



Nighttime is the Right Time

How to design your next pool project with after-hours appeal



By Rebecca Robledo Your clients couldn't ask for a more beautiful aquascape. The pool glistens in the sunlight, the rock cave beckons and the covered patio provides just enough shade.

But what if the homeowners are workaholics? "Nowadays, a lot of clients don't even get to see their yards during the day," says Scott Cohen, garden artisan/president of The Green Scene Design & Construction in Canoga Park, Calif. "They're working so hard, they're not getting home until it's dark."

This means nightscaping deserves serious consideration — and an investment of time and money. Kevin Woodhurst, president of Celebrity Pools and Spas in Chandler, Ariz., estimates that he spends 20 percent to 30 percent of his design time fashioning an after-hours look. His clients might pay as much as 15 percent of their budgets to make it happen.

With the right layout, water reflectivity, fire and lighting, you can transition your creations into nighttime stunners. Read these tips to see how to do it.

The right layout

Evening hours offer two major benefits: drama and mystery. For big entertaining, veer toward the former, with large fire features and gushing waterfalls.

"I like fire on volcanoes or on top of caves," says Brian Cullingworth, president of Brian Cullingworth Custom Pools & Spas in Temecula, Calif. "Typically, those grottos are 6 feet or so above the ground — high enough that nobody can get burnt."

Night design gives you the chance to provide eye candy from the house or patio 24 hours a day. It's important to align water-and-fire or water-and-light combinations with primary viewing corridors.

Just be sure to valve the falls, so you can adjust the flow. Louder isn't always better.

Provide versatility. Most clients need space for quiet moments, whether it be for self-reflection or one-on-one time with a significant other. Create private nooks that take advantage of the mystery the night has to offer.

John Montgomery, landscape architect/principal of John Montgomery Landscape Architects in Alamo, Calif., likes to design

In the dark: It requires forethought to make the backyard as beautiful and useful at night as it is during the day. Here, a fireplace and subtle overhead lighting guarantee an after-hours destination point.



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“secret gardens.” Placed close to the master bedroom or far off the beaten path, they contain trickling waterfeatures and dim light. Night-blooming white flowers, such as jasmine and gardenia, complement these areas because they reflect light and are more fragrant late in the day.

Water reflectivity

Pools, spas and ponds can become mirrors for fire or well-lit trees at night. If you'd like to reflect an existing tree, place the vessel accordingly.

“On a pool that I'm doing now, there are four 25- to 30-foot, majestic saguaro [cacti] flanking each corner of the project,” Woodhurst says. “We're going to light them up, so they seem to bend right into the pool.”

He tries to finish his pools in black or dark blue to reflect as much moonlight as possible. To maintain the sleek, mirror look, Woodhurst also minimizes water turbulence.

In addition, placid waters make an ideal canvas for a fiberoptic “starry night” effect. This technique involves drilling hundreds of tiny holes in the pool shell and exposing the ends of one or two fibers through each. “We can make the floor twinkle and also put a color wheel on it,” Woodhurst says.

Consider reflectivity when choosing materials above the waterline. Crushed glass creates a twinkling look when used in a fire pit or embedded in tile or concrete. Glass mosaic tile becomes luminous, especially if it has metallic flecks. Metal water walls also can enhance the glow of a soft uplight.

Create night falls. Scan the yard and ask yourself if there are any places where a waterfall would make sense for evening viewing or listening. Quiet effects such as streams, scuppers, fiberoptically lit sheets and laminars can provide a sound that blends well with the soothing night air.

Fire

Nothing attracts or bonds people better than the natural, flickering light that fire emits, even atop simple tiki torches.

“I think the appeal is instinctual,” Cohen says. “It seems to open up conversations — you want to tell stories around a fire. If you're with your significant other, you want to hold hands around a fire.”

Fire pits generally accommodate more people than fireplaces because you can place seating all the way around them.



Subtle tones: In this project, the bar area is lit strongly enough to be functional, yet still retain an intimate feel. The lights in the pool and catch basin are almost invisible, making the water glow.

