



Fresh flowers in the kitchen are one of Hilary Farr's signature touches.

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# The lovely world of Hilary Farr

The HGTV design star melds function and beauty

BY STACEY ZABLE

Love is a big word in the life of HGTV star and designer Hilary Farr. The word is included in the name of the two television shows she stars in for the network — *Love It or List It* and *Tough Love with Hilary Farr* — and it is a word that Farr frequently uses when discussing her own passion for design.

On *Love It or List It*, which premiered in 2008 in Canada, Farr and her co-host, real estate agent David Visentin, compete with each other to persuade homeowners to love their current home again (after Farr transforms it within their budget) or list it for sale and buy something new (with Visentin's sage advice). Farr's direct approach, wit, beautiful designs and the undeniable chemistry and friendly rivalry with her co-host make the show a

hit. The latest season, which aired in fall 2022, attracted more than 18 million total viewers.

*Tough Love with Hilary Farr* was renewed for its second season in 2022. This time flying solo, Farr turns her gimlet eye to finding interior design solutions that also address the blind spots keeping her clients stuck in spaces that don't work for the way they live. Audi-



ences obviously love Farr, as the show's first year attracted more than 16.1 million viewers.

Farr describes herself as an "incredibly practical" designer. "I will always do what my client asks, but if I think it is ... (an) impractical thing that they are asking for, I will guide my clients away from that." She describes this as the functional part of design. She offers an example: "Why if you are on a tight budget, are you suggesting a fridge that costs \$90,000," she says. "I would try and >

bring everyone back down to reality and talk it through. If they end up wanting to do it anyway, then obviously, we're going to do it." Once they get "through those little hurdles, then it's all about beauty," she says. "And that's the fun part. But even within the textiles, the fabrics — the rounded edges if there are children — (the design) will also be tailored to the functionality of (the homeowners') particular situation."

In terms of design style, Farr says, "I love drama. I love creating drama in design. I also love the luxury of the way a fabric or a built-in or a countertop looks. I love the light fixtures, which are just so key to how a house functions (both) in terms of the light and just the beauty of the fixture itself. I really want to have a statement design with a background supporting it that is 100 percent functional."

### Design Lifestyle

Interior design has always been a passion of the Toronto-born, London-raised Farr, though it did not start out as a career path. Her mother was "really excellent at creating beautiful interiors and that carried through with me," Farr says. Her interest, however, was in ballet "until (she) was deemed way too tall and then moved on to theater." But even while pursuing this other life, Farr was buying properties, fixing them up, and then finding something nicer. "Back then, certainly



**Designing a central** space where the whole family can gather is a common challenge on Farr's hit show, *Tough Love with Hilary Farr*.

in England, flipping didn't exist," she says. "It wasn't a thing. It was just time to move on and so it went."

That all changed when she moved to Los Angeles in the 1980s and began "to take it more seriously" while redoing a large house that she eventually sold and then moved on to the next house, where she finally stayed for 13 years.

In LA, Farr worked as an actress and became involved in set design, meeting other designers who showed an interest in her style. This is when people started "begging me to do their work for them, which I did," she says. It remained a hobby and sideline until she returned to Canada in the 1990s and knew it was time to switch careers. She went to Toronto's Ryerson University (recently renamed Toronto Metropolitan University) to study design and then bought her first house to deliberately flip. "I was working with one contractor, one realtor and a banker who made it happen and blossom into Hilary Farr Designs," she says. "I suddenly had a huge >



**If your renovation** budget won't stretch to include a kitchen and a bathroom, Farr advises making the kitchen a priority as it's used by everyone in the house.

HGTV (3)

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## Hilary Farr's Home Renovation Advice

**Know your absolute budget.** If you understand the reasons you set a specific budget limit, you are more likely to stick to it.

**Prioritize renovations.** If you must choose between redoing a kitchen or a bathroom, Farr believes the kitchen should be the priority as it is used every day by everyone in the home.

