

Light Up Their Nights



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Strategies to add professional lighting that delights your clients



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Clients *demand* landscapes that appeal to the eyes. But curb appeal, as vital as it is in growing our landscape businesses, is just one of the benefits that our services can provide to our customers. Increasingly, they're also seeking landscapes that improve the security and safety of their properties, and also services and products that extend the use of their private outdoor areas. In short, they want landscapes that improve the livability of their properties.

Beautiful night lighting is one of the most obvious and often most neglected property enhancement services that fits all four criteria – aesthetics, security, safety and extended use. Don't focus strictly on the aesthetics of our services, in particular in regards to night lighting, but also address how they can make our clients' properties safer and more secure, too.

Let's briefly discuss professional night lighting that, for many landscape companies, can become a tidy and appreciated new source of revenue, especially if they have an employee that has a keen appreciation for good design, appreciates technical challenges and has good customer relation skills.

The process of offering and selling the service (assuming you have the expertise to provide it at a professional level) starts very much like any other valuable landscape service – by finding out what clients and prospects value and want.



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The light colored architecture of this home glows giving it inviting feeling. Notice how the well-defined dormers and soffits give the house a more substantial street presence.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TIM RYAN, LITE4 OUTDOOR LIGHTING.

None of us are clairvoyant. Every client has a different perspective on lighting for their home and property. Before we can make any suggestions (never mind coming up with a plan) we have to find out what clients want. Are they looking for lighting that's purely aesthetic or do they need passive security lighting into the design also? Are they looking for their property to stand out? Or are they going for a more subdued look? Unless we ask these and other simple questions, we can only guess at what's on a client's mind. The more we ask, the more we learn and the better we can serve our customer.

Obviously, the best time to discuss lighting is in the early planning stages of a landscape project. It's much easier to plan for wire access through hardscaping before it's installed rather than having to bore under it after the fact. Visualizing how the landscape will look at night also helps to define certain focal features in the landscape based on how they will be seen at night and what kind of shadow patterns will be cast on walls and surfaces because of them. Most of the time, unfortunately, night lighting is an afterthought, which limits the overall possibilities of what can be done.

Professional night landscape lighting has greatly benefited from the development of LED (short for light-emitting diode) the past three to five years. As these technologies continue to improve, more of our clients are becoming educated on the security and aesthetic benefits of outdoor lighting.

They're also seeking better ways to control it, much like they would the lighting inside of the home. New advances in IR (infrared) and line-based control and decoding, will revolutionize the way our clients control and interact with their outdoor environment after the sun goes down.



From a contractor's perspective, the advent of LED technology in landscape lighting, is a great thing because it eliminates the need for annual bulb re-lamping, which sometimes involves climbing. This doesn't diminish the need for periodic maintenance. Fixture lenses still get dirty, plant material still grows, and fixtures will still need to be relocated as the landscape grows and matures.

It's not difficult to maintain lighting but it's necessary, and most of our clients are generally far too busy with their lives or businesses to want to have to worry about it. They just want it to work and look good.

While maintaining your clients' systems isn't a big moneymaker, it will keep your face and your company's name in front of your clients so that they

remember you when it comes time to add on to their properties or refer you to friends who are looking for the services that your firm provides. Stay in touch with clients via email newsletters and scheduled calendar events for servicing.

No discussion of professional night lighting would be complete with some tried and true design tips.

Keep it smooth

I like things smooth; my ice cream, my lawn and my morning coffee. It drives me crazy when I see a beautiful million-dollar home with great architecture that's covered with horridly sharp beam lines and hot spots.

Here are a couple of principles I employ to keep lighting smooth and particularly eye pleasing.

A) Keep it low: Use ground fixtures such as in-ground well lights so light is starting from lowest point on the wall as possible.

B) Use a wide angle lamp: A 60-degree lamp for general uplighting on most walls. Columns are a different story, and you may want to use a 12- or 24-degree lamp on these.

C) Lens it: What I mean by this is don't throw away those lens packs that the manufacture sends you with fixtures. When I get a commercial well light from VOLT (www.landscapelightingworld.com), they send a pack of lenses with it. I will typically use the small prismatic lens on taller walls because it "smooths out" the beam lines from the lamp and doesn't diminish the output too much. For shorter and lighter-colored walls, I may opt for the frosted lens. In either case I am left with a beautifully smooth casting of lighting against the architecture. The viewer's eyes are drawn to the shadow play of the architectural materials and not the ugly beam lines.

D) Take your lighting to new heights: Nothing makes me slam on my brakes faster and create new traffic patterns behind my van more quickly than when I drive by a client's house and see some path lights that are leaning. Every spring I have to go back and straighten them all because Old Man Winter thought it would be a good joke on me to just slightly heave them out of the ground a bit.

I hate path lights (can't you tell?), that's why, whenever I can, I go up into trees to mount downlights for ground illumination. Not only is the effect more visually pleasing, but you will use fewer fixtures, illuminate a broader area and, also, foil Old Man Winter in the process. About 25 to 30 feet up is generally a good height for downlighting and use lamps with narrower beam spreads if you are wanting to simply "focus in" on a key feature. Here is a good tip: use LED lamps for your downlights. I hate getting the ladder out to replace a halogen bulb that is 30 feet up some tree every year.

E) Nobody likes a wash out: Have you ever driven by a commercial property that

uses the ugly, orange-colored, high-pressure sodium lights? They wash out all semblance of color from a landscape and paint it a putrid copper color. Yuck! The reason this happens is a result of low color temperature and low CRI (color rendering index) of the light.

