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OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF
THE GUILD OF MASTER CRAFTSMEN

Glowing in the dark

Kniphofia northiae
lit up at night

Doing the **light** fantastic

By the time most of us get back from work it's too dark to enjoy the mouth-watering plants on which we have blown a small fortune. But **Peter Reid's** back garden has seen the light



Dicksonia antarctica (LEFT) and *Cyathea medullaris* (black tree fern) (ABOVE) take on an ethereal glow at night, only assuming their more familiar form during the day in Peter Reid's garden (INSET)

CLIVE NICHOLSPETER REID

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Oh c'mon, we've all done it... strolled round the garden on a balmy summer night, chilled glass of something cheeky to the point of impertinence in hand, trying to admire the garden in, er, pitch darkness. Not much fun, is it? Not to mention the dangers: a head-on collision with a gunnera can give you a nasty jolt, but stagger into a yucca and you're talking A&E.

The simple answer is to put in some lighting. Thing is, like most simple answers, it leads to lots of difficult supplementary questions. Having dipped a toe into the subject, I'm persuaded the subject of garden lighting is complicated enough to take its place on the curricula of some of our new universities.

So the lighting scheme shown here is only one solution. In fact one of the cool things about garden lighting is that, rather like exotic gardening itself, there are few rules. Generally speaking, if you want to light something, you can – leaves, flowers, tree trunks, lawns, architectural features,

fountains, ponds, pergolas, patios, paths, you name it. The hard part is deciding what not to light. And that's only the first of many decisions...

Decision 1

What not to light?

An easy one. I didn't want to light paths, ponds or fountains because I haven't got any. The patio is going to be re-worked next year, so no point lighting that. I didn't want to light the lawn – why on earth would you want to?

Besides, it's not much of a lawn these days – more a winding grass path. And as the house is a 1930s' semi, I'm kind of short on classical columns to caress with subtle highlighting. So that left me with just the plants, which was fine by me. Like most exotacists, I reckon plants are what gardening's all about.

Decision 2

But which plants?

Oh the big ones, obviously. Mmm, there again...? The biggest things in my garden are

currently a giant rhubarb (*Gunnera manicata*) and a clump of hardy bananas (*Musa basjoo*) and Spanish reed (*Arundo donax*). Sure, they look traffic-stopping in summer, but in winter they're about as attractive as a morning hangover.

Bearing in mind that winter's the time when you really get your garden lighting money's worth – you can turn them on at 4pm – I decided everything to be lit must be evergreen and consoled myself with the thought that maybe the bananas and gunnera would get a bit of light spill.

Decision 3

What kind of mood?

There's a little bit of Las Vegas in all of us, but be honest, do you really want your garden to look like Caesar's Palace? I'm trying to create a jungle mood

and so, reluctantly, had to concede the Golden Nugget Look might somehow jar.

What I needed was something eerie and dramatic – operatic even. The key here is to resist the temptation to overlight. You need some areas of darkness between the pools of light to let the garden retain a bit of mystery. Otherwise it'll look just sassy rather than sexy.

Decision 4

How many lights?

This is where the going gets tougher. One way to figure out how many lights you need is to take your budget, deduct the price of cable, transformers and labour, then divide the remainder with the price of the fittings you've taken a shine to. It's a crude approach, but might be the only way if you're on a tight budget – you can

“A head-on collision with a gunnera can give you a nasty jolt but stagger into a yucca and you're talking A&E”

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ABOVE: *Tetrapanax papyrifera* leaf backlit and in natural daylight

Do-it-yourself?

Ready-made kit

If you're looking for a complete off-the-shelf lighting solution, the Arlec Premier Range retails for about £90. It's a ready-made kit with four spike flood lights, 5 by 10-Watt halogen bulbs, a 42-Watt outdoor transformer with photo sensor to turn lights on at dusk and off at dawn, and 15 metres of cable. The transformer comes with a limited five-year warranty and the light fixtures with a limited 10-year warranty. Instructions are provided, although you'd be well advised to ask a qualified electrician to install it.

Verdict: with their 10-Watt bulbs, these are not powerful lights. Think of it as an economy kit for a very limited lighting scheme – a small patio, perhaps, or compact front garden. You can't add more than the four lights and if you try using more than the 15 metres of cable supplied, the lights will dim. The light fittings are fairly large but feel quite robust. For your nearest stockist, call Arlec DCS Ltd on 01582 544500.

Mix 'n' match

If you want to customise your own lighting scheme, the Ring Select-a-Light range lets you select any combination of fittings in the range. Shown here are their 36-Watt transformer (£13.99), 25 metres of cable (£13.99) and OMCO single spot-light with 20-Watt bulb (£14.99).

Transformers are also available at 60, 90 and 150 Watt – all transformers have to be sited indoors. The lights are available as 7, 10- and 20-Watt fittings. You can move light fittings from one point of cable to another without damaging the system. Instructions are provided but, again, it's wise to ask an electrician to install it.

