

Landscaping - I Love the Night Light

As you drive down the street and approach your house at night, what's your first impression? Does it feel inviting? Does it feel safe? Does it invite you in? Outdoor lighting gives your "outdoor décor" a whole new look, while providing beauty and functionality at the same time! The following is a simple, 4-step process to help you with your lighting project:

Step 1: Taking a Closer Look

Have you really looked at your property from the perspective of your lighting needs only? Probably not. Therefore, before you call a lighting specialist, do a little homework yourself.

1. First, both at dusk and when it's completely dark, go outside and walk around. How much light does your property already have (i.e., from street lights, because of neighbor lighting, etc.)? What areas immediately stand out as being "dark and dreary"?
2. Now, pretend you're a visitor and "take a tour." What areas really might benefit from lighting? Is there an object (statue, fountain, or waterfall) or some foliage-covered area that needs to "shine" during nighttime hours? Is there a gate with a latch you need to see? Look for anything and everything—and be critical!
3. Next, pay a visit to your local home improvement store and look at the available options. It's important you do this now so that you can: (a) understand what types of lighting are available; (b) realize the many pricing options; and (c) gather basic specification information (e.g., location of an electrical outlet, length of cables, areas of lighting coverage, etc.). Whether you plan to do the project yourself or not, becoming "informed" is always advised for any project.

Step 2: Knowing Your Options

There are two ways to light the outdoors: with *Downlighting*, *Uplighting*, or a combination of both.

- **Downlighting** illuminates the ground and adds **safety** (by lighting up paths and walkways) and **security** (to highlight anyone walking on your property at night).
- **Uplighting** (or "spotlighting") is aimed upwards or at an angle to create an **aesthetic** focal point.

TIP: When installing uplighting, make sure your lighting specialist is keeping the following in mind when making his/her recommendations: (1) Will the light "blind" someone walking down a path or driving by in a car? (2) Will the light potentially shine directly into your window or (worse yet!) a neighbor's window?

A word about solar-powered lights: Ease of installation is the primary reason most people choose solar lighting. However, there's a tradeoff: solar lighting is not going to be as bright as electrical lighting, and it can be quite a bit more expensive. A general rule for solar lighting is that if you really want it, install it yourself (to help minimize the cost) and use it for effect only.

Step 3: Putting Together a Plan

As you get ready to bring in your lighting specialists for quotes, be prepared to answer questions or provide additional information on the following:

- What areas do you want to light?
- Do you have a budget?
- Are there sufficient outlets to handle your needs? If not, do they install outlets themselves, or require you to independently arrange this with an electrician?
- Have you seen something you like (either in the neighborhood, on TV, etc.)? If so, what did you like about it. Following by example is going to make your lighting specialist's job a lot easier!

Any good lighting specialist is going to need to look at your property twice: once at night (to see where he/she feels you need lighting), and once during the day (for measurements and such).



Step 4: Moving Forward

Your selection of a lighting specialist should be based on the following:

- Ability to understand your needs such as right lighting for your home that is within your budget.
- Thoroughness of the plan; e.g., does it include measurements? Does it include the details about future items (if your budget can't handle those items now)?
- Past work history including references and photos in a portfolio.

With your decision made, it's time for you to simply sit back and wait for your night lights to turn on!

Landscaping - Is That Your Final Answer?

When you interview for a job, what happens? Questions, questions, and more questions. Only, you're the one having to provide the answers. Well, hiring a landscape professional is the exact opposite. You're the interviewer so you get to do all the asking!

Here is a simple list of questions you should ask any potential landscape professional you are considering to hire:

- **Knowledge and Expertise.** How long have they been around? Now, it's ok to talk to someone who is fairly new, but who works for a company with a long and outstanding reputation. Long-time, successful businesses are exceptional starting points for new people breaking into the industry. They teach them first-hand how to do everything at a high level, and have greater attention to client satisfaction. So, in this case, less is not necessarily a "bad" thing!
- **References and Portfolio.** What have they done and for who? Any professional should be able to give you at least 3-5 names and show you numerous samples as they relate to their work. A good landscape professional is going to offer to let you talk and/or visit previous clients and see/hear it for yourself firsthand. If they don't (or won't), then move on to someone else!
- **Typical Project Size.** Do they handle projects of all sizes, from small (under \$500) to large (over \$10,000)? Which do they handle more often?

