

# SHINE ON

**Stop stumbling about in the dark — evenings outdoors should twinkle and glow. Ann-Marie Powell on how to light and scent your night garden. Pictures by Gavan Goulder**

**T**hank God summer has finally arrived, and with it long, balmy days that stretch into the evening. In June, July and August, the garden is probably the most used room in the house; the TV is off, and the barbecue wheeled out. But, once outside, most of us still find those heavenly evenings marred by mild discomfort: we fumble around in half-darkness, blindly tripping over each other in the gloom of an open back door. It shouldn't be so. Why is it that when we do use light in the garden at all, it is generally in the form of one on-high security beam reminiscent of the searchlights of a helicopter? Injecting atmosphere into your evening garden need not give you a nervous breakdown, or cost you a fortune. Go with what you can afford, but choose now; and let there be decent night-light this summer.

## High fidelity

If you've got money to burn and don't mind digging up your flowerbeds, then install a mains voltage system. You'll need an electrician fully equipped with armoured cable (to be buried deep below ground). This kind of system, though dramatic, is often overkill in all but the biggest of gardens. A do-it-yourself kit will be adequate for most needs: it means you have a dedicated power source for your outdoor lights (instead of an extension lead to the living room), but no need for structural work. Remember to go for a quality kit, have reasonably high-wattage bulbs and a powerful transformer. Make sure your power source and transformer are kept in a dry place, choose your lights' positions carefully, then simply plug them in (if you are at all unsure, get an electrician to install the system).

Lights run from a transformer are

still powerful enough to pick out areas that are not often noticed in daylight: hard landscaping can become sculptural, for example, while textures and tones of brickwork can be highlighted, pools can glow with underwater lights to suggest hidden depths, and plants can be uplit or downlit to emphasise their form. Use a number of circuits (independent strings of light fittings, each with their own power supply), so different lights can be flicked on and off at your whim.

If cables running the length and breadth of your garden sounds like a recipe for disaster (a friend of mine is constantly cutting through his with a fork), then solar-powered lights might be more to your liking. These are no longer the weak, plastic blobs that crept along paths and up steps, glowing rather pathetically because of the unreliability of Britain's sunshine hours. Demand has led to a revolution in their design, and solar-powered lights now tend to use a far more efficient system that absorbs sunlight, stores it up, and then powers the units at dusk when internal sensors switch on the lamp automatically. Floating coloured lights that glide over water in shades of lime, amber and red are also now available, as are silicone balls, which are charged at a power point indoors for four hours, making them completely independent outdoors: just squeeze, then place to glimmer seductively among your grasses.

## Au naturel

Call me old-fashioned, but it's naturally generated light that really creates atmosphere — candles or oil in the form of lamps, lanterns, flares or night-lights. The naked flame has a phenomenal movement that cannot be replicated by a bulb. Flickering



**Clockwise from top: Nothing beats candle light; rope lights, £39.90, from Not Just Lamps, 020-7405 0042; rope lights with flower; Ann-Marie Powell juggles with a Bubble Lamp, £39.95, from Mathmos, 020-7549 2700 (behind her, a large Glowball, for interior use, £269, from The Conran Shop, 020-7589 7401, and 'Parties' lights, £20 each, from Habitat, 0845 601 0740); tea lights as floating candles; Bubble Lamp, as before**

candles cast random shadows, which flatter the faces around it. Best of all, you don't need to lay any cables, and the scheme can be as temporary or as permanent as you want it to be. Place impromptu jam jars with a nightlight in each into the corners of risers on steps, along strong architectural lines in paving, on walls, or around a pool to create twinkling splashes of light. Floating candles gliding across the surface of a pond are the ultimate in cheap chic.

On still nights, candle chandeliers can be hung from pergolas, arbours or gazebos, and seating areas surrounded with flames by simply pushing garden flares into patio pots (be careful to ensure that dripping wax doesn't damage your plants). Another trick





for still nights is to fill paper bags with sand and a single night light, then use them up front paths or along drives to welcome guests. It's always a winner.

Of course, you need not choose between electric light and candle-light; they can (and should) be mixed. A well-hidden electric light fitting, cleverly positioned near candles, can create the illusion that the candles are doing all the work, while the power of the bulb is disguised.

### Light fantastic

Essentially, positioning your lighting depends on what kind of garden you have. In a small courtyard, whether you are in the garden or viewing it from inside, the light will be enjoyed at close proximity. The lighting

scheme of a larger space should be treated very differently.

If entertaining, you may wish to light up routes through the garden, as an aid to your guests. Discovering a hidden, but well-lit nook in a garden can be a real joy — and you can use a different area from the one you enjoy in the day just by lighting it in a particular way.

This is, however, not a licence to go wild, or you'll end up with the floodlit-football-pitch effect. With lighting, perhaps more than in any other aspect of garden design, less is more. In fact, sometimes what is not lit is as important as what is. Abstract qualities such as shadow, focus and silhouetting are equally essential elements, and these effects always

look better if the lighting is not overdone, misdirected or spilling from one area to another.

Remember also that too much light can become a pollutant, causing a nuisance not only to you, but also to your neighbours and the wildlife.



## IN THE REALM OF THE SCENTED

Some plants are true night owls, saving their scent for you to enjoy when you get back from work. Here's my top 10"

**Tobacco plant** (*Nicotiana sylvestris*)

Biennial or short-lived perennial with long, trumpet-shaped, white flowers.

**Night-scented stock** (*Matthiola longipetala* subsp. *bicornis*) Open blooms of pink, mauve and purple, pouring out a spicy fragrance at night.

**Honeysuckle** (*Lonicera* spp.) You may have noticed that honeysuckle is most sweetly scented as the sun goes down.

**Datura or Angels' trumpets** (*Brugmansia aurea* and *B. x candida*; pictured below, left) With night-scented white or soft yellow blooms up to 30cm long, this is the ultimate performer. It is frost tender, so needs overwintering inside.

**Moonflower** (*Ipomea alba*) Perennial usually grown as an annual, its big, trumpet-shaped, white flowers unfurl slowly each night at sunset. During the day, the 15cm blooms close and retreat back into the foliage.

**Evening primrose** (*Oenothera biennis*) A tall, hairy biennial producing bowl-shaped, large yellow blooms fading to dark gold. The flowers open each evening and remain open until dawn.

**Wax plant** (*Hoya carnosa*) Though strictly a houseplant, this succulent climber is so bizarre, it has to be included in my list: strange, dense bundles of fleshy, white flowers release their scent after darkness falls. Move it to the window in the evening, so the scent catches the night breeze.

**Perfumed fairy lily** (*Chlidanthus fragrans*) Unusual bulb, resembling a small amaryllis. Although it opens its clear yellow flowers during the day, its fragrance is best at night. Best lifted in the autumn and overwintered.

**Four o'clocks** (*Mirabilis jalapa*) As the name suggests, in mid-afternoon this bushy perennial's red, pink, magenta, white or yellow blooms unfurl to release a rich, jasmine-like perfume. Each bloom is dead by morning, but is soon replaced by another.

**Sword lily** (*Gladiolus tristis*) Opens its funnel-shaped, creamy yellow blossoms in the evening.