

# LAWN & LANDSCAPE INDUSTRY

## Brightening those long winter nights

**Landscape lights can bring happiness to homeowners—but, more importantly, they can also brighten up your profits.**

by Ron Hall  
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■ Crisp, dry weather and fewer hours of daylight make autumn a good time—perhaps the best time—for landscape pros to sell landscape lighting.

Some of the reasons are obvious, like being able to do on-site demonstrations earlier each evening. But the biggest reason is that professionally installed outdoor lighting allows homeowners to enjoy their landscapes even as the long nights of winter approach, and probably even more so. After all, most working couples don't return home from their jobs until late afternoon or early evening. In late fall or winter, it's dark by then.

The proliferation of high-quality lighting products has, in fact, made it easier for landscape pros to enter this market. That's because many of these products are low voltage rather than the standard 120-volt.

These low-voltage (12-volt just like the lights on your auto) systems:

- require no special training to work with;
- are safe to install and to maintain;
- offer surprising design flexibility;
- are energy efficient.

There are four main components of a low-voltage system:

**1) A transformer** that's plugged into a standard 120-volt electrical outlet and converts it to 12 volts. The higher the wattage of the transformer, the more



**Stunning light displays complement beautiful landscape designs, and allow customers to enjoy the view well after sundown.**

*Photo courtesy Rudd Lighting*

lamps it will illuminate.

**2) Cable** that transmits electricity from the transformer to lamps housed in fixtures.

**3) Light fixtures** suitable for every landscape setting including pools and ponds. Fixtures come in an incredible array of designs, colors and finishes. (Most experienced installers offer just a few popular fixtures. Otherwise clients become confused, they say.)

**4) Lamps** to supply illumination. Lamps come in different wattages.

Although illuminating a landscape requires little special training, it does call for an eye for design, and a willingness to experiment. It also usually requires a plan. Before installing lights, it's advisable to sketch (ordinary graph paper is fine) the

property, showing the locations of buildings and any distinctive trees, plant material and other features that the client may want to light.

Here are some other tips for marketing and selling landscape lighting:

- Provide a **master lighting plan** in conjunction with, or in addition to, any landscape designs that you provide.
- Review your customer files and **target customers** you feel have a need for lighting. Set up **demonstrations** for them.
- Develop colorful door hangers, stuffers or even mailers for homes in the affluent neighborhoods in your market area. Make this **promotional material** visual and exciting. Words don't sell landscape

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## Demonstrations 'light up' sales

■ Nothing works better than on-site demonstrations for selling landscape lighting.

Just before dusk, Robert Lyons Jr. loads his compact car with a case containing a 500-watt transformer, about 100 feet of electrical cable, and outdoor lighting fixtures.

Bob Jr. and his father operate Lite-Scapes, Inc., an eight-year-old outdoor lighting company in Nashville, Tenn. The elder Lyons spent many years with G.E. Lighting prior to starting the company.

This particular mid-summer evening in Nashville is surprisingly cool as Bob Jr. drives through Belle Meade, a suburb of elegant but older homes about 20 minutes southwest of downtown Nashville.

He's planned three house calls. Two of the stops are to reposition lights installed several weeks before; to make sure that clients are pleased. They are.

"Generally, I believe that less is better when it comes to lights," says Lyons. "There's always a point where you can overdo lighting. My goal is to find the balance."

But his main reason for visiting this neighborhood is to give a demonstration that he's modestly confident will result in a sale.

He's calling on a couple in their mid-40s. Their ranch-style home sits on a small hill above a dark, quiet street. They're preparing an outdoor party later in the summer for about 90 guests. They want it to be special, and they're confident Bob's lighting expertise can help.

The woman is justifiably proud of a newly-installed flower garden and its rock-bordered pool. The pool, fed by a small waterfall, is about 150 sq. ft. It contains three sizable goldfish that swim lazily through water plants. She wants Bob to light her pool and its adjacent garden. She also wants uplighting on several larger trees behind the garden.

The western sky turns a deeper purple as Bob retrieves his case of fixtures from the trunk of his car. He plugs the transformer into an electrical outlet on the outside of the house near the garden. He uncoils a length of cable which he attaches to fixtures. Bob prefers copper fixtures because they won't corrode. Also, their brown color blends nicely into most landscapes, even during the day.

"Customers don't want to see the source of the light, they want to see the light itself and how it beautifies their homes and their landscapes," says Bob.

Responding to suggestions from the woman, Bob steps one, then another, of the fixtures around the garden. He uses a path light by the garden walkway, a pond light to illuminate the water plants and the small waterfall of her pool, and a wall light to scatter light through foliage and create intricate patterns on the fence bordering the garden. The fixtures contain halogen lamps and throw off a surprising amount of soft, white light, so when he uplights trees behind the home their branches and leaves come alive.

After almost an hour of experimentation, the woman seems to be pleased with the effect in her garden and trees. Bob packs away his demonstration equipment and says he'll return within a day or two with an itemized proposal.

Ray Szwec agrees that an on-site demonstration is a powerful selling tool. He and his partner Ken Nicholas operate Nite-Vision in Cleveland, Ohio. And, like Lyon, either Szwec or Nicholas (or sometimes both) arrives for demos just before sundown to walk the property, assess its main features and, just as importantly, gauge the prospect's desires.

But they also want mobility. Instead of a transformer, they use a rechargeable, 12-volt, dry-cell battery. They also, typically, demonstrate with just a fixture or two, using a 10-foot cord with clips to attach fixtures to the battery which they carry with them. This allows them to carry a light from location to location on the property and light up individual home or landscape features.

"A lot of our designing is done in conversation with the homeowner," says Szwec. "Before long, the customer is pointing me to different areas. Within about an hour, or maybe an hour and 15 minutes, we've got the whole layout done."

Szwec says not every sale necessarily results from a demonstration though. "Maybe you've already done several jobs in a development. A homeowner there might point to a neighbor's home, one that we've installed lights at, and say, 'I would like my property to look as beautiful as that.'"

—R.H.

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lighting, emotion does.

- Write an article about landscape lighting for the local newspaper.
- Put up an eye-catching job-site sign when installing a project.



Robert Lyons, Jr. prefers non-corrosive copper fixtures.



Szwec (left) and Nicholas: on-the-spot designing with customers.

- Donate and install a lighting project for a local church or for an important memorial or landmark.
- Put together a colorful portfolio to use in presentations to garden clubs, or at regional garden shows.
- Invite prospects to hold and touch fixtures that you offer. You want customers to understand the difference between the quality of professional compared to low-end, do-it-yourself kits.
- Be flexible. If a customer balks because of cost, devise a schedule to light a client's property in sections.
- Consider offering a temporary lighting service, say for special occasions like parties or wedding receptions.

The growth of landscape lighting, and particularly low voltage lighting, looks strong for the next five years or so. Drive into any nice neighborhood and see how many properties are still in the dark.