Larger Jobs. If there's a tendency to do larger jobs, there may be an inclination to push your project into the "large" category when you only want small. However, handling larger projects on average gives them better pricing flexibility (since they buy in bulk, etc.)

Smaller Jobs. Pricing of both materials and labor may be low—quote low. However, you may find that (a) you have to wait to fit into their schedule since they have less people working for them, or (b) the experience level is quite low.

- **Differences in Quotes.** Why is there such a gap in the price quotes? Well, because everyone has a different approach. So, you need to rank these based on several criteria: (1) experience and reputation; (2) your comfort level with the professional; (3) attention to your desired outcome and budget amount; and (4) overall explanation as to how the job is going to get done. Remember: you get what you pay for!
- **Going Forward.** What happens once you select this contractor—i.e., what are the next steps? First, they should give you a tentative start date. Then, they'll ask you for a commitment—in writing—for both the plan itself and the cost. (You will need to make a deposit for the work.) They should also be able to give you a good idea as to how long the project is going to take—including what happens if weather problems creep up, etc.
- **Warranty.** How do they guarantee the work they do? For how long? If you get the chance to talk with other clients, ask them how responsive this contractor was to phone calls about problems. At a minimum, a one-year warranty should be offered on plants, and any major hardscape items (such as brick planter beds or paver stone driveways) should have a reasonable amount of time to allow settling and seasonal changes to occur before saying, "it's a done deal."

In the end, you'll select the right professional for the job by being informed and leaning a little bit on your "gut instinct."



Landscaping - Only In Your Dreamscape

So, are you tired of reading all those magazines or watching those gardening shows where, at the end, you find yourself saying, “oh, that’s the yard of my dreams”? Well, you can have the yard of your dreams by knowing how to ask a professional for what you want.

Here’s a simple formula to get your “dreamscape” created by a professional without getting into **DEBT**:

- **Define.** Decide what it is that you want. This may just be a few key items (such as a pool or fountain or a flower-filled planter bed), or a major overhaul that needs to transform over the course of several years. Sometimes, cutting pictures out of a magazine, or being able to direct the professional to a nearby yard you admire helps both them and you to identify what you want. Use descriptive terms for the feeling you want your yard to have—colorful, warm, friendly, stately, formal. Outline any particular features you’d like to include—e.g., gazing balls, water features, bricks, stones, etc.
- **Educate.** Get the information you need by talking, at length, with any potential landscape professional that you plan to use. He/she should be prepared to “teach” you a little about the project that you’re undertaking. At a minimum, you should be able to get at least one good idea that you did not think of on your own. Plus, you should be able to grasp the magnitude of your project if you plan to do the installation yourself and work just from the plan the professional is creating for you.
- **Budget.** Know how much you want to spend. Everyone has a number in the back of their mind before they start. Be realistic about this number so as to avoid “sticker shock.” It’s very important that you realize that you’re paying for two things: (a) expertise that includes knowing how you can get your dreamscape while sticking within your budget; and (b) time to get the job done quickly and properly the first time around. Put the burden on someone else to keep you within budget and get the job done on time!
- **Time.** If patience is not your virtue, hiring a professional is going to be the best money you’ll ever spend. Imagine what it’s like to leave in the morning with something so-so, and returning home to find that your yard does have potential!

Landscaping on your own can be very hard work—both for your back and your checkbook! Now, wouldn’t you rather be able to simply sit back and say, “it’s better than I every dreamed”!

Landscaping - Where Do I Begin?

Your yard. What to do with it? If you're faced with a dilemma about what to do with your "outdoor décor," it's probably time to call in a professional. While your first thought is going to be cost, don't let it be. Too many times, those of us who have tried to "do it on our own" spent more time and money (and days in bed with sore muscles) would have "saved" by simply hiring a professional. So, unless your budget is zero, review your options for getting it done right the first time.

