap siding, a natural-stone masonry chimney, and architectural steel elements. Connected to the garage by a breezeway, the home creates the effect of an original main house with a series of additions.

**Design** Tim Cuppett Architects, [cuppetchitects.com](http://cuppetchitects.com) **Build** Wilmington Gordon, [wilmington-gordon.com](http://wilmington-gordon.com) **Location** Austin, Texas

though; farmers of old would have used the most practical fixtures available. Farmhouse doors are usually paneled, though the number and orientation of panels varies. Sliding barn doors are not historically accurate, but they pull a practical farm detail into the home in a whimsical manner.

Some old farmhouses still have an attached privy, but virtually all have upgraded to an indoor bathroom. Décor can vary, but a claw-foot tub and pedestal or console sink always look at home in a farmhouse. Painted wood or simple tile wainscoting on the walls, a furniture-like medicine cabinet or a simple wall-hung mirror, and vintage-looking light fixtures all work well. Bathroom floors may be

painted planks, classic glazed or slate tile, or something more contemporary, like natural linoleum sheet flooring.

As you’ve seen here, farmhouses have been designed for centuries in all corners of the country. While one can be quite different than the next, each share traits that reflect the philosophy of American farmers—simplicity and practicality of form, resourcefulness and durability of materials and construction, and a strong work ethic. It is perhaps these characteristics, more than any particular architectural details, that define the farmhouse style. □

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