

by Mark Oxley

# Lighting Outdoor "Rooms"

For starters, lighting is an enhancement and should not make a bold statement. Fixtures should be hidden but great care should be given to minimizing glare. The design is successful if you are not sure that the lighting is there until you miss it when it is turned off.

Lighting is a secondary medium by which we are creating atmosphere by accenting elements in the landscape. Without being overly structured, plan in advance for balance in selecting plants that take well to lighting. The success of the lighting plan rests in part on the success of the landscape plan so plan for lighting in your landscapes! Certain trees take to lighting much better than others. For example, a Crape Myrtle has multiple stems at the base, offers great bark character and builds up to a "bloom" at the crown. Lighting a Crape Myrtle will look good in the Spring, accent the blooms in the Summer and even look great with intricate branch details visible in the Winter. A Harry Lawder Walking Stick or Japanese Laceleaf Maple will look good lit from the outside in the Summer, but you might move the fixture inside the plant in the Winter. On the other hand, many evergreens do not absorb light evenly due to their dense and low hanging canopy, plus deadwood inside. We talk about creating "outdoor rooms." The "front room" should offer a warm welcome. If possible, resist the urge to up light the entire house. Instead, focus on unique architectural elements such as columns or quoins. By grazing (up lighting from directly below) the surface,

you can bring out the texture of stone, brick or stucco. Siding is not a good candidate for grazing. Expand the perimeter by illuminating ornamental trees flanking the house. "Raise the ceiling" by up lighting tall trees behind and around the house. Don't bring the eye too close to the street, or create distractions that block the ultimate visual destination.

The principle method for lighting a driveway should be the car's headlights! Conventional path lights on a driveway are sure targets for destruction from snowplows and delivery vehicles. BK, Kim and Hadco make fixtures that can be driven over. Also consider up lighting trees framing the driveway to suggest the curve of the drive.

Walkways should be illuminated for safety and to welcome guests. We always would prefer to down light from a tree rather than a series of "runway lights". However, if down lighting is not an option, path lights still do not need to dominate. Let your lights "set the tone" of the walkway by illuminating limited (but not all) areas and highlighting potential danger spots such as stairs. Try setting your path lights back in landscape beds, accenting plant material and merely spilling light onto the walk. Nestle the

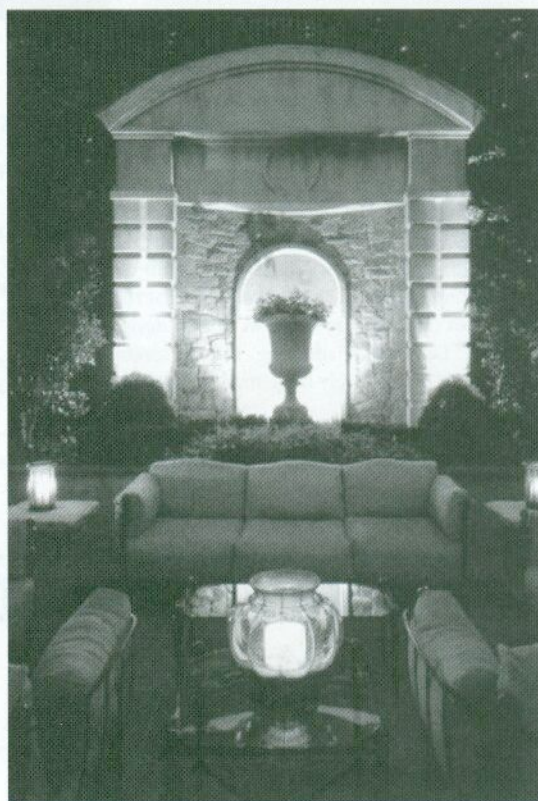


photo courtesy of Outdoor Illumination

path lights within or immediately adjacent to bushes. Shadowing in this fashion can enhance the character of the walkway. Stagger the fixtures and think in odd numbers - threes, fives and sevens. Remember, less is more!

The "back room" needs "walls" and its perimeter should be established through lighting. Again, up lighting larger trees in the distance raises the ceiling of the "room." If those larger trees are also close to the entertaining areas, down lighting is the most subtle, natural and uniform lighting format. Generally, down-lighting from less than 25 feet will be less successful. However, height is not as large a factor when you create "smaller rooms" by down lighting from arbors or trellises. Again, try to create filtering by lighting through vines and branches. Seek visual destinations such as benches, statues, unique plants, walls with character.

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When illuminating water, capture the motion and make the water "dance." We see a tendency to randomly place in-water fixtures. These fixtures create a strange muted glare and serve no purpose. Instead, position the fixtures at a 45-degree angle, up lighting the waterfalls. Water is a very heavy diffuser of light, so your conventional field calculations do not apply. Out of the water, try to cross-light the waterfalls rather than lighting from the front. Be careful of hot spots on rocks and plant material at the border. Your position and angle are critical. Resist using inexpensive (sic "cheap") fixtures in the water; you will always get what you pay for.



*photo courtesy of Outdoor Illumination*

Down lighting from large trees is among the most natural and subtle formats of lighting, but it should not be undertaken casually. Ideally, down lights from large trees should be between 30 and 50 feet up in order to maximize effect and minimize glare. If your ladder only gets you 25 feet up, don't bother! You will need to climb the tree or, better still, hire a certified arborist for this work. Down lighting also requires careful design calculation. Look for shadowing, but be careful not to create a disturbingly large shadow by down

lighting through a large limb. Also, be careful not to allow the under canopy to over-absorb light. Take the change of seasons and resulting density of foliage into account. Further, be aware of hot spots at the light source. Be prepared to go back up the tree for adjustments. And take extra measures to prevent the tree from enveloping the wire or hardware.

Electrical considerations are more than you may think! While a 600-watt transformer only draws

five amps while running, it may surge to as much as twice that when it initially fires up. You are taking a big risk by just "plugging into any available outlet." Low voltage systems are garden friendly and flexible. Low voltage fixtures from home centers are low end, but top brands such as Teka, Bega, BK and Lumiere are largely low voltage as well. Low voltage allows for reduced line depth and therefore are garden friendly and flexible. However, voltage drop is a much greater consideration for low voltage than it is for line voltage. There are a variety of techniques for reducing voltage drop and many leading manufacturers offer a variety of suggestions. Start by checking their web-sites, which you can hot-link from our web-site [www.outdoorillumination.com](http://www.outdoorillumination.com).

Fixtures should be invisible. Work hard to hide fixtures within plant material, but avoid hotspots. Fixture color should match plant material. Less is more and you can always add later. However, don't let your design become spotty, distracting the eye by moving from light to dark to light. Have fun and use your imagination...nothing ventured, nothing gained!

*Mark Oxley is principle of Outdoor Illumination, Inc., specializing in residential and commercial custom installation of landscape lighting.*

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