Now, you have two options: Landscape Plan Only ~or~ Landscape Plan Plus Installation.

Option 1: Landscape Plan Only

The primary purpose of the landscape plan is to facilitate communication between a contractor and the homeowner. Without a plan, mistakes (sometimes costly ones) will happen. Over and above that, a plan ensures that the garden functionality is what you wanted.

To create your plan, you'll hire a landscape designer who becomes your "architect" to create the *green* print (versus *blue* print) for your outdoor décor. Typical plans include a drawing showing the size of everything on your property, and recommended elements (such as plants, hardscape items, paths, pools, etc.). A good plan includes a separate list of every item that's needed, size, and quantity. Plan development prices range from \$400-850 and are based on the type of property, the size, and location.

Pros/Cons. *Option 1* is going to require you to do it yourself. If you're on a budget, this is probably going to be your best choice since installation (as you get with *Option 2*) is quite expensive. However, when doing it yourself, you're going to have to be patient as your "transformation" is going to occur over a series of weeks (probably weekends).

Option 2: Landscape Plan Plus Installation

This includes everything involved with creating the plan (discussed above) but factors in the installation costs (labor primarily).

Pros/Cons. *Option 2* is going to cost more money but it's well worth it if (a) you have little to no time to do the work yourself; (b) are not able to do extensive physical labor; and (c) have no patience and, thus, want your results now. (Watching your yard change from dust to delightful in a mere day or two makes it worth every penny you spend on having someone else do the installation!)

Some Tips

- **Weed out the so-so contractors.** Verify the qualifications and level of professional and business standards. It's perfectly acceptable to ask for references and to see a portfolio of work.
- **Take your time.** Better to take a few weeks or months to do your research properly and get the best project possible, than be spooked into something you will likely regret later. Remember, you're going to be living with that garden project for years; make it a good one.
- **Apples to Apples.** When comparing contractor quotes, ensure they are quoting on the same project requirements (e.g., are the plant materials the same sizes and varieties, the soil/fill of the same quality/quantities).
- **Getting it in Writing.** Regardless of which option you select, always make sure you have a signed agreement that details the work to be done, fees and expenses, schedule of work and payments, standard of work expected, and the warranty. If your landscaping professional won't agree to an agreement, immediately find yourself another contractor!

Regardless of which option you select, be prepared to invest either your *time* (for *Option 1*) or your *money* (for *Option 2*). In either case, the decision to hire a professional won't be the wrong one!



Outdoor Furniture as Outdoor “Décor”

When you think of outdoor furniture, do visions of folding lawn chairs and wood picnic tables come to mind? Well, gone are the days when these are the only types of furniture you can use to create your outdoor décor.

Approach your outdoor furniture decor just as you would when decorating on the inside. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Choose the furniture that works best for the environment in which it will be placed. For example, *wicker* is very durable; however, it is better suited for a screen porch or semi-covered area. If you plan to use your wicker outdoors, look for pieces that have a protective vinyl coating or are constructed of all-weather materials.

Likewise, *wood furniture* (benches, chairs, tables, etc.) with removable cushions is a good fit when the “elements” (such as rain, snow, etc.) must be considered. Remember: time outdoors only improves wood’s weatherworn appearance...as long as it isn’t exposed to moisture for prolonged periods of time. To help it maintain its quality, seal the wood with beeswax furniture polish to extend its life span, or choose a species that is weather resistant.

Wrought iron or aluminum tables and chairs, if properly painted, are very effective for year-round use. Simply add a cushion or two to give them that inviting feeling.

- Select fabrics for your furniture that encourages lounging. Depending on where your furniture is placed—e.g., inside a screen porch, or under a tree—consider adding pillows and throws.
- Think creatively. While a swing may not be appropriate for the inside of your home, it is 100% acceptable (and quite appealing) as furniture in outdoors areas.
- Accept that you can “mix and match.” A wicker rocker and a wooden bench can share the same space when they share a matching or complimentary fabric.
- Experiment with wood accent pieces such as tables, benches, desks, etc.

