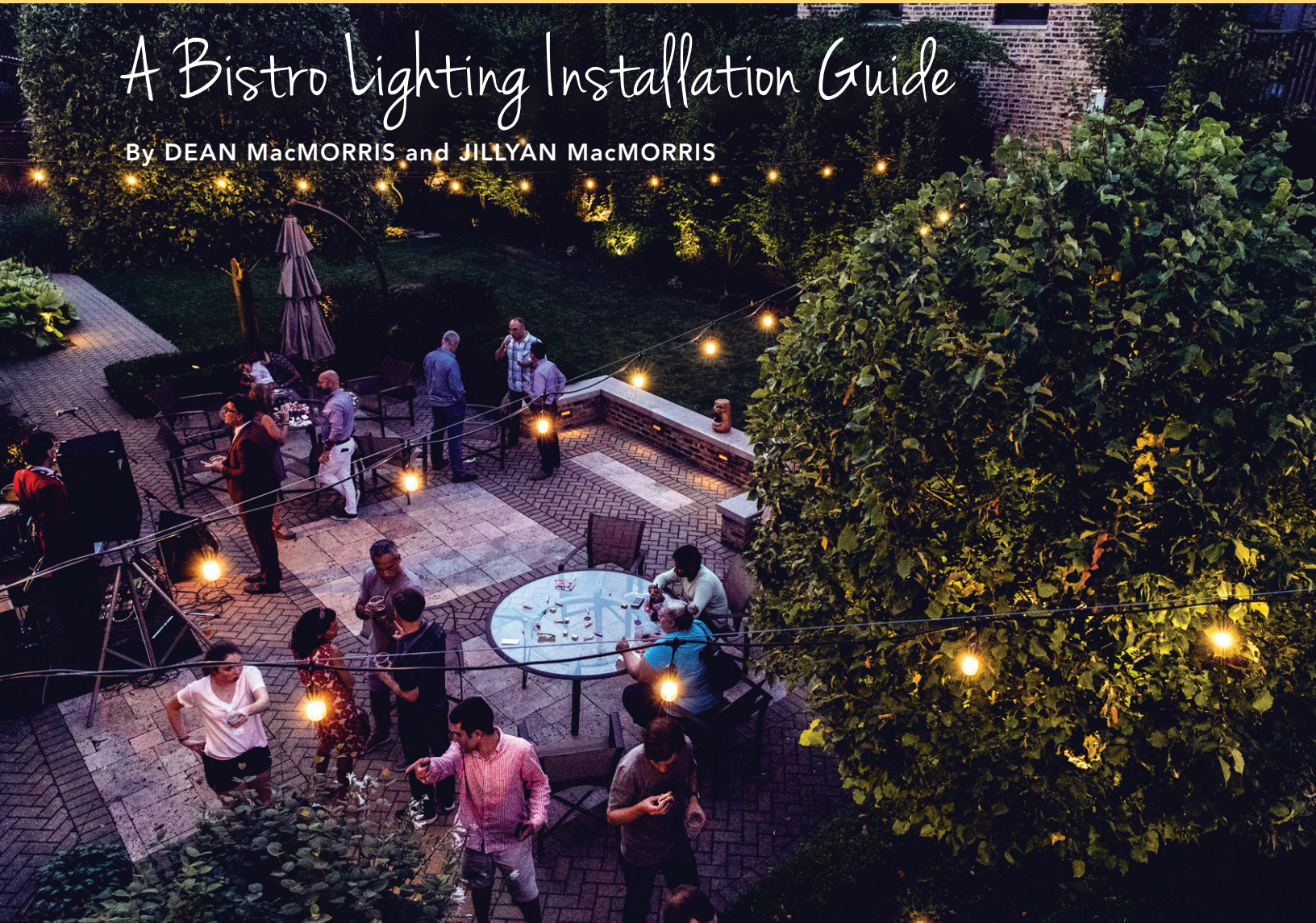


TANGLED?

A Bistro Lighting Installation Guide

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Have you ever caught a glimpse of the opening to the TV series *Parenthood*? The opening theme transports you to a beautifully striking scene. The camera captures several angles of a large, extended family sitting down to dinner on the backyard patio. Children argue, parents laugh. The matriarch and patriarch of the bunch look on, beaming at the life they have made. The lights are what make this setting particularly memorable. Dozens of lights strung over their heads across the patio create a dreamlike glow that is a beauty to behold.

This effect isn't movie magic or special effects, but merely round, bare bulbs threaded across open space to throw a soft ambiance onto the scene. Whether you refer to them as party lights, string lights, festoon lights, or bistro lights, these simple fixtures are quite versatile and fit for an entire spectrum of settings: indoor and outdoor, residential and commercial, and casual

and formal use, for example. You may see them suspended over a romantic Italian bistro, across a clearing in a wooded yard, above a window in a college dorm, or even under the rafters of a farmhouse porch. The tranquil mood they produce fits nearly any setting.

Yet too often, strands of bistro lights are installed haphazardly, or in such an improper way that they serve as a distraction, rather than a complement, to the space. Improper mounting can easily cause damage to healthy trees or leakage when attached to a house or other building. Other potential damage, safety concerns, and ornamental considerations are often overlooked. The manifold attempts to take advantage of bistro lights speak to their aesthetic, as they have the power to transform the atmosphere of nearly any living space. However, a few key considerations must be made before moving forward with your next bistro lighting endeavor.

