

Lighting Up The Night by Cindy VanderTol

When designing your garden spaces, don't forget to incorporate lighting. It is an important aspect of landscaping that will increase safety, showcase plantings and create atmosphere. We can extend the amount of time we spend outdoors working, entertaining, and relaxing, by brightening our backyard retreats.

Safety first!

Security lighting of entranceways, porches and garages should always be a primary concern. Illuminating your walkway edges, patios, and steps directs the flow of traffic and increases safety for visitors to your property. Remember to illuminate a path from above or below eye level to avoid blinding glare.

The addition of a programmable timer can provide extra protection for your home while you are away. It is designed to switch on your security lights at a specific nighttime hour to give your home a "lived-in" look.

Two types of sensors can also be used to increase security. Motion sensors respond when motion is detected in the immediate area, thereby lighting your way safely or providing a deterrent to intruders. Photosensors respond to lowering light levels at dusk to turn your yard lights on, and then shut them off in the daylight hours.

These features help to conserve energy and are cost-efficient additions to your lighting plans.

Feature lighting

Feature lighting focuses on an interesting piece of garden art, a specimen tree or shrub, or a unique garden planting. This type of lighting uses a variety of techniques to create a focal point for viewing the nighttime beauty of your garden from inside or outside your home.

Positioning spotlights to cross-light a tree or statue adds depth and texture to a view. To accent a shrub or tree with an interesting branch structure, try the technique of silhouetting. This approach involves positioning your lights behind and below the plant to create a very dramatic effect by accenting only shape, not colour or texture.

Shadowing can be used to accent a plant that stands in front of a wall or fence. By placing your lights in front of the object, the image displayed on the vertical surface will be accented and increased in size depending on how closely the light is positioned.

A technique called moonlighting can add a soft pleasing effect to your space. Try hiding low voltage lights in two or three branches of a medium or large sized tree. Aim the lights downwards to cast lovely shadows on the ground below, creating an artificial moonlight effect.

Other techniques such as grazing, which accentuates the texture of a stone or brick wall, or spread lighting, which focuses on a low growing bed, will also bring a new perspective to your night garden.

Remember that plants will light differently depending on their leaf structure. For example, ferns look the best when their lacy foliage is lit from below, while a Canna Lily will be more dramatic when its large bold leaves are showcased from above.

Setting the mood

Ambient lighting uses low-voltage lights, candles, chandeliers or torches to create mood.

Nothing beats candlelight for adding a glow and a bit of romance. Vertical structures such as obelisks or pergolas can be draped with decorative lights to add a bit of whimsy.

Don't forget to light up the water features in your yard so they can be enjoyed after the sun sets. Inserting lights in the bottom or the edge of a pond, behind a waterfall, or in the fountain can accentuate the calming effect of the water. Floating candles in a pond, pool, or even a birdbath, add to the feeling of a starry night.

Solar or wired

There is a choice to be made between solar or wired lighting. There is a myriad of systems and kits that are easy to install, and can fit into every budget. Stand-alone solar lighting is a quick alternative to create ambience. Low voltage wired lighting generally provides more illumination for security and safety along walkways and porches.

Tips

Be considerate of your neighbours. Don't position your lights to shine into their homes or yards, or interfere with their lighting schemes. Avoid aiming a spotlight directly into your patio seating area; no one wants to be put "on stage".

Experiment with positioning by using flashlights before installing more permanent fixtures. This highlights how different effects can be achieved, and which landscape features you might choose to highlight or avoid. View your positioning from inside and outside your home. Outdoor lighting visions can be enjoyed while entertaining inside.

Position plain spotlights in your garden so the light source is hidden by plants or rocks. Focus on the effect, not the source.

Be careful with your use of coloured lights, as they may create an artificial atmosphere, and the hues can grow tiresome very quickly.

A variety of lighting sources and techniques adds a sense of artistry. With all the choices available today for beautiful decorative fixtures, it is possible to add a little flair, or enhance your garden style by adding just a few pieces. These days the lighting fixtures themselves are the art in the garden.

Balance

When lighting your outdoor space for effect, you only need to enhance the night sky. Don't flood your yard with light. It is important to balance the amount of illumination throughout the yard to avoid jarring the senses. The saying "less is more" applies to garden lighting, so try to create a small amount of light and shadow within the mystery of the darkness.

Sidebar: Landscape Lighting Techniques

Downlighting: Mounting lights high in trees or on the house to illuminate a wide area. Most useful for security and entertaining.

Silhouetting: Lighting a plant or garden art from below and behind to accent a unique shape.

Shadowing: Lighting a plant from in front onto a vertical surface to accent shape and size.

Moonlighting: Placing low voltage lights in tree branches. Light filters through the branches to produce lovely shadows on the ground below.

Grazing: Positioning a light 15-20cm from a surface and aiming it vertically to highlight texture. Most dramatic in front of a brick or stone wall.

Spread Lighting: Positioning low level shielded fixtures to highlight ground covers, a low growing garden bed, or pathways.

Cross Lighting: Lighting an object from two or more directions to create a sense of depth.

Uplighting: Positioning lights directly under a tree to illuminate the canopy.