If weather is a major concern, considering purchasing items that are already “worn in.” (And...no...your grandmother’s 100-year old table does not qualify as “worn in.”) Look for pieces that have previously held a place in the outside world. If you’re not sure, hire an experienced decorator or consult with our antique/flea market storeowner. He or she can point you to items that are classic, yet ideal candidates for outdoor use.

When you’re finally ready to arrange your furniture, envision how you want an area to look, the feeling you want it have, and the manner in which it’s going to be used. Once completed, you’ll be able to easily transition from your indoor haven to your outdoor world...with time to stop and smell the roses along the way!



Outdoor Furniture: Putting Your Best Seat Forward

You've seen the photos in magazines, and you've dreamed about how it would look. But, how much do you really know about outdoor furniture. In a nutshell, here are your choices:

- **Cedar** is a superior choice for furniture because of its beauty, practicality, and durability, plus it's naturally resistant to insect damage and decay.
- **Wicker** is a weaving technique using various materials, both flexible and durable, and tightly woven over a rattan, wood, or metal frame. While strong, its durability and practicality is affected by usage and environment.
- **Cast aluminum** is constructed by pouring molten aluminum into molds and letting it cool. It's lightweight, transports easily, and combines non-corrosiveness with great strength.
- **Wrought Iron** has been the material of choice for many artists over the centuries, resulting in intricate designs on doorways, fences and home furnishings.
- **Teak** is a fine wood with a beautiful pattern, exotic scent, and very strong structural properties. It retains oil and therefore repels water.
- **Pine** is very weather resistant, can last many decades without rotting, and is found mainly in the temperate regions of the Northern hemisphere.

So, How Do You Choose What's Best for You?

There are two main factors to consider: (a) price and (b) appropriateness for your climate. A good decorating or landscaping professional familiar with your region of the country can advise you on the following:

- **Availability in your area.** Typically, local merchants don't carry furniture that isn't appropriate for your climate. So, the role of your decorator or landscape professional is going to be to point you in the direction of those retailers having only items designed for your environmental elements. NOTE: If your professional plans to order furniture from a location outside your area (e.g., Florida), investigate the track record of this furniture in a place where snow and cold weather encompasses a few months of the year. (Last time we looked, the snow levels in Florida were not of monumental portions! So, is buying furniture from there a good idea?)
- **Best Selection for Your Lifestyle.** We all love to look at those 'picture perfect' settings with the nicely decorated table and the spotless BBQ. But, let's be real—that isn't what a real yard looks like. Your decorator needs to evaluate your use of your outdoor living space to ensure your furniture selections are complimentary.

Quite simply, consider this purchase a long-term investment. This will ensure that in the "end," you've made the best decision.

Painting Techniques: Brushing Up on What's Involved

Most of us don't paint on a regular basis. So, when the time arrives for us to begin this process, have the following tips handy. They apply for projects regardless of whether you are the painter, or you have hired a painting professional.

The Basics

Time. Factor in time for prep work. Also, allow approximately 30 to 60 minutes per 100 square feet for actual painting.

Tools

- Use paint rollers for the large areas. A good synthetic roller cover works as well as a lamb's wool roller. Rollers also come in many different types, and naps differ according to use.
- Use brushes for smaller areas. Buy either synthetic or natural bristles (recommended for oil-based paints). Most jobs require a 4" brush for "cutting in," a 2" brush for baseboards and trim, and a 1 1/2" to 2" angled sash brush for windows and smaller trim.
- Use specialized tools for corners, trim, and so on. For tight maneuvering in areas like small bathrooms and closets, consider using a paint pad.

Types of Paint

There are two types of paint: **oil-based** (alkyd-base) and **latex** (water-based).

- *Oil-based* paints are often applied over metal or wood, since they are more resistant to damage.
- *Latex* paints are generally used in areas where there is little need for frequent washing. Clean up with these paints requires only water and is much easier than with oil-based paints, which require a solvent.

