

# Whose Home is This? How Outdoor Lighting Can Change Your Home

Forever..... *By Josh Mason*

## LIGHT HOUSE



L A N D S C A P E L I G H T I N G

*I*f you have ever built your own home, you know that you spend endless hours making product selections. You debate and discuss color schemes, carpet piling, countertops, siding, pavers, tile floors, landscaping materials, wiring schemes, interior light fixtures- the list goes on. You may have paid an architect or designer to help you with these decisions. You may even have at least one argument with your spouse during these discussions- my wife and I once argued about the placement of an electrical outlet in the master bedroom of the home we were building (I lost, and she was right).

Finally, after months of agonizing over these decisions and watching closely as products are delivered and installed, you move in. The first evening you are in your new home, you walk outside and one glaring omission smacks you in the face- you say to yourself "I didn't realize how dark it is here at night- I can barely see my house!"

Without adequate lighting, all those major details and products that you selected cannot be seen or appreciated at all.

When planning for new construction, most people fail to recognize that it is dark for 11 hours a night on average. Why do we miss this obvious fact? We are asleep for most of this time, and the darkness doesn't really matter when we aren't awake to notice it. When you are asleep, a dark front entry just isn't important.

Until you reach an occasion when the dark portions of your yard are important: the first evening party, the first time you come home from work in the winter and it is so dark you can't see to unload the car, or the first time you trip while taking out the trash. Darkness also invites crime- many criminals say that they hide in areas where darkness provides them security. Most homes include carriage light fixtures near the garage, side and rear

entries, and around the front door, but often we forget to turn these fixtures on every night. Many homes also include the high voltage flood lights on the corners, but the light is so bright and intense that the obtrusiveness of the light often takes away from the benefit, especially if you are trying to enjoy an intimate evening outside with friends. Homeowners often feel that their homes are deficient in the area of outdoor lighting, but aren't sure how to correct the problem by themselves.

One way to provide the lighting you desire is to add low-voltage lighting. On the surface, low-voltage lighting seems like a simple installation and addition. There are



really only 5 basic components to a low-voltage system: the fixtures, a step-down transformer, wire, bulbs, and some sort of a control. Many of the do-it-yourself kits offered at the big box stores have directions that seem too easy. Step 1: put the lights in the ground. Step 2: run wire. Step 3: plug wire into the transformer. Sounds easy enough, right? Unfortunately, most homeowners find that this installation yields unsatisfactory results. The lights often look dim and yellow especially the farther away from the transformer they are placed. The awful truth is that there really is more to low-voltage lighting than the do-it-yourself kits would have you believe, and the real answer for a professional-looking job is to hire a lighting professional.

### What is a lighting professional?

I recently had a family member who was experiencing problems with his heart. He first went to his family doctor, who then referred him onto a cardiologist for treatment. Both the GP and the cardiologist went to medical school, but only the cardiologist went on to specialize in problems associated with the heart. The same is true with low-voltage lighting: there are companies that specialize in lighting, and then there are a large number of companies that provide low-voltage lighting to their customers as a service. So what differentiates a "professional lighting company" from a company that provides lighting as a service? Experience is usually the single greatest differentiator, but there are others.



**Questions to ask your potential lighting contractor:**

- What experience do you have with low-voltage lighting? There are a number of electricians and landscapers who will offer to do low-voltage if you ask, but it isn't their specialty. Professionals understand the best way to light the architecture of your home, and then incorporate the landscape lighting into the design. The more experience, the better overall project you will get when your lighting is installed.



- Will you provide an evening demonstration? Many companies prefer to draw lighting designs on plan, but that doesn't give you the opportunity to see how the effects they present will actually look on your property.

- What type of fixtures do you use? The brand or make is really less important than the material of construction. The best lights are constructed of solid brass, copper, or bronze, and can be very competitive in price to fixtures made of aluminum and plastic. Lighting professionals will understand the difference and suggest that you only use solid metal fixtures. Also, lighting professionals will typically worry less about the look of a fixture than the result of the effect.

- What type of warranty do you offer? People who offer lighting on the side will typically only warranty products the length of the manufacturer's warranty, and offer a short 1 or 2 year warranty on labor. Professionals understand why systems fail and safeguard against failure from installation, which typically extends longer warranty periods to the homeowner.

Professionally designed and installed low-voltage lighting will make you appreciate your home all over again. As an



installer, I get to see the transformation first-hand. I installed a project once for a customer, and when I called to check up a week later, the customer said that they didn't even realize how good the dental molding along the roof looked until the lighting made it stand out at night. A number of my customers ask me to take photographs of their homes at night so they can have them framed, and I have had a few customers use their photo as a way to list and sell their homes when the time came to move. Ultimately, a professionally designed lighting system, whether installed before or after you take residence in your home, will make sure that you get a chance to see all the aspects of your home that you love, both day and night.



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