

Hendricks Churchill

The New York Times

Mastering the Art of Layering Rugs: a Step-by-Step Guide

Layering rugs is cheaper than buying a single large one, and cozier, too: "When you start layering rugs, it begins to feel like home."

By Tim McKeough
Photographs by Stefano Ukmar
June 9, 2023



Hendricks Churchill

Choosing a rug ought to be the easiest part of furnishing a room, right? Turns out, it's harder than it looks.

The rug you love may not be the right size. Or maybe it's an antique that could be destroyed by foot traffic. Or it's gorgeous but not that comfortable. Or maybe you just can't decide between different styles?

Not to worry: There's an easy fix. Instead of trying to find a single rug that meets all your needs, you can simply layer rugs on top of each other.

"We do it all the time, for both aesthetic and economic reasons," said Heide Hendricks, who founded the architecture and interior design firm Hendricks Churchill with her husband, Rafe Churchill.

Layering rugs, "makes it very cozy, and very comfortable," she said. And as Ms. Hendricks, 55, pointed out, buying several small rugs is usually more affordable than buying a single large one. At their 1871 farmhouse in Sharon, Conn., which will be featured in the Rizzoli book "Our Way Home," out this September, they layered rugs in numerous rooms — both to make favorite ones fit and to give the spaces a relaxed vibe.

"The look is eclectic," said Mr. Churchill, 53. "If you have a room that's decorated in a way where you're drawing from different sources and time periods, it does a really nice job of pulling it all together. When you start layering rugs, it begins to feel like home."

Ms. Hendricks and Mr. Churchill showed us how they do it.

Plan the Furniture Layout

"The first step is determining the layout of the furniture," Mr. Churchill said. Before you look at rugs, figure out where you want your furniture, and then determine how layered rugs can support that plan.

In their home, the couple often center small, decorative rugs on top of larger, plain ones. But they also layer rugs end-to-end to cover longer rooms and in L-shaped arrangements to accommodate circulation paths around furniture.

Take Stock of Your Options

Whether you have a stockpile of rugs to choose from or you're narrowing your choices while shopping online, "there's the larger palette to think about," Ms. Hendricks said.

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When she and Mr. Churchill were selecting an antique rug from their collection for the living room, she said, “we intentionally didn’t want green in the rug, because of the strength of the green paint in the room.”

They chose a Russian Soumak rug from the 1890s that was rich in reds and blues. And because it was patterned, they paired it with a plain-looking, woven water hyacinth rug from Rush House.

Mix Patterns, Within Reason

Setting off a small, patterned rug with a larger plain one is a classic approach to layering. But mixing rugs with different patterns can also look striking, as long as they relate somehow.

In the couple’s sunroom, they layered two vintage off-white Beni Ourain rugs. “It’s a layering of different patterns,” Ms. Hendricks said, “but they’re unified by the same background color.”

They were more daring in the dining room, where they paired an ornately patterned antique Serapi rug with a contemporary checkerboard rug that Ms. Hendricks found on Etsy. Both have an earthy color palette that make them good partners.

Install With Care

When you’re installing the rugs, “you just have to be careful, because it is an extra layer,” Ms. Hendricks said. Any rug is a potential tripping hazard, and layers of rugs increase the risk.

She and Mr. Churchill use a rug pad under the bottom rug only, to keep it from slipping. Then they add additional rugs on top, while trying to minimize raised edges where people need to walk. They also try to avoid having rugs overlap in a busy area.

“You pick your spots,” she said. “Layering under a coffee table is a great location, because it’s not a main thoroughfare.”

Fine-Tune the Furniture

When you bring in the furniture, the colors and patterns may not combine the way you hoped. One example: Ms. Hendricks didn’t like the way the green upholstery of her ottoman looked next to the living room rugs. So she draped it with an antique paisley shawl: “I introduced this layer with a finer pattern on top of the larger-scale pattern of the rug.”

Change as Needed

Another benefit of layering rugs: It’s easy to move them around, the same way you’d swap out a throw pillow or bedding when the seasons change.

“Layering rugs is an ongoing exercise,” Mr. Churchill said. “It definitely changes seasonally.”

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He and Ms. Hendricks frequently change the layout of their living room, including the rugs, to shift the focal point from the fireplace to the windows, when spring begins. They also roll up the Moroccan rugs in their sunroom for a lighter feeling in summer.

Layered rugs are ideal for entertaining, as well, Mr. Churchill noted: "If you're having a bunch of people over, you might take up a slightly more precious rug, just to protect it."

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After Years of Watching It Fall Apart, the Home Was Finally Theirs

The farmhouse in Sharon, Conn., was ‘impossibly perfect.’ All they had to do was fix 150 years’ worth of damage and bad renovations.

