

Night Light

Landscape designers spotlight the warmth of outdoor illumination.

“The landscape tells a different story at night than it does during the day,” says Sean O’Connor, a Beverly Hills–based lighting designer. The way he and other lighting gurus see it, you may be missing half the fun—the idea of maintaining a garden to be enjoyed only in the daytime seems almost quaint.

“Now we have an appreciation of what lighting can do for a landscape, which was a big epiphany for me,” says Andrew Moore, a landscape architect at Quennell Rothschild & Partners in New York. “For the longest time lighting took a backseat, since architects are generally more interested in what a setting looks like by day than at night. We work with lighting designers as collaborators these days, rather than bringing them in after everything is done.”

In America, exterior lighting is often thought of as a security concern rather than an aesthetic opportunity, but that appears to be changing. “Now residential lighting is about navigation: knowing where paths are and having a sense of the borders and features of your yard,” notes Linnaea Tillett, a Brooklyn-based lighting designer with a Ph.D. in environmental psychology. “If you’ve just spent a bunch of money on windows, once the sun goes down you can no longer see what’s out there. Landscape lighting gives you back that scale.”

As much an art as a science, effective landscape lighting requires an eye for composition as well as a range of professional expertise, from knowing how the eye reacts to light and light reacts in the environment, to understanding the ways plants grow and the deleterious effects of corrosion on lighting fixtures, which apparently begin the moment they’re placed outdoors.

Landscape lighting techniques vary according to the effect desired.

“Downlighting,” for instance, produces shadows on the underside of leaves, just as the sun does, while “uplighting” causes foliage to glow as light shines. “I use less wattage and more fixtures to create a visual theme,” says Janet Lennox Moyer, author of *The Landscape Lighting Book*. “I want the tree I’m lighting to show off its shape and form—trunk, bark, everything.” Rather than “blast” plants with high beams, Moyer prefers intricate arrangements of low-wattage light sources, typically only 10 to 30 watts per fixture. Her goal, she says, is brightness balanced with elements in the landscape and absolutely no glare.

Moyer was recently hired to design a ten-acre property in South Carolina that includes several ancient oak trees. She began with soft uplighting to reveal the “romance” of the big trees, and then added downlighting throughout the garden to assure each oak would be seen in context. The resulting ribbonlike lighting effect transported the eye from one part of the garden to the next.

“We gave the client views she’d never seen before,” says Moyer. “She’s planning a ‘walking cocktail party’ to show it all off.”

Greg Yale, a prominent lighting designer with boldfaced clientele and offices in Malibu and Southampton, New York, typically overlooks obvious elements of a landscape in search of texture and depth. “One of my clients told me, ‘You’re not a lighting designer; you’re a shadow sculptor,’” he recalls. “When I look at a landscape by day, I see it in the negative. I’ll be searching the backdrop for things I can silhouette, like the texture of a birch tree, whose color, bark patterns and branches look wildly different at night than by day.”

For Yale, the key is finding the elusive element that creates a scene. He relates an encounter with Martha Stewart, whose expansive Bedford, New York, estate he was designing as of press time. “I was interested in how she walked through her property at night. As we went along, we passed a patch of woods with a stream. I told her it would be beautiful to use light to bring out the soft glow of the rocks, moss and ferns. She said, ‘I walk this path all the time, and I’ve never thought about that once.’ And so, there it was—that’s the detail we look for.”

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For a firsthand look at Moyer's artistry, I headed to Spencertown, New York, on a frigid December evening to the weekend home of Cathy Kaplan, a Manhattan lawyer. Approaching the thirty-acre property on a dark and seemingly endless driveway, I found towering oaks and tangled birches only modestly aglow as their respective fixtures lay buried in the snow, casting orbs of light that resembled mozzarella balls. "I should've told Cathy to turn them on earlier; they would've melted through by now," said Moyer, who spent much of our tour digging out fixtures to reveal their full effect.

City-raised, Kaplan found it depressing to be surrounded by darkness in the country. Landscape lighting reminded her of the lighted palm trees she'd seen at Florida hotels that she visited as a child. She'd first hired Moyer to light her art-filled house before turning her loose outdoors. "It seems silly to me to look out the windows at night and not be able to appreciate what you have."

Moyer began by creating a welcoming scene for Kaplan's guests on that endless entrance. "I lit one tree part of the way down the driveway, two trees toward the end to frame the parking area, and then a bunch of trees behind it to give the concept that you've arrived." Moyer then focused on the front of the house, splashing shrubs and trees in the foreground with brighter lights to direct the eye and lead guests "both safely and aesthetically" to the front door.

Once my eyes adjusted to the scene, the effect was dazzling, albeit subtly so. Low-wattage ground lights and canopy-level downlighting drew my eyes to individual trees across Kaplan's property, their trunks and leafless branches popping out visually from the darkness around them. The views through the windows of her home were equally eye-catching—haunting at first, and then comforting, as if I could've stepped outside and still been warm.

Lighting designers have a wide arsenal of outdoor equipment to work with. Manufacturers such as B-K Lighting and Tekal Illumination of Madera, California, and Louis Poulsen of Copenhagen are noted for fixtures made of natural materials that can not only endure the elements but are also designed to facilitate bulb changes and such—a significant convenience for those having to reach sockets mounted in treetops. Such reliability doesn't come cheap, and there's also the task of placing the fixtures and the electrical work, both of which can require a significant time (and financial) investment.

Adding it all up, even a modest landscape lighting project can quickly swell into a budget balloon. For a small garden, clients should be prepared to spend a minimum of \$5,000, while lighting a large estate could run from \$100,000 to many times that.

Then there's maintenance, an integral part of landscape lighting and important for keeping your yard from resembling a spotty no vacancy sign at a roadside motel. All the designers I spoke with stressed the need for ongoing maintenance, from changing burned-out lamps to cleaning dirty lenses to replacing fixtures damaged by seasonal squalls. Moyer, for one, seeks a sense of commitment from her prospective clients, and offers them not only a beautifully lit landscape but maintenance plans for keeping it just so.

And, pray, what if you end up unimpressed with the results? Greg Yale strongly urges requesting an onsite mock-up before committing, the better to see firsthand what fixture placement and proposed light levels will look like when the switch is finally thrown. When it's done right, says Moyer, "landscape lighting gives you a visual connection to your garden; you can have outdoor rooms any time of the year." Or any time of the night.

Flip the Switch

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