**Expertise matters.** Why would you repair your own shoes instead of taking them to a cobbler? Similarly, an experienced designer can see where the problems are and begin to construct solutions quickly. Ultimately, that can cut down on time and guesswork. The finished product is almost always something that the homeowner hadn't envisioned.

**Vet your contractor.** Make it a priority to find someone who has a sense of loyalty to their clients, one who will come back and who will ensure the job is completed. Referrals through friends (and friends

once-removed) are one way to start your search. Begin with interviewing two or three contractors and ask each for two to three references.

**Dig into references.** Ask your contractor's references if it's possible to see the finished job, along with such questions as: Was he on time? Did she keep a clean job site? Did he do what he said he would for the price he quoted? Did she let you know there were changes that would cost more before she did the work so you were aware of it? Did he always run things by you for approval?

**Cultivate collaboration.** Having a good working relationship with your contractor is key. You want your contractor to be open, honest and transparent with you, but that's a two-way street. Be available to make decisions and answer questions about your preferences.

— Stacey Zable



Farr's calm and reassuring television persona is reflected in the elegant yet practical and functional designs she creates for her clients.

client base." And she began to grow and learn simply by doing. "Most of my skill set in terms of understanding space and the actual build aspect came from being on the job," she says.

### Hello, HGTV

After a divorce, Farr moved to an apartment and became friendly with a neighbor (a theatrical agent) who came across the casting call for a designer on *Love It or List It*. She suggested that Farr audition.

Farr thought "it seemed ridiculous because it was the infancy of all of what is now HGTV. I was cast straightaway. And then David came into the picture and the rest is history." The series' production moved to the U.S. in 2014.

*Tough Love with Hilary Farr* was born from Farr's



own personal experience in which her then-partner of 22 years was fighting cancer. "I was dealing with the reality of having someone going through treatment, recovering from treatment, wanting to be in the main space of the house, and not wanting to go up to a bedroom somewhere on the second floor," she says. "And it was difficult. Difficult not just in how the house functioned. It made a huge impact on my

**Selecting the right** light fixtures is one of Farr's favorite tasks. She values both the beauty of the fixture itself and its power to illuminate the space.

life as well, with the concern and everything that goes with that situation." Farr wanted to explore how people deal with emotional and physical life changes when they don't have the knowledge or the funds to renovate their living space.

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HILARY FARR,  
HGTV host

The first season of the series was based in Philadelphia and the second season has Farr helping people in North Carolina. Among the standout episodes for Farr was the chance to figure out a self-contained space in a couple's house for the wife's mother. It became an emotional journey for both mother and daughter, who found getting along challenging. "The space was there; that wasn't the biggest part of it. It was finding middle ground," Farr says about getting the mother-daughter duo to embrace their relationship.

In addition to the design and renovation segments, Farr and the homeowners spend time away from the space taking baby goat

yoga, axe throwing and cooking classes, which reveal more about not only Farr but also the homeowners. These moments "become part of the texture of the story," she says.

### New Adventures

An HGTV Christmas film, *Designing Christmas*, which premiered in December 2022, had Farr returning to her acting roots.

"Because I tend to jump into things and figure it out later, I said 'Sure, of course,' and then suddenly there was a script and lines to learn and impossibly long days," she says. "But it was a load of fun and I'm glad I did it."

Farr currently sells her textile designs

through Kaleen Rugs and Covington, with a new collection coming out this spring. She feels strongly about the environment and insists sustainability be a consideration.

Pre-pandemic, she was hoping to launch additional design products, but for now production is pushed back.

Jump in and think about it later is clearly Farr's mantra. The HGTV star recently vacationed in Italy and after 10 days, bought a property there. "That's my next little project and we'll see how it turns out," she says.

Loyal fans would probably be happy if this new step transformed into the next series for Farr. Her response to that idea: "I don't know if it will be a show or not. It's going to be a fun ride, regardless." ■

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# HOME

2023

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COZY,  
COOL  
COLORS

TOTAL  
KITCHEN  
ENVY

VAMP UP  
YOUR  
SPACE

*Harley*  
Farr

