

Lavender: The new neutral

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JAHU CHIKWENDIU / THE WASHINGTON POST

'It's gone beyond the sweet old lady thing,' Washington designer Whitney Stewart says of lavender, which she used in this home in Washington's Georgetown neighborhood.

In my house, the color palette is neutral: The walls are pale linen, the sofa is light brown, the rugs are natural sisal, the dishes are white. I find neutrals calming, tasteful and restful. And the perfect backdrop for anything and everything, all seasons of the year, whether the shade is taupe, tan, ecru, almond, cream or ivory. Or lavender.

Once considered too cloying, too old-fashioned, perhaps best left for the baby's room, lavender has of late become a go-to color for walls, ceilings, fabrics and furniture, showing up in magazines, catalogues, show houses and designers' portfolios.

"It's gone beyond the sweet old lady thing," said Washington designer Whitney Stewart. "It's something new and fresh that we can use in the same way as the beiges."

This season, Crate and Barrel is selling lavender stemware. Pottery Barn's summer paint palette includes a shade of lavender. Restoration Hardware, known for its strictly edited color selection, sells lavender paint, shower curtains and towels. And, last fall on the fashion runway, where interior design often takes its cues, a pale lavender wedding gown appeared among a sea of white and ivory.

The color stars at the Kips Bay Decorator Show House in New York this month, where emerging design trends often begin their journey into the mainstream. A lush bedroom decorated by Manhattan designer Jamie Drake included lavender wall-to-wall carpeting, a lavender velvet slipper chair and high-gloss lavender lacquer wall panels.

"Lavender can be a soft and embracing neutral when used in lavish amounts," Drake said in an e-mail.

Many people have a misconception about neutrals, designers say. Neutral does

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