

# OFF DUTY

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## DESIGN

### The Garden Is the New Home Office, Thanks to the Sanity Shed

As we settle into working and learning from home, repurposed backyard garden sheds and prefab outbuildings offer a pleasant soft divide between family and work life

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In Weston, Conn., Chris Roughan turned her late-1700s shed, which had been a tollhouse and a cobbler shack, into an office for her interior design team.

PHOTO: SEAN LITCHFIELD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

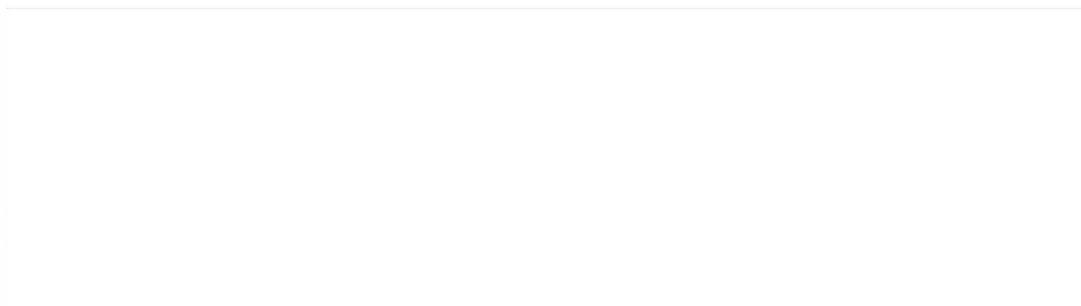
Perhaps to erase the dingy pasts of existing garden sheds, many designers paint their interiors white. On walls and between the chestnut ceiling beams of her little saltbox

outbuilding, a late-1700s structure about 300 feet from her home in Weston, Conn., interior designer Chris Roughan turned to Benjamin Moore's Super White. In her new home office, a respite from the chaos of 10-year-old twins and a husband working remotely, she drafted both table and task lamps. The white walls help bounce the light the lamps cast and brighten the space. "That's really important because there's not a lot of downlighting," she said.

While Mr. Marini painted his vaulted ceiling black so it recedes and makes the 10-foot-by-12-foot space feel larger, his interior walls sport a creamy off-white. "I really prefer darker, moody rooms," he said. But for a workplace, "that starkness keeps you alert and vibrant and bright and aware." After his 74-year-old mother moved into a first-floor bedroom as Covid-19 descended, he also began using the place as a hideout from his now-full house. Under the firelight of a rust-finished candelabra that had no place in the main dwelling, "my husband and I sit and have a cocktail around five o'clock and talk about the day. It makes a nice separation, almost like going out to a bar."

Mr. Marini hired an architect to draw a rendering of his outbuilding, then had a seasoned shed builder construct it (total cost: \$7,200). But ready-made options are proliferating. Starting at \$500 a month, you can lease a glass-walled 8-foot-by-10-foot pod from ootBox, in Columbus, Ohio. A modern Mono Mini cabin from Alberta-based DROP Structures arrives with a sturdy standing-seam exterior and extremely hygge Baltic- birch interior (from \$18,900).

To ensure Wi-Fi access, you may need to amplify your home's router with a booster or extender. Other logistical considerations include permits, specific to local jurisdictions. The hoops you'll need to vault through will likely increase with every nicety you want to add, from electrical wiring to a plumbed bathroom. Said David Latimer, CEO of Nashville's New Frontier Design, whose business has jumped 300%-400% year over year, "It's the same process for a 5,000-square-foot-house as a 450-square-foot one."



Another virtue of working from a Sanity Shed: The reintroduction of a (beautifully brief) commute. Even a quick stroll through dewy grass offers an energy reset, injecting fresh air in a workday with every coffee refill or bathroom run. “Human beings need transitions,” said Mr. Pink, who works in a revamped garage a 22-step shuffle from his door. “Human attention is precious, and it’s not infinite. It needs punctuation marks,” he said. Without them, “our attention becomes an incoherent run-on sentence.”

## PEAK RETREAT

*A guide to kitting out a garden office for maximum comfort and productivity*



Ms. Roughan mixed desks from “good old IKEA,” she said, with alabaster lamps.

PHOTO: SEAN LITCHFIELD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

**EVERYONE** from Mark Twain to Pink Floyd's Roger Waters worked in their garden sheds. To ready your own Sanity Shed for maximum output and minimum headaches, try this design advice from the pros.

**Look down.** Install a hard-wearing option underfoot. Max Sinsteden selected stained fir for his Westerly, R.I., retreat because he knew his feet “would be a little dirtier out there.” In St. Petersburg, Fla., designer Joseph Marini chose engineered hardwood that “can stand up to being muddy and wet but has a great stained-gray look to it.” If you're carpeting, choose durable material like sisal and wool, said interior designer Chris Roughan, in Weston, Conn.

**Conscript salvage.** To get ample light into his workspace, Mr. Marini reused 1950s French doors from a house he'd recently flipped. “I thought, ‘What a perfect way to do floor to ceiling windows in here!’” Charleston designer J.P. Horton, too, argues for employing castoffs. “I don't want it to be a catchall for garage-sale stuff, but it's a good place to be creative.”

**Get green.** “The number one thing you can do [to improve an outbuilding] that's inexpensive is add plants, which seems trivial, but living things help a lot,” said Mr. Horton.

**Mind your purpose.** Mr. Marini displays his collected horde of antique iron urns and footed vases on his shed's built-in shelving, but he left one wall entirely blank as a “giant work board” for organizing notes on projects—adhered with cobalt painter's tape—to keep him on task, and it works. “I've really been out here every day.”