

# Home & Garden Television

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## 9 Ways to Create a Mood with Color

By Cathleen McCarthy, special to HGTV.com

Ever notice how cozy you feel in a room painted burnt orange or burnished gold? Or how spas are often awash with soothing cream and beige? If you're looking to create a mood in a room, color is a powerful tool. Applying a coat of paint is the quickest way to alter an ambience, but it helps to understand a little color psychology first. Here's how interior designers and color consultants choose their palettes.



### 1. Start with the mood

Next: [2. Understand color psychology](#)

You have a new place and you're anxious to make it your own. But before you grab your paintbrushes, take some time to contemplate the purpose of each space. Otherwise, you may end up with an impressive-looking room that makes you vaguely uncomfortable. "Often people say, 'This is a really nice room but there's something not right about it and I'm not sure what it is,'" says Leslie Harrington, an interior

designer and color consultant in Greenwich, Conn. "The problem almost always has something to do with color."

"When people start to think about color for their homes, they rarely start with the question: 'How do I want to feel?'" says Harrington. "As a designer, that's the first question I ask. 'How do you want to feel and how do you want others to feel and behave in this room?' Once I know that, I can start using color to support it."

What color you choose to paint your kitchen, for example, should depend on the role the kitchen plays in your life. "If you love to cook and spend a lot of family time in the kitchen, you may want the warmth of peaches and terra cottas and soft golds, which are all energetic, warm, nurturing and fun," says Melanie Wood, an interior designer and color consultant in Knoxville, Tenn. "However, if you want quiet time to heat up your take-out after a busy day at work, you may prefer the tranquility and serenity of soft grays, blues and greens."

Lori Dennis used a palette of gold, white and peach to give this eating area a sunny, casual mood.



## 2. Understand color psychology

Next: [3. Make it inviting](#)

You probably know the basics. Cool colors are relaxing and warm colors promote activity. Red stimulates the appetite. Blues and greens are soothing and contemplative. Yellows and oranges are sunny and cheerful. All true. But applying these rules in your home is a little more complicated.

In large doses, for example, bright yellow can move from cheerful to abrasive. Rather than painting an entire room the color of McDonald's golden arches, you might want to choose a toned-down shade for the walls or use that vivid yellow as an accent against a neutral backdrop, like gray.

"Gray recedes, so it moves away from the eye. Yellow moves forward," explains Melanie Wood. "A room works like an artist's canvas. Soft grays work as a background making bright colors and objects stand out. Yellow and white are the first things you see when you walk into a room. The eye goes to the brighter colors and those colors expand."

Yellow furniture against a charcoal gray divider adds a bolt of excitement to this dining room by Cecil Baker Associates (Photo by Barry Halkin).



### 3. Make it inviting

Next: [4. Create excitement](#)

Most people want their entryway to be inviting. But what sends a warm welcome in a cabin in Vermont may feel suffocating in a Florida beach house. "In Florida, color and landscapes are more pure and pastel than in New England where nature is more subdued and colors are muted," says Jonathan Poore, architectural designer and author of "Interior Color by Design." Before choosing the mood of an entryway, consider your surroundings.

Light quality can also vary dramatically between, say, Phoenix, Arizona, and Portland, Oregon. "If you have an entryway that's dark and shady, you might want to paint it gold so that it glows," says Poore. "But if people enter the house through a sun-baked walkway under glaring light, they may prefer to enter a cool, soothing blue space."

If your home is in an urban neighborhood, he adds, "you might want the entryway to feel safe and home-like, whereas if the area is already so safe it puts people to sleep, you can use color to add some excitement."

Joseph Berkowitz sponged the walls an earthy gold to create a warm, dramatic entryway. (Photo Barry Halkin)



#### 4. Create excitement

Next: [5. Weave a cozy cocoon](#)

Want to introduce drama into a room without overwhelming it? Consider painting one wall—or even the ceiling—a vivid color. If you're wondering what to paint the other walls to tone it down, just look in your clothes closet. Fashion designers mastered this trick long ago.

"You see it in men's neck ties," says Joseph Berkowitz, an interior designer in Penn Valley, Pa. "A stripe of peach or hot pink will be surrounded by blacks, browns or grays to tone it down. In the same way, you can create a very elegant, traditional room using intense colors." Berkowitz has painted dining room ceilings teal or terra cotta to spice up neutral-colored walls and furnishings.

"Putting a contrasting color on one wall or the ceiling is very different than doing a whole room," Leslie Harrington adds. "It's a fast way to achieve a dramatic change—perfect when you want something really wonderful for a short period of time."