For each type, you have your choice of the following:

- **Flat** hides surface imperfections as well as flat paint. Since it cannot be scrubbed clean like other finishes, avoid using in kitchens, bathrooms and high-traffic areas.
- **Satin** resists stains better than flat paint and can endure scrubbing. A good choice for walls in children's bedrooms, family rooms, hallways and stairways.
- **Semi-Gloss** is more stain and wear resistant than satin, and is a good choice for areas that receive lots of hard use (kitchen, bathrooms, kid's rooms, woodwork, etc.).
- **Gloss** has the highest level of stain and wear resistance. However, because of its high sheen, it highlights flaws on surfaces.

To estimate the amount of paint you'll need, use the following calculations:

- *Walls.* Multiply the perimeter of the room by the height to determine the square-foot area of the walls.
- *Ceilings.* Multiply the length by the width. A gallon of base coat covers 350 to 450 square feet.

Most Common Mistakes

The most common painting mistakes include the following:

- Not preparing a clean, sanded, and primed (if needed) surface.
- Applying too much paint to the applicator.
- Using water-logged applicators.
- Not solving dampness problems in the walls or ceilings.
- Not buying enough paint beforehand to avoid color-mismatch problems.



Painting Techniques: Color Your World!

The job of painting is not the physical task itself...but the design step in which we have to decide what our painted area needs to look like, and the best way to achieve the results.

Here's a simple approach that will help you decide how to add the right color(s) to the selected areas (either interior or exterior) of your personal canvas.

Step 1—Feeling

If you had to pick one or two words to describe the feeling or mood for the area you want to paint, what would they be? Soothing? Energetic? High-Tech? Luxurious? Comfortable? One of the easiest ways to identify this feeling is to select an item you already have that conveys this feeling. Typically, a painting or a piece of art is used for this type of approach. It provides visual cues as to the color, texture, pattern, etc. that coincides with the feeling you are trying to achieve.

Step 2—Effect

Long gone are the days of smooth, flat walls. Texture and patterns can be added to both enhance what you have, or hide what you don't want to see! The most common effects today involving the "faux" finish where paint is used to give the impression of something else—e.g., stone, marble, etc. "Faux" painting techniques give you the look of wallpaper (without all the work), and the "permission" to make mistakes. There are lots of painting professionals on the market today who can transform a wall into almost anything you like. So, "think outside the paint can" and choose the effect that suits your needs (and not your artistic ability).

Step 3—Color Selection

With the abundance of colors and special effects, no color is totally "in" or "out." While green was the color for the 90's, and blue is the color for the millennium, the palette is wide open. Yet, to some of us, all those choices may not be a good thing! This is where a decorator or painting professional can be a great asset. He/she can help you select colors that convey the feeling and effect you want.

Step 4—Paint Quality

With paint, you do get what you pay for. Typically, the cheaper the paint, the more work is going to be required—e.g., prep time, coats, etc. Now, this doesn't mean you should buy the most expensive paint. Instead, know the goals for your painting project—i.e., you only have a weekend and it needs to cover in one coat, it needs to be resilient to lots of touching and bumping, etc.

The Results

If you've followed the above, you'll end up with a masterpiece that is sure to please you, and be thoroughly enjoyed by others!

Wallpaper Techniques: It's Not Just "Cut and Paste"

The decision to wallpaper versus paint is a big one. Almost everyone can paint; however, not everyone can wallpaper. Of any of the non-construction improvements you can make to your home, this is probably one where a professional is almost a "must have."

Because of the expanded interest in wall coverings, finding a professional is not a major undertaking. You can use someone as close as the stay-at-home mom down the street who has decorated her entire house, or bring in a top-notch professional through a decorating company.

In either case, you do need to be informed about the process.

