



Getting the Light Right

Here are tips to make the most of your home and garden at night

BY MARILYN DICKEY

At night, President Lincoln's cottage is bathed in a low light from small fixtures hidden behind the shrubbery. Their beams bring out the texture of the stucco walls and the architectural elements, but they don't reach beyond the house.

On the grounds of DC's Armed Forces Retirement Home, the Lincoln Cottage—recently renovated and opened to the public—reflects principles that guide many outdoor-lighting experts: The 20-watt halogen bulbs illuminate only what's in their path; they don't throw beams into neighbors' yards or the sky.

The idea of illuminating a home or garden isn't to create daylight at night, says Karen Weaver, a designer with Bethesda's Outdoor Illumination who chose the Lincoln Cottage's lighting:

"What surprises people about using a lighting designer is how much less light you actually need outside than you probably already have."

When Weaver takes on a project, she goes to the house in the evening to see the existing lights: "I'll notice that the fixtures at the front are very bright—they almost hurt your eyes. Or the lights in the driveway take away from the incredible architectural features. And almost everyone has a bulb at the front door that is almost twice as bright as needed to be functional—and way brighter than it should be to be beautiful."

Energy bills are one reason people may want to tone down the brightness, but ecology is another. Studies have shown that outdoor lights throw the en-

■ Many designers say subtle outdoor lighting is best. This garden, lit by Illuminata in Sterling, uses trees and a swimming pool as focal points.

vironment out of balance, according to the International Dark-Sky Association. Artificial light disorients some migrating birds, endangers some creatures that travel in darkness to protect themselves from predators, and alters growth, behavior, resistance to disease, and reproduction in a variety of living things.

Weaver tells people, "If you want to decrease your carbon footprint, reduce the wattage by half—and I'm not going to charge you anything for that advice."

Outdoor lights should create focal points, says Tony Davis, a designer with Illuminata in Sterling: "I could put a 500-watt floodlight in the front yard, but that doesn't create pockets of interest, like beautiful trees you want to stand out." It will also illuminate the parts of your property you want to hide, such as trash cans.

"Just because you have a pathway to the side of the house doesn't mean you

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■ Lighting an outdoor feature such as a statue can dramatically change a garden's look. Designers recommend illuminating a sculpture from above, as in this picture, rather than from below.

should light it," he says. "Just because you have a tree doesn't mean you should light it. Why illuminate a walkway if you don't want people to walk there?" Things you might want to illuminate, Davis suggests, could include trees with a canopy—crape myrtle or river birch.

Uplighting and downlighting cast light in either direction to accent something such as an architectural feature. Wash lighting creates a wider splash of light over a larger area.

For patios, Davis recommends lighting something beyond it as a backdrop, such as a wooded area or swimming pool. If the house is new and parts of the backyard are empty, he suggests adding some features to make it look like an "outdoor room."

"People buy these big houses and have a barren backyard, then they add on a patio but nothing else. It leaves a stark feeling," he says. "To create another 'room' and make it a little more cozy, some people add fire pits or big chimneys." Then they illuminate the backdrop: "You could have your patio lit by candles and have the backdrop either uplit or wash-lit."

When Bethesda lighting consultant Susana Babic works on a landscape, she considers three things: safety, such as illuminating a path; enhancing the landscape, such as with beautiful trees; and illuminating architectural features or sculptures.

Depending on the tree, you may want to uplight or downlight it, says Davis. You would uplight crape myrtles or cypress trees. But in a wooded area, downlighting with a 50-watt wide bulb from a height of 30 to 35 feet can create interesting shadows and will fall on the ground as a mass of soft light.

Illuminating a sculpture is different, says

Babic: "You cannot illuminate a sculpture from the bottom. You must do it from the top, maybe from a couple of fixtures." She likens the difference to shining a flashlight on someone's face from below versus seeing that person under overhead lights; one will cast eerie shadows while the other will look more natural.

Uplighting and downlighting create different visual effects on a house. With stucco, stone, and brick, uplighting gives a textural effect, Weaver says: "It will bring out every color variation in the stone—gold, blue, rose." Says Davis: "Use down lights when you're trying to re-create the moonlight."

To prevent light pollution (lights that illuminate the sky) and light trespass (lights that shine into your neighbor's yard), Babic uses directional fixtures that limit the spread of the beams or diffusers to filter the glare. And she limits the wattage.

She advises against the kind of fixtures that are like balls of light illuminating uniformly everywhere. Some of the light will be wasted, and it won't be the right amount where you need it.

Don't put a lot more lighting on one side of the house than the other, Weaver says. And if you're lighting a walkway, don't put all the lights on one side—an effect that isn't very interesting visually. Instead, alternate lights on either side. "Stay with the theme of the yard," she adds. If you're going for a more informal, woody look, make things asymmetrical and use odd numbers—grouping lights in threes and fives, for instance.

Incandescent bulbs have been standard for home use, but they're on the way out. Outdoors, Davis tends to use halogen



■ Lighting a house from below, such as in this design by Bethesda's Outdoor Illumination, emphasizes its texture. Says a designer with that firm: "It will bring out every color variation—gold, blue, rose."

bulbs, which are brighter, longer-lasting, and more energy-efficient—though they cost more and can give off a lot of heat. "You get a much better result using less power with halogens," he says. "A 20-watt halogen puts out considerable light."

More efficient are compact fluorescent bulbs, and they don't get nearly as hot as halogens. They're more expensive than incandescent but last 20 times longer. The drawbacks to fluorescents have been their buzzing sound and poor color rendering. Models have improved, but the color rendering of halogens is better.

Newer technology is being converted for use in outdoor lighting, including LED lights, which are used to illuminate electronic clocks, and fiber optics, which transfer energy in computers. LEDs last longer than even fluorescents and have very small fixtures. "You might have them on a deck rail," Weaver says. "Or you can use them on the risers of steps to emit just enough light for one step."

The downside is that LED fixtures are expensive and don't have replaceable parts, so you can't change the wattage; when they burn out, you replace the entire fixture. "But if you're thinking out future maintenance," Weaver says, "it will save you money after a period of time."

Fiber optics are being used especially around pools and streams, says Weaver, because the fibers don't conduct electricity. She recently installed fiber optics near a stream, with cables running along the bank. The cables emit the light, so there are no fixtures. "They're small and easy to hide," she says.

Lighting a stream, landscape, statue, or house can dramatically change a home's look, but many people never consider hiring a lighting designer. "People think of lighting as a luxury, but it isn't really," Davis says. "People spend \$500,000 or \$1 million on a house—it's the biggest investment they make. But at night, people can't see it."

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