

Painting the Night...with Light

By Sean James

“It doesn't take much.” “Things are getting cheaper.” “It's a good investment.” “It's not as difficult as it used to be.” These are phrases you don't hear often anymore but they definitely apply to low-voltage landscape lighting. I'll give you a minute to get over your shock. Now let's paint a mental picture. It's the dead of winter. It's nighttime. There's a blizzard going on outside. You get up and walk to your window — your favourite window that looks out onto your garden. As it happens, your next door neighbour is doing exactly the same thing, but when looking out the window, he/she sees isolation and a tough drive to work the next day. When you look out your window, however, you see beautiful puffy white flakes falling through the soft lights, shining and illuminating your favourite and most sculptural plants.

Perhaps you haven't noticed, but we live where it's dark when you leave for work and it's dark when you come home! This means, after all the cash, blood, sweat and tears you've put into making it beautiful, for several months of the year, you can't enjoy your landscape.

In my opinion, the best investment to be made in your yard is quality, artistic, low-voltage lighting. We've come a long way from the original mayonnaise jars and coffee tin fixtures (seriously, that's how it began!) through the poorly made plastic fixtures of the '90s, up to today's amazing choices. Unfortunately, many folks got the wrong idea about costs from those old crummy fixtures. Also, since they didn't last very long, shoppers were left with bad memories.



◀ These custom-made lights were created out of cored-out limestone so the lights could be hidden while safely lighting the potentially dangerous stairs. PHOTO BY SEAN JAMES.

Take heart! Incredible fixtures are available. Fixtures from such companies as GardenLights, out of the Netherlands, are inexpensive, ingeniously designed and well made. Even lamp technology has improved, from using car headlights, through the bright but incredibly hot halogen lights and now to the low-power and long lasting LEDs.

Increased Safety

Low-voltage lighting is safe to work with. Twelve volts isn't enough to penetrate the skin. It offers safety, lighting pathways and stairs. Security

is increased; soft light creates soft shadows that burglars can't hide in. It adds beauty and curb appeal. Think about it. When selling your home, most folks are going to visit after dark. A warmly lit, welcoming yard is a great selling feature.

In winter, LED lighting is amazing. Watching big snowflakes drift through lights is magical. The way perennials and shrubs hold snow adds a whole new level of sculptural beauty. In summer, lights in a pond make fish appear to swim in slow motion. Even the movement of grasses is enhanced with



▲ Water is one of the most beautiful features to have in a garden and one of the most interesting to light, often casting rippling lights behind or over the water feature. PHOTO BY SEAN JAMES.

uplighting. Illumination can bring out beautiful texture and form in a garden, even hiding the bits you don't want to see, simply by lighting other things, leaving, say, the compost pile in shadows.

Dramatic Effects

There are different lighting effects you can use: “Washing” or having a fixture close to something like a wall or rough tree bark so the texture is brought forward. “Backlighting” creates dramatic silhouettes. Conversely, having a light in front of something, a yucca for instance, creates dramatic shadows on a wall. “Uplighting” into trees makes a cozy ceiling in the garden, while “downlighting” involves lighting paths and gardens with fixtures mounted in trees to create more of a moonlight effect without creating “hotspots” or bright, blinding points of light. If lighting a sculpture or statue, use two lights, one on either side. One will make things look two-dimensional, whereas two create a three-dimensional image.

Fixtures are available in copper (handmade or machined and expensive), powder-coated steel or aluminum, or even stone. Each has its own advantages. It's a good idea to mix and match, based on the desired effect.

I'm still wrestling with the effect lighting might have on nesting or migrating birds. It might be best to turn it off from March to May to give the birds time to settle in.

After all that, whether it's enjoying a drink on the patio in the summer or sitting in the warmth of your home, looking out at the snow in winter, just ease back and enjoy the beauty!

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