

Focus: Hardscape Lighting

low-voltage systems.”

The more expensive line-voltage systems are also seeing an increase in popularity. More and more landscape designers, architects and contractors are looking to add line-voltage systems to large projects at the front end. In the 1980s and early 1990s, lighting was often an afterthought (or not thought of at all).

Beiser says landscape architects and design/build companies are more educated today about landscape lighting than they were 10 years ago. Many professionals now understand that it's financially responsible and more efficient, from a construction standpoint, to offer clients lighting packages during the landscape planning process. “In 10 years, the recognition of the importance of planning for landscape lighting has

come a long way,” he says. “The highly professional landscape companies recognize the need to plan for lighting systems and their power requirements at the front of the project. This also helps the homeowner get the most from their landscape budget.”



Night Light's aim is to “enlighten” consumers as well as industry professionals by offering educational presenta-

tions to landscape contractors. The company's principals, Beiser and Dean MacMorris, have conducted workshops and seminars at The Morton Arboretum in Lisle and the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe.

As with any landscape or outdoor trend, the popularity of landscape lighting stems from an educated customer. Call it the HGTV and Martha Stewart syndrome. “Clients today are so much more sophisticated,” Beiser says. “Twenty years ago, if you talked to a client about lighting, they would have just said, ‘That’s interesting.’ Today, many clients have already thought about the different types of lighting before we even suggest the idea. They understand uplighting and they have seen various fixtures or configurations in magazines, on television and in neighbor’s yards.”

Whether it's low-voltage or line-voltage, it seems like landscape contractors will be lighting the way for years to come. ✂



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*NightLight Leads the Way in
Landscape Illumination*

Lighting the Way —

Landscape lighting is a bright spot in the industry

by Michelle Byrne Walsh

The green industry is as much a slave to “fashion” as any other. Now, water gardening is very stylish, as is perennial gardening, Japanese gardens, and Old World-looking pavers and retaining walls. Another trend (but not a fad) is landscape lighting. Since the early 1990s, lighting projects and sales have increased regularly. Professionally designed and installed landscape lighting is a “beacon” on the landscape horizon, and it seems to be getting brighter and brighter.

This is a trend seen across the country. According to an article in the April 2002 issue of *Lawn and Landscape* magazine, “A recent *Lawn and Landscape* online poll suggested that most companies that offer lighting services find it a growing part of their business. Sixty-eight percent of respondents said the profit center is increasing, while 32 percent said they expect the service to remain steady. Another 26 percent [of respondents who did not offer lighting] will consider adding the service this year.”

Landscape lighting, on average, costs about 15 percent of the total landscape bill. So for example, a \$10,000 landscape might require a \$1,500 lighting scheme. Likewise, a \$100,000 project could encompass a lighting system totaling \$15,000.

Line voltage versus low voltage

There are two distinct kinds of landscape lighting systems: low voltage and line voltage. The low-voltage systems usually use 12 to 15 volts and require the use of a transformer, which reduces a building’s electricity from 120 volts to about 12 volts. The wires that power low-voltage systems are usually buried without the protection of conduit or PVC piping — similar to TV cable. Many of the do-it-yourself kits sold at home improvement and hardware stores are inexpensive low-voltage systems. Landscape contractors can purchase high quality, commercial-grade fixtures and transformers from wholesale suppliers. Typically, it is the low-voltage systems that landscape contractors offer as an add-on service.

Line-voltage systems, on the other hand, are directly connected to a building’s 120-volt main electrical system, similar to an interior ceiling lamp. The underground wires of a line-voltage sys-

tem are protected by heavy-gauge galvanized steel or PVC conduit, and can cover longer distances than similar low-voltage configurations. They can also handle brighter lights, such as those designed to light public areas. Line-voltage systems must adhere to local, state and federal electrical codes and can only be installed by a licensed electrician.

Times and lighting have changed

Ten years ago, many landscape lighting professionals argued that line-voltage lighting was the preferred way to achieve high quality systems. Today, low-voltage lighting is now professional grade and is the fastest growing segment of the lighting industry.

Lighting contractors have found that using a combination of low voltage and line voltage can be useful. Mitchell Beiser, president of Night Light, Inc., Lombard, says, “In the past few years, we have found the need to be able to put together a lighting system for clients’ needs that might be low voltage, might be line voltage, or might be a combination. In the past, we often just installed one system or the other. Now we find it beneficial to look at the situation and to offer a system, or combination of systems, that is appropriate.”

Night Light also recently began offering clients

annual maintenance contracts on their company-installed lighting systems. “Anything outside, no matter how fine or well made, needs maintenance, especially in a growing environment like the landscape. We have a program we call PMP, for Preventive Maintenance Program. Every spring or late winter, we go out and do preventive maintenance, such as inspecting and cleaning — whatever it takes to warranty that system for another year. Ninety percent of our clients are in our maintenance program,” Beiser says.

These preventive maintenance efforts greatly extend the life of a low-voltage system, he says.

The quality and selection of low-voltage fixtures and transformers have improved dramatically in recent years, which has further fueled their popularity. “The changes in the quality of the fixtures have been remarkable,” says Ken Baxter, outdoor lighting specialist at Phoenix Irrigation Supply, Inc., Wheeling, a wholesale supply company. He notes that copper and brass fixtures are now available in a multitude of styles. Only a few years ago, designers were mostly limited to aluminum fixtures. The newer fixtures also have components that make them easier to install and maintain.

Baxter says 99 percent of the landscape lighting sales at Phoenix Irrigation Supply are for the low-voltage systems and components. “The quality of product has improved significantly in the last 10 years, specifically in terms of styles and durability.”

Beiser agrees. “We have put together a



per fixtures and stainless steel transformers have greatly improved the durability of low-voltage systems.

The increase in low-voltage lighting products and quality is mainly due to competition among manufacturers to offer

the best product, Baxter says. “We carry five lines of lighting, and there are other lines available through other suppliers in the area. So there is quite a large selection available to the contractor.”

Learning to light

As the quality and availability of low-voltage lighting has increased, more landscape contractors are offering it to clients. “More landscape contractors are installing lighting, or have become aware of it as an additional service to be offered to increase their sales,” Baxter says. “So our client base has increased considerably.”

He adds that Phoenix Irrigation Supply’s lighting seminars are well attended. “Design/build landscape contractors and designers want to learn more about landscape lighting. Today, more landscape contractors are installing lighting in-house. These are contractors that offer landscaping, hardscaping, and now, low-voltage lighting.”

Another change since the 1990s — Chicago area municipalities are writing rules and regulations concerning landscape lighting. Beiser says, “Now, most villages follow national electric codes as a base. But some villages, like Lake Forest and Highland Park, have adopted guidelines that a contractor must follow beyond the national electrical codes. Some towns require permits to install



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