

The Right Outdoor Lighting Makes a Home and Landscaping Shine

By Yvonne Swanson, Times Correspondent
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Photo by Dennis Anderson courtesy of
Randall Whitehead



Lighting from above casts shadows onto the walkway

It's no wonder that "do-it-yourself" has become the weekend mantra of today's homeowners. Countless how-to classes, articles, books, Web sites and television shows make home improvement look simple, fun and inexpensive. Even first-time home buyers should be able to conquer plenty of projects, right? • Wrong! DIY, unfortunately, doesn't always equal do-it-right.

Case in point: landscape lighting. You buy a \$100 boxed set of solar path lights and spotlights, install them according to the manufacturer's directions, then wait for the sun to set and your front yard to look like the one on the box. • Instead, the spotlights with the yellow filter make your plants look sickly and the pagoda-style lights along the walkway barely stay lit for a few hours. Solar, it turns out, wasn't a good choice because your front yard doesn't get enough direct sun during the day to charge the darn things. • Another weekend warrior loses the DIY battle. There is, it turns out, a science and art to landscape lighting, and it doesn't come in a box.

"People buy low-voltage kits and pop in the colored lenses. They up light every plant. It's not natural. It looks like a little hotel or a miniature golf course," says Randall Whitehead, architectural lighting design expert and author of numerous books, including *Residential Lighting, A Guide to Beautiful and Sustainable Designs* (Wiley 2009).

Whitehead's San Francisco lighting company was established in the 1970s, and after 30 years in the business, he knows what he does and doesn't like. Take, for instance, those common pagoda-style path lights you find at most retailers. He calls them "the Paris Hilton of lights" — all style, little substance. (Walkways should be lit with mushroom or bell-shaped fixtures that focus the light down on the ground, he says.)

Experts agree that function over form is best when it comes to night-lighting your property. The right combination of lights and techniques can showcase trees, palms and shrubs; accent fountains, statues and other features; or illuminate an outdoor room for entertaining.

When done right, outdoor lighting is like "icing on the cake," says Doug Tibbits, owner of Premier Outdoor Lighting in Tampa. "If the lighting is done properly, the landscaping can look equally dramatic, if not more so, as it does in the day. We only light what we want people to see. We don't see the neighbor's fence or the sprinkler heads."

If you have created an outdoor room for entertaining, there are many options for illuminating the space. "The whole notion of outdoor rooms really started in Florida," Whitehead says. "(Floridians) have understood and used outdoor lighting long before any other state."

One of the first things to consider when lighting your yard is the power source. There are three ways to go: heavy duty 120-volt line that plugs into standard outdoor outlets; low voltage line that plugs into a transformer and has thin wires that are easy to bury; and solar power. The easiest to install is solar; just charge up the solar panel on each light and stick it in the ground. Lights should, however, be placed in full sun for best operation at night. Even at their best, though, solar isn't preferred by most professionals, Whitehead among them.

"Solar is kind of crappy. It's a weird blue light," he says. "It's very hard for a very small solar panel on top of a light fixture to collect enough energy."

Next up are bulbs, or lamps. There are numerous types to choose from, including newer 65-watt and 120-watt incandescent bulbs that provide up to

25 percent more light than older incandescents; halogen bulbs; compact fluorescent bulbs that produce soft lighting and last up to 10,000 hours; and mercury vapor bulbs that cast a cool color and can last up to 24,000 hours. Energy-efficient LED bulbs, which last up to 30,000 hours, are gaining in popularity for they require one-third the energy of incandescents and don't emit UV light that attracts insects.

Knowing the arsenal of products and power systems is only half the battle, however. To light your nights like a pro, it also helps to understand some common creative techniques.

"I'm painting with light, so I feel it's a very artistic endeavor," Whitehead says. "It's my job to make spaces look beautiful and alluring at night."

Make a sketch of your property that shows plant life, architectural elements, gathering places and other outdoor features you want to highlight. Then use these outdoor blueprints to figure out which techniques will best do the job — and don't be surprised to learn that one boxed set of light won't cut it.

Says Whitehead, "The best outdoor spaces have a little of each of these types of lighting."

Randall Whitehead's Tips for Landscape lighting

- Plants look healthiest when illuminated with cool colors from LED and fluorescent sources. Add a daylight-blue color-correcting filter on incandescent outdoor lights to eliminate the amber hue.
- People, however, look best in ambient fill light that softens shadows. To light outdoor rooms, use warm colors from halogen, incandescent and warm-hued LED lights.
- Don't use dimmers on outdoor incandescent lights; their color becomes more amber, making plants look sickly.
- Hide light fixtures behind shrubs, tree branches or other foliage, unless they are decorative.
- Use patterned filters on light fixtures to create moonlight and other interesting effects.
- Soften outdoor decorative lighting by using 25- to 40-watt bulbs.

- UV-producing cool lights can attract insects. Use warm-hued LED lights in outdoor sitting areas.
- Create two levels of light: one for when you are inside looking out and one for when you are actually in the garden.
- Invest in treated brass, bronze or copper fixtures, which hold up better in Florida sun and salt.

Lighting techniques

Moonlighting: Lighting experts use several techniques, but moonlighting (also called down lighting) is the most popular. It is a soft, natural-look light with a dappled pattern of light and shadows. To create the effect, multiple light fixtures are mounted in tall tree branches to cast light downward through the lower branches and onto the ground. "It's as if the space was illuminated by a full moon," lighting designer Randall Whitehead says.

Uplighting: Uplighting, a popular technique with palm trees, is used to highlight and add dimension to trees, palms, shrubs and other objects with lights shining up from the ground. One of the biggest mistakes with uplighting palms is placing the light too close to the trunk. "The best way to light a palm is from the next palm over, or be at least 10 to 12 feet away," Whitehead advises.

Spot Lighting: The best features in your yard, such as a prized plant, statue, fountain or gazebo, can be illuminated with spotlighting, which uses carefully placed directional fixtures. Spotlighting is also used in outdoor kitchens to focus light on work areas such as the sink, grill and food prep area.



This Buddha figure is illuminated with one LED MR16, but the candles provide the illusion of light.

Photo by Dennis Anderson courtesy of Randall Whitehead

Grazing : Lights can be placed at the base of walls and pointed upward to skim the surface with dappled light and shadows, a technique known as grazing. It is also used to project through low-growing plants, such as ornamental grasses.

Path Lighting: Path lighting is placed low to the ground and pointed downward to illuminate walkways. Lights can also be recessed into the ground and filtered to diffuse the light.



Adding lighting outside helps make interior spaces seem larger at night.

Photo by Dennis Anderson courtesy of Randall Whitehead