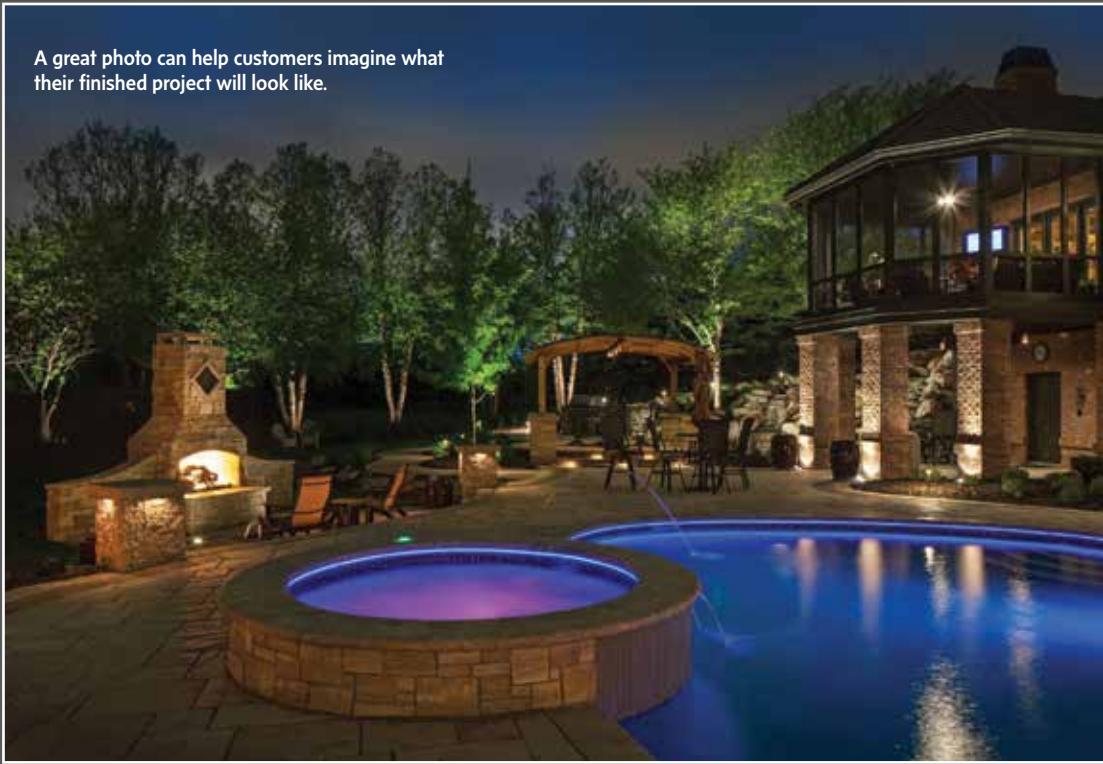




A great photo can help customers imagine what their finished project will look like.



NOT TAKEN LIGHTLY

By Brooke N. Bates

Landscape contractors should be serious about lighting if they are adding it as a service.

Lighting is the icing on the cake of landscape and hardscape designs, if you ask Jerry McKay. His company, McKay Landscape Lighting in Omaha, Neb., has lit up yards for thousands of clients across the country since 1992.

Often, lighting is a finishing touch, as about 80 percent of calls come into McKay after a project – such as a patio, pergola or fire pit – is completed. Lighting professionals can work around structures to insert wires and fixtures. But it may take a little longer, involve a few more subcontractors, and, therefore, cost a little extra than incorporating lighting into initial design plans.

“Unfortunately, a lot of times, it’s like an

afterthought,” McKay says. “It’s just that a lot of people don’t think of it in the beginning stages. It’s not front-of-mind when they’re thinking of the fire pit.”

McKay is noticing a trend in the opposite direction, though, as landscape contractors recognize landscape lighting as a specialized niche that should be subbed out, instead of tacked onto a list of services.

“It’s the same reason we don’t do landscaping,” says McKay, who started a lawn care company in 1987 that evolved into, and officially relaunched as, an outdoor lighting company within five years. “We think if we just specialize in lighting, we’ll do it right. So we’ll find the landscaper that says, ‘The

best part of my business is hardscapes; lighting just gets in the way,’ then we collaborate with them.”