1

START BY EVALUATING THE SIZE AND SHAPE OF YOUR SPACE

Your layout must be appropriate so your lighting does not overwhelm nor insufficiently illuminate the area. Your space is unique, and so is your design. Do you hope to string up the lights under a pergola, gazebo, porch, or arbor? Would you like to suspend them over open space such as a patio, deck, outdoor seating area, or lawn? What is the desired effect: dim, romantic ambiance, or day-like illumination for your outdoor living space? Any combination is possible, but you must begin with what you have and what you want.



2

CONSIDER OTHER AESTHETIC FACTORS

Generally speaking, manufacturers choose to space bulbs with lower wattage/lumens on smaller-gauge wire approximately 12 inches apart; for higher-wattage/lumens bulbs, they tend to be spaced about 24 inches apart on heavier-duty wire. As you research the proper choice of lights, take into account the space you are working with to determine what best meets your needs. For instance, large, widespread bulbs in a relatively compact space may not achieve your desired effect, while those same strands would be strategic for a broad area with high mounting points.





3 KEEP THE PRACTICAL/ SAFETY IMPLICATIONS IN MIND

Before you pull out your hooks and eye bolts, ask yourself: Do you want to make sure the lights are outside the reach of children? You know how mischievous they can be. Do you plan to use the lights outdoors year-round? Does your space encounter a lot of wind? Make sure to invest wisely in heavy-duty, weatherproof materials. Do you have moving parts to avoid? Gates, doors, outdoor fans, and heaters should be factored into strand placement. What kind of controls would you like to have? You can use a switch, time clock, photo cell, or even Wi-Fi to control them remotely. Before you dive into preparations, make sure to call in to your local municipality to check on the codes for your outdoor lighting project.

4 UNDERSTAND THE PATTERN AND LAYOUT OF YOUR BULBS

Beyond the spacing and size of the bulbs on a particular strand, general layout is a key point in any successful bistro lighting project. You are not working with twinkle lights or independent Edison bulbs; they are both, and they are neither. They can be spread wide apart or gathered close together, depending on your desired brightness and look. As you determine your ideal pattern, remember to take into account the length of strand you will have to use as well as realistic mounting points. Where do you plan to anchor the strands? Are there trees, buildings, posts, or cables available for setting hooks or other mounting hardware? Often, your mounting options will affect the overall design.

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5

CREATE A BUDGET FOR YOUR PROJECT, AND PLAN ACCORDINGLY

Have you ever heard the parable of the man who began to build a tower without first counting the cost? He laid the foundation and could not complete the work because he did not plan out the time or money it would take to finish. Many common, preventable issues can be dealt with ahead of time, so you can avoid laying the foundation without finishing your tower.

6

AVOID POWER PROBLEMS

As a general principle, do not plug your lights into an extension cord. If you do not have a ground-fault interceptor (GFI) outlet within range, it may be worth the investment to have your local electrician come out and run electricity to the proper location. That GFI will provide you convenient access as well as a safety guard from power surges or interceptions that will damage your lights and could potentially cause electrocution. It also reduces danger when conditions are wet or the strands are installed near a water feature.



"Many common, preventable issues can be dealt with ahead of time."



7 KNOW YOUR LIGHTING'S WATTAGE AND DIMMABILITY

Another common problem has to do with wattage and dimmability. At present, 110-volt LED bistro lights are not available in dimmable form. Incandescent bistro bulbs typically use 15 watts apiece, while LEDs use two watts each. If you would like to adjust the brightness of your bistro lights, incandescent bulbs are your only option. So before purchasing lights, decide on the lighting capabilities you require and plan for the accompanying power draw.

8

DETERMINE WHERE YOU WILL MOUNT YOUR LIGHT STRANDS AND HOW FAR THEY WILL RUN

As alluded to above, the length of light strands and realistic mounting points can make or break your vision for your bistro lighting project. Continuous strands of lights simplify the complication of power access, and Costco distributes strings of bistro lights up to 48 feet long, which are an excellent LED option. Also, check with the manufacturer to determine the maximum span for the strands you select. Generally, the larger the gauge of cable, the heavier-duty the strings; the heavier the strings, the further you can run them. If your situation demands that you run them farther than their designed capabilities, consider using aircraft cable. Wind and other weather will inevitably wear on your hardware, so aircraft cable is a great source of insurance. If optimal mounting locations are not available, consider strategically-installed posts. You can attach multiple strands to a post set subtly off to the side. A post's size and material may depend on its location, the effects of frost on the material, mounting height, and number and length of bistro strands. Posts also help in sheltering the joining of strands from the weather. If you do not include a post in your design, make sure to use a box or cavity to hide those junctures from wind and rain.



If you're currently thinking, "This is a way bigger undertaking than I had hoped," do not fear. You can answer all of these questions relatively easily when you focus on your specific project. And if you do not want to control your lights with a remote device or have a post installed, you do not have to. Installing bistro lights is as complex or as simple as you make it. I encourage you to take a pen or highlighter to this article to organize your thoughts and build a plan. Or maybe you know someone who has been talking about it forever, who you can share this resource with. You will be on your way in minutes. My family calls them "Parenthood lights." What will yours call them when they enliven your outdoor living area?

"Installing bistro lights is as complex or as simple as you make it."



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Dean MacMorris is the President and co-owner Night Light, Inc., a full service design, install and maintenance site and landscape illumination company. Night Light, Inc. shows those who appreciate the difference how to transform their landscapes into a soft ambiance of understated elegance in the evening hours with quality landscape illumination.

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For those who appreciate the difference...



At Night Light everything we do we believe in challenging the status quo. We believe in thinking differently. The way that we challenge the status quo is by providing products and services that are the most efficient, well designed, simple, longest lasting and tailored to the specific needs, values and budgets of our clients. We just happen to provide design-build landscape illumination for those who appreciate the difference.



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