A good lighting designer will know that a medium to darker earth-toned architecture will be more inviting with a warmer-colored light (around 2,700 Kelvin). For light-colored materials, a crisper tone of light may look better; one that emits something closer to the 3,000k range. Most of the halogen bulbs we use are somewhere between 2,800k and 2,900k, making them a good all-around color. I again mention using diffusion lenses, but I want you to try using a light blue or green lens over your lamp if you are lighting conifers or lots of lush, green plant material. You will notice that the color-shifted light (3,500k to 4,000k) will make the blues and greens of the plant material much more vibrant and eye-catching. Be careful with this if your "green" plant material has a lot of flowers of various colors. It's a trick to be used selectively when you want a particular area in your night composition to shine, so to speak.



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Not every lighting project has to be grand, but it has to be professional. It took experimentation to bring out the full dramatic potential of this modest water feature, but the clients loved the result.

Don't be a lighting wimp. If you get into the lighting biz, most of the time you're going to be called to home with a well-established hardscape and landscaping. Oftentimes we see great lighting opportunities for really wonderful features, but they're locked in by some really nasty hardscaping or are in a very precarious location. Nobody said it was always going to be soft, sandy turf and fluffy mulch beds for placing cable and light fixtures.

Some of my best lighting projects were a result of staring down a tough wiring situation and meeting it head on. My motto is where there is a will, there's a wire chase ... somehow! This may mean boring, coring, drilling, threading, chasing and grinding out your way to a tough spot. I can remember a couple projects where it took a full day just to get cable to a few lights. Whew, talk about exhausting; but in the end it made all the difference between an average job and an incredible job.

Quality Always Matters

If you say you're a landscape lighting professional, then you go with quality materials. There's no ifs, ands or buts about it. So, let me share thoughts when it comes to fixtures and lamps. Bear in mind that these reflect my personal experiences as a landscape lighting professional.

On first entering the industry I installed powder-coated aluminum fixtures,

but became dissatisfied as the powder coating, after a few years, began to flake and the fixtures started looking worn and fragile. I've since moved to brass fixtures. The dark weathered brass blends into the landscape so well, and the durability of brass gives me confidence knowing I won't be getting phone calls about broken fixtures.

The down side of going to brass was that I had to raise my prices to compensate for the extra cost. This made it difficult to compete at first until I realized I had to be selling on quality.

You have to get lamp selection right. After all, the light fixture just needs to be durable, look good and last. But it's really just a bulb holder when you get down to it. The quality of the light bulb or LED is the critical component of lighting. Buy cheap bulbs and you're going to get ugly, uneven lighting.

Here are my top two choices of halogen lamps: the GE constant color lamps give the best color, consistency and life span. As a backup lamp, I go with an Ushio lamp.

In the LED world, I use a couple of different lamps. I use the MR16 lamps from Illumicare (www.illumicaregroup.com) and VOLT (www.landscapelightingworld.com). The color temperature is good, and the CRI is right there, too.

If you are finding it hard to break away from halogen lamps, try mixing in a few LEDs, especially in those hard-to-reach fixtures up in the trees. You will thank me next year when you don't have to climb the tree to change lamps.

Finally, here again are some of my personal thoughts on product availability and price.

Traditionally, landscape lighting professionals have purchased equipment from their local irrigation distributor. It's a system that can work well for some if their distributors are willing to stock all of the lighting products that they daily need in the field. Unfortunately, in some markets this isn't the case.

As I've been providing landscape lighting for many years, it's my passion and the market is increasingly price conscious, I buy my almost all of my equipment from online supplier VOLT Factory Direct Store that, in my opinion, is revolutionizing the business. The product is professional quality, delivery is rapid (usually in two days) and the price allows me to compete at the highest level while still making it financially attractive to customers.

When wanting to place lights in the three bowls of a \$6,000 tiered fountain, grab your drill and don't be timid. If you're going to make yourself remarkable and stand out from the crowd in the lighting game, sometimes you have to put yourself out there a bit. So be confident, grab your hammer drill (and a little quick setting epoxy) and go beyond your comfort zone. You will be amazed what you can do with a little wiring imagination.

It's evident if you've read this far, that I'm talking about "professional" night landscape lighting, lighting that's designed, installed and maintained as more than a landscape services afterthought. How do you gain the expertise to give your clients lighting that delights and provides the beauty along with the security and safety benefits that you promised them?

Great info sources



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Your job as a lighting specialist doesn't end with the design and installation. Like all landscape features, you should contract to maintain the lighting, as well.

A couple of books I would recommend for anybody that is new to lighting include the "Landscape Lighting Resource Manual" by Nate Mullen. This is a good book to help you with the basics of adding a lighting side to your business. It covers sales techniques, basic design and layout as well as some tips and tricks that have been learned over the years to save you time and money. This is a practical guide to getting your feet wet in landscape lighting.

"The Landscape Lighting Book" by Janet Lennox Moyer is another great read, but it is more technical than Mullen's book. This is the one to acquire and study when wanting to delve deeper into lighting design theory and learning how to paint with light. Both books can be found on Amazon.

Also, some light fixture manufacturers offer one and, sometimes, two-day seminars on the basics of landscape lighting. These are generally offered through your local distributor, and are a great way to get introduced to the industry. Check with your distributor.

Finally, check out the Association of Outdoor Lighting Professionals (AOLP), which offers training that leads to certifications in certified low-voltage technician (CLVT) and certified outdoor lighting design (COLD). These certification tests are held annually just prior to the national conference. Visit its website at www.aolponline.org for more information.

Tim Ryan, the author, is the owner/operator of Lite4 Outdoor Lighting, which performs landscaping lighting design, installation, maintenance and repair serves in Indianapolis and central Indiana. Tim has been involved in the professional green industry for more than 20 years.