Verdict: with the choice of transformers and light wattages, flexibility is an obvious advantage. However, even with the most powerful transformer, you can have a maximum of 7 by 20-Watt and 1 by 10-Watt lights (or 15 by 10-Watt lights), and the recommended maximum length of cable used in a straight run is no more than 25 metres. So again, this is not a range for ambitious schemes or bigger gardens. The light fittings themselves, though, look pretty cool. For stockists, call Ring PLC on 0113 276 7676.

always add more lights later.

A more sophisticated tactic is to amble round the garden looking for likely candidates for the spotlight which, in my case, meant evergreens. Remember you need some pools of darkness, so you can't light everything. And bear in mind the overall scheme needs to be in some kind of balance. That doesn't necessarily mean symmetrical – in fact avoid symmetry if you want a natural look. But if all your lights end up on one side of the garden, try again.

You might find drawing a rough plan of your garden helps. In the end I settled for 11 lights. I thought that sounded a lot – the garden is only about 35ft square – but they turned out about right.

Decision 5

What kind of effects?

Things now get really tricky because you have choices.

Uplighting: I opted mainly for uplighting, which means placing the light fitting on the ground *in front* of the plant, then shining the light up onto it – or into it. This works well for plants attractive enough – and big enough – for this kind of star treatment.

Cross lighting: this isn't when you install the fittings in a bad mood. I used it to send light up the trunk of the big *Dicksonia antarctica*. This needed two uplights either side of the trunk, placed slightly towards the side I wanted lit to

Wiring up



ABOVE: Burying junction box



ABOVE: Remove turf to accommodate wiring

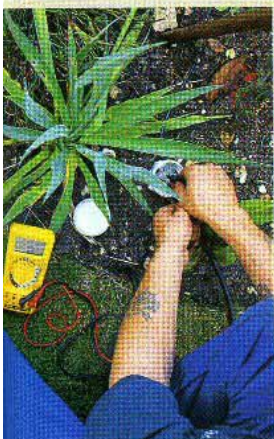
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get a three-dimensional effect. Using only one fitting would make it look flat, apparently. You'd use the same approach for lighting a lawn, although the fittings would be further apart. The fronds at the top also catch the light, giving a rather fetching 'giant lampshade' look.

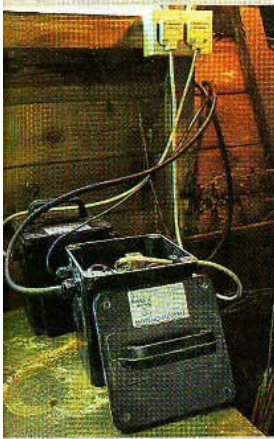
Back lighting: this is when you put the light fittings *behind* the plant you want to light. Also called silhouetting, it creates an altogether moodier effect. I used backlighting provided for a bed which doesn't yet have anything dramatic enough to uplight. In a year or two I can always redirect the lights – there's some slack in the cable so individual fittings can be moved about a bit.

Down lighting: this, as the name suggests, is when you



ABOVE: Checking for voltage drop

ABOVE: Putting sealant into the junction box



LEFT: The wiring runs between these two transformers in the shed...

BELOW: ... and the exotics border



shine light down onto a plant. I've used it once – rather cleverly, I thought – to solve a dilemma. I wanted to light a *Magnolia rostrata*, partly because it deserves it, and partly to keep the lighting scheme in balance. The problem was the magnolia is only 2ft tall. The solution was a pole light which I'm currently shining down on to a *Kniphofia northiae*, but which in summer, when the magnolia is bigger, I can direct up into its leaves.

Floodlighting: essentially

using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. Fine in football stadia, but a bit unsubtle for the garden. I didn't even consider it.

Decision 6

Okay, let's go shopping

First step was to grit my teeth, put on ill-fitting sportswear to blend in with the other punters and visit the DIY sheds. This was in August when they're already bringing in their winter ranges. Garden lighting, apparently, is a summer product, so

The science bit

Low-voltage v. mains

I opted for a low-voltage system. Frankly, there was no contest. I like the clean white light of halogen. You won't electrocute yourself if you cut the cable by mistake. It's a lot cheaper to run – at least 50% (some say up to 80%) more efficient... a mains system equivalent to mine would be like running a 2kW electric fire. The light bulbs last much longer. Also, mains cable has to be buried at least a spade's depth, and the thought of digging trenches all over the garden simply doesn't bear thinking about.

Transformers

With a low-voltage system you need a transformer to take the voltage down to 12 volts. The power of the transformer dictates how many lights you can have – for example, a 500-Watt transformer can run 10 by 50 Watt lights. Mine are totally weatherproof and are designed to be buried – preferably as near to the first light as possible. In my case, it was easier to put them in the shed.

