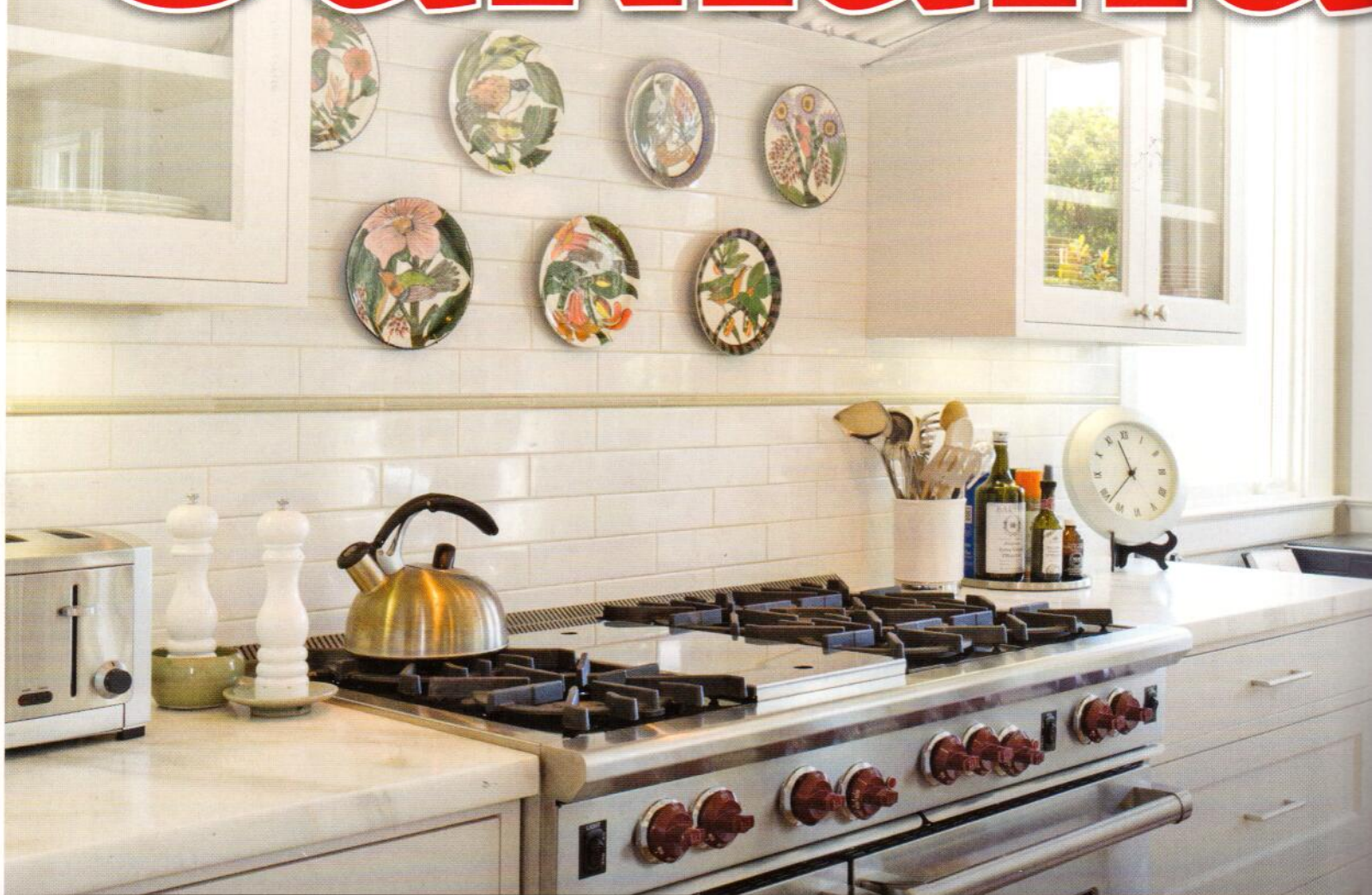


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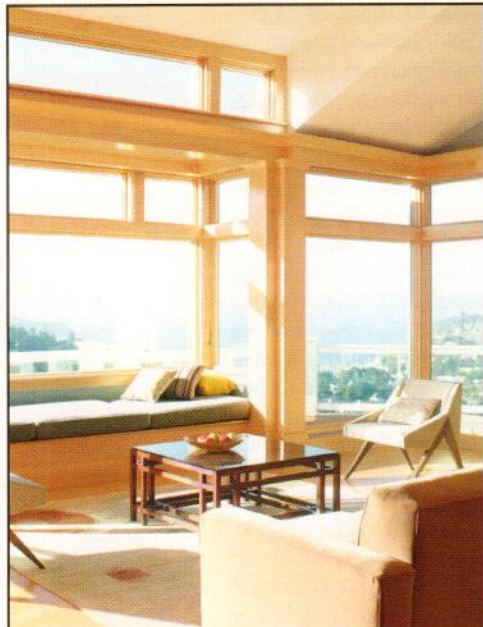
By Sarah Coombs



Here's a bit of design trivia for you: What can both soften a room and give it welcome heft? What can warm up a space and keep it cool? What can provide privacy and frame a view? If you answered curtains, props to you. Good ones do all that and more, while looking stylish to boot. Here's a primer on how to do them right.

First, budget for your window treatments from the very beginning. Even off-the-rack options will likely cost hundreds per window, and custom ones will tally much more. Curtains also require rods, rings, brackets, and finials, and all that metal can really add to the bottom line. Plus, unless you're an intrepid DIYer, you'll likely want to hire a handyman to handle the installation. Older homes in particular are infamous for being untrimmed, which can make working with windows a real chore.

This isn't to say that you need a professional every step of the way. Curtains are quite forgiving to design newbies, provided you remember one simple rule: Go big. Curtains look best when hung several inches wider and taller than the window. This technique accomplishes three things: it helps to create the illusion of a larger window; it maximizes your natural light; and it also makes your whole room look larger.



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So, space allowing, hang them about 10 inches wider than the window frame on both sides, and several inches higher than the window top.

Now that you know where you're placing them, it's time to pick your panels, and here size is still key. In order for the curtains to look gracious, you need a good amount of material: between two and three times the width of your window. In other words, if your window is 50 inches wide, you need at least 100 inches of fabric, or two 50-inch panels. If you have a really wide window—so common in Craftsmans and ranches—you'll need to go much bigger. Some stores like Pottery Barn and Restoration Hardware carry double-wide panels (usually about 100 inches or so), or you can have multiple single panels sewn together to create the same effect.

Width isn't your only concern. You've got length to contend with, too. For the neatest look, you want to have your curtains either kiss the floor or float just above it. Shorter than that and they'll bear a striking resemblance to capri pants: a sporty look on legs, but a sure sign of chintziness on a window.

As you start your hunt, you'll note that curtains come in standard lengths: 84 inches, 96 inches, and 108 inches. Few rooms require a full 108 inches, and most are too tall for 84 inches. The 96-inch length is often the sweet spot, with the understanding that you may need to hem them a bit to get the length just right. This is a simple job; your local seamstress should be able to handle it for a reasonable price if you aren't game.

A little prep, a bit of measuring, and a generous dose of fabric: That's all your windows need to look their best.

Sarah Coombs is an interior designer based in Alameda.

Photo by David Duncan Livingston, courtesy of Ann Lowengart Interiors



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