

Light in the Landscape

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The creative use of light in the nighttime landscape can be one of the most rewarding facets of residential gardening and is applicable in almost any size of garden.

Not only does the aesthetic use of light extend the time for the enjoyment of the garden's textures and colors when viewed from the house, deck or patio but it also adds to the home's available living space with the increased evening use of the garden for entertaining by providing safe area and walkway illumination.

Whether the lighting plan is developed by a professional landscape lighting designer or an amateur gardener, the artistic use of the principles of lighting design are limited only by the imagination. Many techniques are borrowed from the world of the stage to create depth and height in the evening landscape. By utilizing specific types of fixtures to cast controlled light onto an area, object or plant and varying the light level and direction, one can produce a nighttime landscape composition focusing attention on plant colors, textures and shapes in conjunction with other garden features and structures.

In addition to the aesthetic aspects of garden lighting, the safety necessary to negotiate a path, step or change in grade must be addressed in a fashion that will not create unsightly glare and have a negative impact on the nighttime garden.

The human eye automatically adjusts to the amount of light stimulus it receives making it necessary to conceal or reduce the source of light for best results. For example, a post or path light which allows direct viewing of the lamp (light bulb) will actually cause the eye's iris to contract and the path or step that is the desired target of the light may appear dim, perhaps invisible, creating a hazard rather than eliminating one.

Another benefit is the added security offered by being able to "see into the darkness" or to simply deter an intruder with the presence of light. Harsh light is not necessary, the fact that stealth is eliminated will be enough make unwanted visitors think twice before entering the area.

The aesthetic goal is to create an effect while concealing the source. This can be accomplished in a infinite number of ways utilizing a combination of the proper fixtures and the placement of those fixtures.

One of the basic and most striking methods used for plant material illumination is well concealed uplighting. Fixtures placed near the base of a open branched plant direct light throughout the canopy creating shadows and highlighting the plant's structure and bark texture.

Some modifications of uplighting include wall washing light to silhouette a plant's form or emphasize wall textures, directing light onto a statue or wall ornament or casting a shadow onto a wall by aiming the light through an adjacent plant.

Variations of downlighting also contribute to the techniques available for use in the garden. Path and area lighting may be accomplished with ground mounted fixtures that illuminate small areas where steps or grade change may create a hazard. A well placed path light will lead the eye and imagination down a path towards an interesting garden feature.

Tree mounted downlighting not only introduces light into the garden but if placed above branches will cast shadows on the ground creating a moonlight effect. In addition, this type of area lighting may emphasize a planting bed's colors, textures and shapes.

Other characteristics of landscape lighting that are sometimes overlooked include the use of light in conjunction with water features. If the water is moving over a fall or from a fountain head then the water action can be dramatically accented.

A still pond may be used as a mirror by uplighting an object or plant behind the pool. Unless an atmosphere of festivity is to be projected, colored lights should be avoided as they can be difficult to work with. A green or blue color lamp for example creates a gloomy appearance. Red or yellow lighting will produce a "hot" look. Even "White" light has many different tones but usually allows the natural beauty of the landscape to come through.

In landscape design, the approach to screening off an area or view may be to install a fence or hedge. In landscape lighting, we have the pleasant surprise of not spending time and money to hide something. Simply, don't light it!

The place to begin is with the landscape plan and its concepts. Determine the areas in the garden to be highlighted and what the tone of the lighting will be. A subdued overall level of illumination may be called for with particular emphasis on a grouping of trees or a planting bed.

Walkways may need pockets of light for safety. Maybe illumination from a low path light is best or perhaps reflected light produced by uplighting of an adjacent tree would add both interest and safety.

Some common errors to avoid include straight lines of fixtures creating a "runway effect", visible light sources except for the occasional ornamental light fixture and the tendency to over use any one type of visible fixture or technique.

Design is the key in most attractive landscapes, and the purpose of garden lighting is to compliment the curves, shapes, textures and features of that design as it was originally envisioned. If properly lit, the garden will be a safer and more secure nighttime environment and will be available for many more hours of enjoyment during the changing seasons.