The Basics

Before purchasing wall covering, some basic information needs to be gathered about the area to be papered:

- Determine where the rolls will be applied...specifically where the seams will meet.
- Consider if adjustments need to be made so that patterns match.
- Locate the point of mismatch where odd-shaped pieces will need to be cut. An inconspicuous corner is always best.
- Estimate the amount of paper required by using the following calculations:
 4. Multiply the perimeter of the room by the height of the walls to arrive at a total square footage.
 5. Divide this by 30. The average American single roll contains 35 to 36 square feet, but there will be losses due to trim and pattern matching waste. European papers contain 27 to 28 square feet per single roll and are packed in double rolls of 55 to 56 square feet per bolt. Use a figure around 24 for calculating Euro Rolls. As most US manufacturers also import and export, always be certain of roll sizes. Some pattern matching and shrinkage require more rolls (check with your supplier). This new number is your number of rolls if you had no openings.
 6. Subtract 1/2 roll for each normal size door or window opening. This number covers your final needs.

When it's time to finally make a purchase, remember two things:

- **Always purchase pre-pasted.** It saves tremendous time.
- **Buy all the rolls at one time.** This ensures that all the patterns are created in the same run so that they will match.

Most Common Mistakes

The most common wallpapering mistakes include the following:

- Not sanding, cleaning, and sizing the walls before applying the wallpaper.
- Failure to soak the pre-pasted wallpaper long enough.
- Failure to allow the wall covering to cure the proper amount of time after soaking.
- Not positioning the strips of the wallpaper level and plumb.
- Not getting air pockets out when smoothing the covering on the wall.
- Not planning for pattern match-up and extra on top and bottom before cutting each strip.
- Not estimating and ordering enough wallpaper for the job.
- Not overlapping the wallpapers that have a tendency to shrink.

Wallpaper Techniques: The “Ultimate” Wall Décor

Consider wallpaper as the “Rolls Royce” of wall decoration. It offers you the opportunity to add texture, pattern, or accent color to a room and with a tremendous amount of detail. Wallpaper can both create a mood, or used as a “backdrop” to highlight carpets, furniture and accessories.

Getting Started

Keep the following tips in mind, whether this is a “do it yourself” project, or one handled by a professional:

- Collect ideas, wallpaper samples, colors schemes, etc. in anticipation of your project. However, to maintain the uniqueness of your room, use these ideas only as indicators that show what you do/do not like.
- Decide on a budget at the beginning of the project. If funds are limited, decorate your rooms one at a time.
- Purchase the most pronounced items—such as carpet, furniture, and wallpaper--first. Worry about accessories later!
- Buy wallpaper, fabric and floor coverings for their practical as well as decorative effect. Keep in mind kids, pets, lifestyle.

Likewise, you should also keep the following in mind:

- Avoid selecting wall coverings perceived as “trendy” or “faddish.”
- Bypass products because they’re a bargain. This type of project should be viewed as an investment, not a “great buy.”
- Remember that wallpaper adds a tremendous amount of detail. So, you’ll find that you’ll need fewer furnishings.

Patterns

All wallpaper patterns fall into one of four basic styles: geometric, large print, small print and overall print.

- **Geometric patterns** include plaids, stripes and grids.
- **Large Prints** make a room seem smaller and feel more intimate.
- **Overall Prints** allows the human eye to blend the design together, minimizing pattern and emphasizing color.
- **Small Prints** add a touch of pattern to the overall background color, forming a subtle backdrop—ideal for kitchens, bathrooms, and other small spaces.

In addition, all wallpaper is given a *pattern number* and dye-lot or “run” number.

- A pattern number identifies a particular design and color way of a pattern.
- The dye-lot number represents a particular group of rolls that are printed on the same print run. **NEVER BUY ROLLS WITH DIFFERENT RUN NUMBERS!**

Wallpaper Backings

Since there are various types of backings, it might be best to consult with a decorating professional to help guide your selection.

- **Paper backings** are used on paper-backed vinyl, vinyl coated papers, and specialty products.
- **Latex acrylic backings** are used on fabric wall coverings to allow for stability, and improved hanging qualities.
- **Woven fabric backings** are commonly used for heavy traffic areas such as hallways in office buildings, etc.
- **Non-woven fabric backings** are used primarily in commercial installations because of their durability.