BEYOND THE OBVIOUS. That’s also why Southern Exposure Landscape Management, Pete Bryant’s company in Greensboro, N.C., separated its landscape lighting services into a division called Southern Lights about five years ago.

“Most contractors incorporate lighting as an add-on, which is great – but leaves so much on the table when they’re content to only light the obvious,” Bryant says. “Landscape contractors have a bad rap when it comes to lighting because it is ‘only an

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add-on.' They haven't devoted enough resources, time, or training to develop the skill it takes to perform at a high level."

With certifications ranging from the Association of Outdoor Lighting Professionals (AOLP) to Certified Low Voltage Lighting Technician (CLVLT) to Certified Outdoor Lighting Designer (COLD), Bryant takes lighting seriously. As such, the gap he sees between add-on lighting and specialized services can be gaping, as cheap or misplaced fixtures plague mediocre lighting jobs.

"Cheap fixtures or lamps, in the long run, are no deal at all," Bryant says. "If you can't offer a lifetime warranty on the fixtures you install, don't use them. You will be making so many maintenance visits that your clients will lose faith in your ability as an installer."

In fact, about a third of McKay's projects are upgrading or replacing lighting systems that other contractors installed insufficiently. The biggest misconception contractors have with lighting, McKay says, is thinking it's easy enough to do themselves. But even a few simple path lights can be botched by amateurs, leaving landscapes with unilluminated potential.

"Somebody that doesn't do it every day would put all the lights along one side to avoid going under the sidewalk," he says. "Or we'll see all these little path lights next to a path – except there are a couple of large trees where you could put lights downlighting the sidewalk to create a nice moonlight effect without any path lights."

WORTH A 1,000 WORDS. Those mistakes can be opportunities for lighting specialists to improve landscapes, but it's a challenge to re-educate customers about proper lighting. Both McKay and Bryant rely on perfectly-timed photography to illustrate the effect. "You can talk about lighting all you want," says McKay, who uses a professional ar-



Think about lighting early in the design process for best results.

chitectural photographer. "But it's such an emotional, visual effect that you really need to see it to understand it."

For example, 60 fixtures sounds like Christmas to most clients, so Bryant uses photography – and even walks through night-time demos – to illustrate the design in context.

"Trying to explain to a client what you mean by grazing a wall or silhouetting a plant may be extremely foreign," Bryant says. "Unless you can visually showcase what an additional 40 fixtures will do for the homeowner, they'll stay content with the 20 it will take to light the house and few trees – and forget about all the moonlighting, cross-lighting, and backlighting techniques you've discussed but haven't adequately portrayed."

PARTNERING WITH PROS. Subpar lighting systems can be business opportunities for lighting professionals – and not just via new customers. McKay sees those as partnership opportunities, offering to collaborate with contractors that do lighting but aren't devoted to it. His company subcontracts lighting for half a dozen local landscapers, including one of the largest nurseries in the state.

"Of course, that makes for the easiest, best projects when we can lay things out on the plan," McKay says. "We'll tell the landscape contractor, 'Let's get a sleeve under this hardscape. Let's pre-wire this. Give us a call when you're building your seat wall around the fire pit, and we'll get our wires in there.' When we're a subcontractor to a landscaper,

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those jobs go extremely smooth.” The key is coordinating lighting into design and construction, rather than retrofitting afterward.

“If the plan has any constructed features such as a fireplace, seat wall, pergola, outdoor kitchen, deck or structures, lighting fixtures need to be installed – or at the very least, prepped for – at the time of construction,” Bryant says. “It creates a more seamless installation without pricier retrofitting.”

THINK AHEAD. Because Bryant owns both a landscaping and a lighting company, he can incorporate lighting into construction projects concurrently. He opts for lighting plans that can be scaled for future upgrades by pre-installing sleeves under patios and using larger wire gauges and transformers than required.

“Not planning for future additions is a

mistake,” he says. “You may get a 300-watt transformer and only utilize 150 watts of it. The difference between the 300- and 150-watt transformer might be 75 bucks, but if you had to buy a whole separate transformer, you may be spending \$300 more down the road. The material cost savings is minimal, but the labor saved down the road can sure add up.”

Likewise, if a lighting specialist has to go underneath or inside existing structures to lay wire, the retrofit can be lengthy, costly and involved.

“Adding landscape lighting during later phases is definitely a possibility, but it always saves time and money to know where the fixtures and wires will be placed prior to breaking ground,” Bryant says. **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

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