Vincent Smith-Durham, an interior designer in Philadelphia, painted one wall of every room in his home shocking pink in honor of his favorite fashion designer, Elsa Schiaparelli, who made that color famous in the thirties and forties by pairing it with basic black. Smith-Durham too surrounded his pink walls with gray or black. "It's an incredible geranium pink with a lot of orange in it. It throbs with life, like the heartbeat of the house."

Shocking pink throbs against the soft dove gray of Vincent-Smith Durham's living room, creating what he calls "a dramatic, nocturnal mood." (Photo Barry Halkin)



## 5. Weave a cozy cocoon

Next: [6. Lighten up](#)

Muted browns produce a soothing, suede-like backdrop. Shades of gray can have the same serene, cocooning effect. Joseph Berkowitz recently created a cozy master suite by pairing chocolate brown walls with lime green accents and cream-colored carpet and bedding. "The end result is a warm, romantic cocoon," he says.

Brown or gray may seem drab on their own but are often transformed by other colors in the room. Accents of lime green or powder blue brighten brown tones and red or gold will warm up gray. "One of the most common mistakes people make is to zero in on a paint sample and say, 'I can't live with that,'" says Berkowitz. "But creating a color scheme for a room is like putting together a puzzle. The wall color is just one piece of the puzzle. Window treatments, furniture, bedding, pillows, carpeting and lighting all affect the color and mood."

White bedding and wall panel brighten earthy brown walls in this cocoon-like bedroom by Ammie Kim.



## 6. Lighten up

Next: [7. Bring on the Romance](#)

White is often over-used in homes, partly because we're trained by the real estate market to view it as safe. Want to sell your house faster? Paint it white.

Resorting to white walls simply to avoid color is missing a design opportunity. But used deliberately, a white palette can produce a light and airy oasis—which is why high-end spas are so often done in off-whites and pale earth tones. Joseph Berkowitz sometimes uses several shades of white in a bedroom: soft cream, beige, pale gold. "The mood is very serene, very spa-like and soothing when everything in the room is light—draperies, shelving, bedding. Using a stronger color in this case can make the walls too dominating and spoil the ethereal quality."

Designer Stephanie Henley used a neutral palette of white, beige and gold to create a light, airy bedroom.



## 7. Bring on the Romance

Next: [8. Alter the mood](#)

Another way to balance strong colors in an interior is to add tonal variations of the same color, just as you find them in nature. Sometimes the best inspiration for a mood-inducing palette is right outside your front door.

Using the reds and golds of a sunset, for example, lit with the warm glow of lamp or candlelight, creates an exotic, romantic ambience. "If a sunset was just one color, I don't think everybody would be looking up at it with such awe," says Joseph Berkowitz. "When you look into the leaves of a tree, the beauty is in the many tonal variations. It's the same with decorating. You need to stray a little from the perfect match and get comfortable mixing colors together."

Christopher Grubb used golden sunset hues to create this romantic seating area for two.



## 8. Alter the mood

Next: [9. Put it in context](#)

Just because you've painted a room doesn't mean you're stuck with one mood or a static color statement. "You can alter the mood of a color by putting other colors with it," says Leslie Harrington. "That's where complementary colors come into play." Red and green always look more vivid together, for example—which is why an apple looks riper in the tree than in your hand.

Placing mint green next to bubblegum pink instantly relieves an otherwise overwhelming color and creates a lighthearted, playful mood. In a similar way, orange can balance and bring excitement to turquoise. Pale gold does the same for lavender. "Complements are opposites and opposites together are always more dynamic," says Jonathan Poore. "They create a dialogue."

Mint green chairs complement the pink walls of this lighthearted eating area by Sue Adams.



## 9. Put it in context

Next:

"We talk about colors as individuals, but in reality, you never see them individually but always in the context of other colors," says Leslie Harrington. You don't need to understand the complexities of color theory to figure out how a color will make you feel in a particular room. Just make sure to examine it in the proper context. That lavender paint chip may look dramatically different in the store than it does beside your furniture and rugs.

Best way to test the mood of a color? Live with it a while. Paint a board and place it on each wall—against a neutral shade, not the wall color it will replace. Once you've made a considered choice and started painting, resist the urge to grab the can of paint and run back to the store to return it. Finish painting the walls and put the furnishings back in place to get the full effect. "If you've made a conscious decision, it will all come together in the end," says Vincent Smith-Durham. "And if it doesn't? It's just a coat of paint. You can always change it."

Joyce Bradshaw used spicy red walls and ceiling to transform beige, gold and sage furnishings into an intimate conversation area.

*Cathleen McCarthy has written for Country Living, Elle Décor and The Washington Post, among others.*

### **What's Your Color Personality?**

Find out what your favorite colors say about you--and get decorating ideas for mixing and matching your favorite hues! [Spin the color wheel>](#)