By Tim McKeough
Photographs by Tim Lenz
April 21, 2020



Heide Hendricks and Rafe Churchill first saw their new home in the early aughts: an 1871 farmhouse with a big red barn and stone walls, sitting on 33 acres of field and forest so idyllic it looked like something out of a storybook.

“It was like a fairy-tale setting,” said Ms. Hendricks, 52. “It was just impossibly perfect.”

Hendricks Churchill

The married principals of the design firm Hendricks Churchill, who have a reputation for thoughtful restorations of New England country houses, had just left Brooklyn for Sharon, Conn., and were getting to know the area with their newborn daughter, who is now 16.

“Part of our routine for getting our daughter to fall asleep was driving around the back roads of Sharon,” said Mr. Churchill, 50, so eventually they saw nearly every house in the area.

Although they had just designed and built a new house of their own, once they discovered the farmhouse, “we were both talking about it like it was our special place,” Mr. Churchill said. “But it seemed totally unrealistic that we could ever live there,” he added, because they assumed they couldn’t afford it.

“So we just kept an eye on it for 15 years,” Mr. Churchill said, as their family added a son, who is now 14. “We watched it and watched it as it slowly fell into disrepair.”

Beginning in 2015, they also watched as the house landed on the market and the price slowly fell from the initial ask of \$2.4 million. By the time it hit \$775,000 in early 2018, they felt they couldn’t avoid buying it. They offered the asking price and closed that May.

Like any 19th-century house that had been only partially updated over the years, the 3,000-square-foot structure needed work. The plumbing, heating and electrical systems all had to be replaced, along with roughly half of the windows.

The home had been expanded a few times over the decades, with a series of early additions to the back. The latest changes — including renovated bathrooms, an updated kitchen and wall-to-wall carpeting — appeared to date from the 1960s and ’70s.

Fortunately, most of the newer things simply covered up the old details that Ms. Hendricks and Mr. Churchill cherished.

“With all of our projects, we like to approach them very carefully and protect the initial emotional response that made you fall in love,” Ms. Hendricks said. “Essentially, we went through and tried to scrape away some of the insertions that the previous homeowners had made, and eke out the original details from the late 1800s and early 1900s.”

That included exposing and refinishing the original pine floors, retaining as much early woodwork as they could (including the Victorian scrollwork on the front porch) and replicating missing pieces of trim where necessary.

In the front section of the house, they left the layout largely as it was and tried to keep as much original plaster on the walls as they could.

Hendricks Churchill



“When you walk into a house, you can see the difference between a new drywall wall and an old plaster wall,” Mr. Churchill said. “As far as doing a full gut, we limited that to the bathrooms and the kitchen.”

For a replacement kitchen, they designed a room with bead-board paneling, a deep statuarietto marble sink, an island topped by a thick white-oak counter and new cabinets painted Farrow & Ball’s blue-gray De Nimes. The kitchen now connects to a sunny pantry painted pale blue, a laundry room painted light yellow and a new mudroom with a diamond-patterned cement-tile floor.

The kitchen also flows into an oversized dining room, where there is space not only for a dining table and chairs, but also a tufted sofa and armchairs.

“When you wake up in the morning, there’s such beautiful light in the dining room. It’s a great place to sit on the sofa and read the paper,” Ms. Hendricks said, adding that the Shaker-style Chris Harter dining table “doubles as a work zone for laptops and kids’ homework.”

Hendricks Churchill

Throughout the house, they mixed traditional-looking furniture with clean-lined contemporary pieces — a scroll-arm sofa paired with a David Weeks Cross Cable chandelier in the living room, for example — to give it a fresh, collected look.

They covered some of the walls with patterned wallpaper, including a design based on abstracted pine trees from Fayce in the living room, and concocted an appealing color palette of unexpected hues based on the luminosity of each room.

“The closer you get to the southern side of the house, the brighter the colors get,” Ms. Hendricks said. “And then I just sort of embraced the north side and made those rooms more dark and moody.”

The rearmost section of the house was an odd two-story addition that appeared to have once been a shed, with a second-floor ceiling so low that Mr. Churchill, who is 6 feet 5 inches tall, couldn’t stand up. So they removed the second floor, salvaging the chestnut flooring to use in the entrance hall and other timbers for repairs. After fixing the foundation and straightening out the structure, they began transforming it into a double-height sunroom.

While work on the sunroom continues, the rest of the house was completed in December 2018 at a cost of about \$750,000.

The family has now lived there for more than a year, but the past month has been the most rewarding, the couple said, as they shelter at home with their children.

“It was a little hard leaving our last house, because the kids were toddlers and formed their personalities there,” Ms. Hendricks said. “But we’re finally settling this new place as a family home.”

“We’re making family memories,” she said, “living in lockdown.”