But pits may not belong front and center, says Jon van Allen, a registered landscape architect with McHale Landscape Design in McLean, Va. He likes to set the wood-burning types out of the way.

“I think they look rather ugly, especially if you leave burnt lumber in there,” van Allen says. He tries to use gas-powered fire pits when they need to be prominently placed.

When working with open fire, position it as close to the pool or spa as possible to promote reflection. Some designers place the flames next to the spa to reinforce the intimate feel. Heat from the fire also helps

people transition from the warm water to the crisp night air.

Lighting

Lighting gives you the power to set the right mood, enhance attractive features and conceal what you don't want to see. “You're basically painting the landscape with light at night,” Cohen says.

Think in terms of glow. For an elegant environment, the lighting should be very subtle. Design the light scheme to glow rather than shine, whether emanating from a sheet fall, shooting through a pencil-thin laminar arc or reflecting on a textured water wall.



PHOTOS COURTESY BRIAN CULLINGWORTH CUSTOM POOLS & SPAS

Illuminating transformation: Here, you can see the day-to-night progression. In the dark, lit bar stools add an interesting feature. To create them, the builder brought fiberoptic conduit up to the top of each concrete stool. Etched acrylic caps disperse the points of light to create a glow.



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The best way to create this look is to bounce the light or shine it through the water. Make sure you place it so that the source is not visible. “The lighting becomes important, but at the same time, you don’t want to know it’s there,” Montgomery says.

When gauging how much illumination

is needed, don’t forget to factor in existing ambient light from the house, neighbors and streets.

Create drama from ordinary things. With the right lighting, features that seem mild-mannered by day take center stage at night. If you see an interesting texture on a wall or tree, use a technique called

grazing. This is where the light beam is set almost parallel with the surface to maximize shadows.

Silhouetting plants or architectural features also is effective. Place a light directly behind the feature so that all you see is a black form. This works best with “architectural” plants, meaning anything that has a strong outline, such as cacti, grasses or gnarled, multibranching trees (those with more than one trunk coming out of the ground).

Design elegant safety. If you were to ask an experienced lighting designer about his or her pet peeves, the runway look undoubtedly would top the list. This is where ground-level fixtures known as “Malibu lights” are spaced along a pathway at regular intervals.

A close cousin is the penitentiary look. It’s the same thing, only the lights point up toward the house. “You see all these directional washes and it creates a lot of static,” van Allen says.

All elevation changes or obstructions should be illuminated for safety’s sake. Avoid spotlights, but if you do decide to use some, don’t place them in a line or at regular intervals.

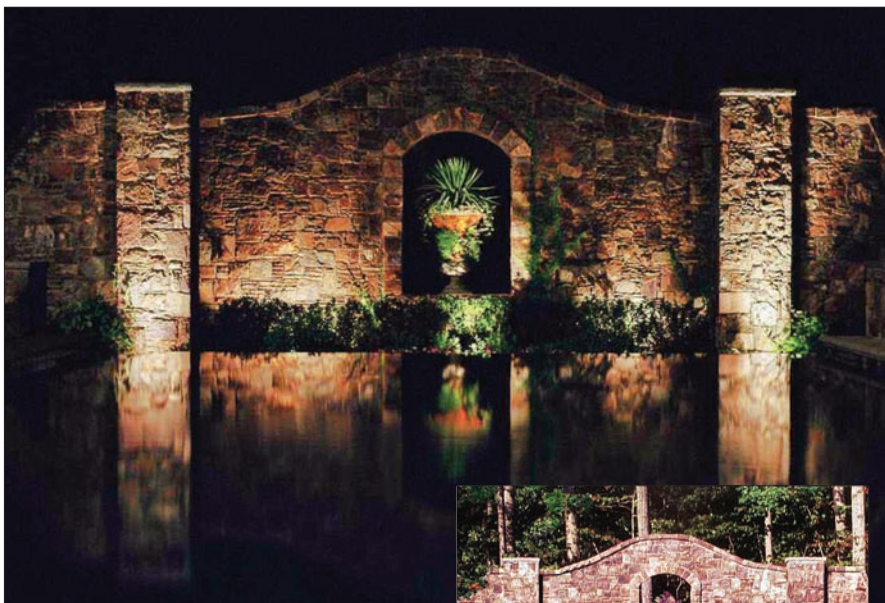
Instead, try more indirect forms of illumination. Place subtle, area-washing fixtures up high so they can shine down and provide light similar to that of the moon. Or install lights in the cheek wall of a staircase rather than in each riser, van Allen suggests. You can even embed string lighting in mortar joints underneath the stairs’ tread bullnose.

