

LIGHT UP YOUR LIFE

As the weather warms up, many homeowners like to extend their living space to the great outdoors. Never before have there been so many options for outdoor furniture and accessories including a vast array of lighting choices.

The addition of landscape lighting can help you spend more time outdoors and allows you to continue gardening, swimming, reading or just relaxing into the night. With the wide variety of low voltage and solar powered outdoor lights available, shedding light on your yard doesn't need to use a lot of power. While some homeowners may prefer to hire a landscape lighting contractor, many of today's lighting options are easily installed by the average "do-it-yourselfer."

Adding light to walkways and driveways is not only a great idea for safety, but the beauty of landscape lighting can also increase your home's "curb appeal." Consider different types of lighting for different areas around your home. For example, light a pathway with low voltage fixtures, add a motion-sensor light in your driveway and some subtle "spot" lighting in your gardens or around a pool. The right lighting can bring your property to life at night as well as help you and your guests see where they are going.

Unless you are looking to hire a lighting contractor, it's probably best to start with a low voltage or solar lighting system. These systems are safe enough and easy enough for a homeowner to install without the help of an electrician. Low voltage lights run along a wire from a transformer plugged into an electrical outlet. Most transformers feature a timer so you can control when the lights go on and off and some include a photocell that reads the amount of daylight and automatically turns the lights on and off at dusk and dawn. Most low voltage sets come with about 50 feet of cable and have the option of adding more cable, more lights or a larger transformer.

The advantage of solar powered lighting is its flexibility. With no cables to worry about, you will have more freedom for design creativity and can place a light just about anywhere. On the downside, however, solar lights are usually more expensive and require an average of 8 hours of sunshine to operate properly.

Before rushing out to purchase lighting for your home, it's best to sketch out a plan. Think about how you use the area you wish to light. What path do you take to travel through your yard? Are there areas that are dangerously dark? What type of atmosphere are you looking for? Visit your local garden center or browse through a few gardening magazines for inspiration. Many landscapers and contractors don't charge to help you design a system that meets your needs as long as they do the work. If you are buying one of the boxed sets, most come with layout ideas and grids.

Next, measure the areas you need to light up and put it all down on paper. Be sure to include any trees or bushes you would like to spotlight and the location of the nearest electrical outlets.

Finally, use your imagination and get creative. Outdoor light fixtures come in so many shapes, sizes and colors, your biggest problem may simply be making a choice.

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