Cable

This comes in different thicknesses. We used a high specification 4mm cable to minimise voltage drop which can make each light along the cable dimmer than its predecessor.

Bulbs and beams

Low voltage bulbs come in 10, 15, 20, 35, 50 and 75 Watts. The higher the wattage, the brighter the light. Low wattages are suitable for lighting areas like decking and steps, but for uplighting lush foliage you need higher wattages.

Bulbs also come in three beam widths. The narrowest is 12°, which we used to uplight the tree fern trunk. For all the other fittings we used 38° beams. The widest beam – 60° – would be suitable for cross-lighting a lawn.

“Sure they look traffic-stopping in summer but in winter they're about as attractive as a morning hangover”

the pickings were slim. You can see what I found in the Do-it-yourself? Panel. None of them looked up to the task I had in mind.

Next step was to call Garden & Security Lighting, tel 01293 820821, which offers a full nationwide service, including designing the scheme, supplying all the equipment and installing it. Sounded good to me. Their quote, however, was about double my budget. Time to think again.

So I called Mike Flitcroft at the Garden Lighting Company which is essentially a lighting retailer stocking products from several upmarket suppliers. Helpfully, Mike will also give you a hand with design and technical issues at no extra charge if you send him a plan of what you want lighting. He can also do a site visit, but charges between £100-£250, depending on where you are and the size of your garden.

In my case, everything was

Lighting choices



ABOVE: Copper light by Hunza



RIGHT: 11 Hunza lights, 2 300W direct-burial transformers and 50m of 4mm cable



ABOVE: 4 Arlec green lights, 42W outdoor transformer and 15m of cable



RIGHT: Hunza's copper pole light

sorted during a 15-minute chat. I didn't have to worry about light wattages, beam widths, cable size or transformer specifications (see The Science Bit) – Mike took care of all that. He also later threw in a site visit for free because he happened to be a mere 100 miles away. Dedicated or what? The fittings arrived in a matter of days.

Decision 7

What finish?

Again, you have choices – black, green, stainless steel or copper. I wanted my fittings to look unobtrusive, so although tempted by black, I plumped for green powder-coated aluminium. I used more expensive copper fittings which will dull down to a verdigris finish for

the pole light and one spotlight because they're in highly visible locations.

I also got a couple of glare guards which, while you don't usually need them, are handy for uplights right at the front of a border. As for the cable, it comes in black. You can bury it or cover it in a mulch, but I reckon it's pretty invisible and I like the idea of knowing where it is when I'm wielding a spade.

Decision 8

Coloured lights?

Forget it, unless you want your garden to look like Blackpool – although I guess they might come in handy for things like statues or buildings. Coloured bulbs are dear – little change from a tenner – and are only available in narrow beam.

“There's a little bit of Las Vegas in all of us but be honest do you really want your garden to look like Caesar's Palace?”

The Kit

All the equipment for my system was supplied by the Garden Lighting Company from their Hunza range, manufactured in New Zealand. The system comprised:

- 9 green powder-coated Hunza Adjustable Spike Spot lights (£63.45 each)
- 1 copper Hunza Adjustable Spike Spot light (£89.30)
- 1 copper Hunza Pole Lite in copper (£129.25)
 - 2 green powder-coated Hunza Glare Guards (£19.97 each)
 - 2 x 300 Watt Direct Burial Transformers (£164.50 each)
- 50 metres of 4mm cable at £1.20 per metre (£60 total)

Total equipment cost was £1,218.54 (including VAT), plus the cost of one day's installation by Eclipse's Garry Blackburn. The transformers come with a 5-year replacement warranty, the green powder-coated lights are guaranteed for three years, and the copper lights for 50 years.

Though far pricier than DIY alternatives, you really do get what you pay for. The two robust transformers give ample capacity to add pond and patio lighting when I get round to sorting out the landscaping next year. The thick 4mm cable makes any voltage drop unnoticeable. The fittings are solid, easily adjusted and discreet. At 50 Watts, they're also powerful – vital to cope with the thick foliage and dense planting.

Contact the Garden Lighting Company on 01706 227525, or visit their web site at www.gardenlighting.co.uk

Contact Eclipse's Garry Blackburn on 01303 268221 (mobile 0468 437020) – he covers London and south-east England.

Decision 9

How to install it?

Simple – get a qualified electrician, preferably one who specialises in garden lighting. Having seen the complexity of the kit that needs installing, doing-it-yourself isn't a sensible option. Mike Filteroft arranged for Eclipse's Garry Blackburn to install my scheme – he's the electrician the Garden Lighting Company uses for London

and the south east.

It took Garry a long hot day to finish the installation, and on top of his obvious technical expertise he brought some extra design input and a sense of humour to the project – both proved invaluable.

Decision 10

Throw that switch

Was it worth it? Judge for yourself. Personally, I'm tickled pink. Brilliant.