

GARDENS

Beam me up

Great outdoor lighting means you get to enjoy your garden after sundown.

Annie Gatti plugs into some dramatic effects

Fashion designer Tania Laurie used to see her garden only at the weekend. Now when she gets home in the evening, at the flick of a light switch her open-plan living room appears to extend magically across a polished floor to a leafy, outdoor room. A geometric space is revealed, with a line of olive trees emerging from cushions of black grass and a tapestry of green and dark foliage framing an open centre.

When Laurie began renovating her Victorian terraced house, she decided to transform her garden at the same time. Her taste runs to minimalism and monochrome, so she called in lighting designer Rebecca Weir of Light IQ and garden designer Charlotte Rowe.

The outcome might not seem very green – all that electricity, just for the fun of it – but it's possible to organise a more modest display, and you could ration lighting-up time to parties

and treats. The trick is to ensure the garden looks good by day, unlit.

Laurie's brief was challenging: she wanted the same greys, blacks and browns of her living room, with only purple flowers. She also wanted oak boards, stained to match her interior floors. Her designer persuaded her that using oak decking over such a large area (the garden measures 13m by 4.5m) would be oppressive, and suggested introducing two other materials – grey granite slabs and black polished stones – to break up the space. For the boundaries, they chose tongue-and-groove softwood with a trellis of horizontal battens, painted the same grey as the surrounds of the folding glass doors.

But before any of the hard landscaping could go in, Laurie had to settle on a lighting layout so that the cables could, where possible, be concealed underground.

In a small garden, lights can help create depth by drawing your eye to the farthest point – in Laurie's plot, this is the line of black-stemmed bamboo (*Phyllostachys nigra*) along the back boundary. The bamboo can be luxuriously backlit with spike spots to silhouette their stems, then front lit with a soft wash of light from wide beam spots. "It seems obvious," Weir says, "but you need to have something elevated to catch the light, otherwise you're just throwing light into the atmosphere."

The bamboo is the first of three "stepping stones of light" that, if all lit, focus the view from the house. The second is the grey pots of clipped box. Uplighters cast shadows against the wall – a theatrical effect that Laurie loves. The third is the line of olive trees cross-lit with 20-watt spike spots. These low wattage spots use less energy than the ones at the back, but are still powerful enough



illuminate the silvery trunks and glow light up into the branches. On the right-hand fence, three like spots uplight the gnarled branches of a wisteria to provide a backdrop for an outdoor dining area. Above the glass sliding doors on the back wall of the house, Weir has added two discreet spots. These glow ambient light out above the deck to break the darkness immediately outside the living room. Throughout the garden, low-voltage halogen bulbs were used to mirror the effect of the indoor lighting, with one exception – the strip LED lights on the front of the deck step.

The planting scheme developed gradually: initially, Laurie just wanted deep purple Tulip 'Queen of Night', the exotic-looking *Angelica* plants and some olive trees, but Rowe persuaded her of the pleasure of seeing some seasonal changes.

The colour palette was extended to include lime green (*Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*, *Helleborus argutifolius*, *Hydrangea arborescens* 'Annabelle' and *Alchemilla mollis*) and creamy white (*Sedum spectabile* 'Iceberg', the fragrant climber *Trachelospermum jasminoides* and *Galium odoratum* for groundcover), both of which offset the darker shades of the shrubby evergreen *Pittosporum tobira* and the black lily turf, *Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrascens'.

Lighting a garden professionally can be expensive – Laurie's came to £6,000, a sixth of the total cost of the redesign – but there are ways of keeping prices down, such as using powder-coated fittings instead of stainless steel, and using kits where possible. For Laurie, it was all money well spent. "The garden was a mess before. Now it's like a beautiful painting."

TOP TIPS FOR LIGHTING

- 1 Less is more. 'Leave part of the garden dark and limit the number of elements you light. Too many focal points confuse the eye,' says lighting designer Rebecca Weir.
- 2 Less is more is also the message in terms of minimising the impact on the environment. You don't have to light the whole garden: choose one or two features. Use low-energy alternatives where appropriate, such as LEDs for steps. A time clock will ensure that lights are not left on overnight.
- 3 To maximise the depth of the garden, focus an area of lighting on a feature at the farthest boundary.
- 4 Backlighting plants and objects, such as containers, with strong shapes creates silhouettes and adds drama.
- 5 To uplight a tree, fix spots on both sides of the trunk, so you can see the whole tree from every angle.
- 6 When lighting evergreens, topiary or

any dense plant, position the light at a distance to provide a wash of light rather than a concentrated beam, which will create a hot spot.

- 7 Halogen bulbs provide good colour rendition of plants and a warm, bright light. LED lights produce a colder, whiter light, but use less energy.
- 8 Even if you're just putting up fairy lights for a party, you'll need to install an external weatherproof power point (unless your lighting cables can safely reach an indoor socket) and for this it's best to hire a qualified electrician.
- 9 For safety, always use a residual current device (RCD). This automatically cuts the power supply if any leads or light fittings get damaged.
- 10 Low-voltage lights use a transformer to reduce the 240-volt mains to a safer 12 volts.

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