If a pathway runs under trees, use a technique called moonlighting. Fixtures are secured in the branches to point down. You could stash lights among the plants or use the reflection of adjacent surfaces to provide more of a glow.

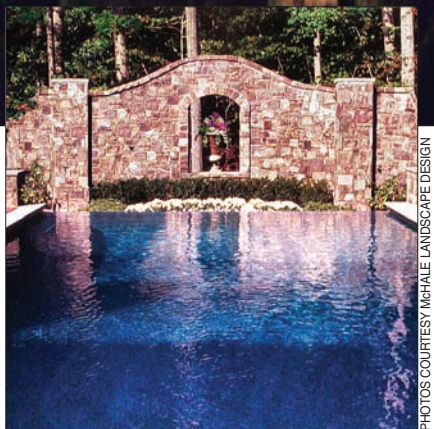
Avoid dark spots. Steer clear of lighting extremes, such as dark or glary areas. Use subtle or indirect lighting between places where you want brighter illumination. Feather the light away from patios or the main part of the yard so it will shine lightly on outlying areas. That way, people won’t feel as if they’ll fall off a cliff if they venture outside.

To fully illuminate the pool, use fiberoptic lights for beach entries and other places that are too shallow to sufficiently submerge a standard pool light, Cullingworth advises.

Consider different lighting scenarios. Sometimes your client will request a festive



On the surface: White and light-hued interior surfaces reflect easily, so less lighting is more (top). When working with a dark pool, take advantage of the water’s mirrorlike quality by uplighting features such as this stone wall and planter (above). To enhance texture as much as possible, use a technique called grazing, where the beam runs almost parallel with the wall surface. The pool itself remains unlit.



PHOTOS COURTESY MICHAEL LANDSCAPE DESIGN

feel. Other times, he or she will desire a quiet, soothing aura.

Create separate lighting schemes and put each on its own circuit. Or use computer controls to switch back and forth.

Try light in unlikely places. Occasionally, Cullingworth installs lit bar stools in the pool. They are made of concrete, with fiberoptic conduit running inside and brought up through the top. Acrylic caps the stool. "We etched the material to break up the intense pinpoint of light and refract it across the whole bar stool," he says.

Green Scene's Cohen likes to embed pieces of glass in some of his concrete bars and then light them from underneath. One bar was made with melted wine and scotch bottles in the counter. "The fiberoptic light is on a sparkler wheel, so it gets brighter and dimmer. But it's not discotheque — it's subtle," he says.

Use color and perimeter lighting carefully. In the right place, there's nothing like color-changing perimeter fiberoptic lighting. But other times, it just doesn't make sense.

"Give me a geometric-style pool with sharp corners and it looks good," Woodhurst says. "When it's done right, you actually get two rows of fiber because of the reflection off the water." But he tries to avoid this product on lagoon or other natural-themed pools.

As for vegetation, colored lighting rarely enhances it. "It ruins the color of the foliage," Cohen asserts. ■



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Setting the mood: Create secluded, intimate locations in your yard and light them softly (above). When choosing objects to highlight, look for those with strong forms, such as the palm trees on this project (below), designed by Robin Sowinski of Champion Pools & Spas in West Palm Beach, Fla. Notice how the sideways-growing specimen gets the most attention.



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