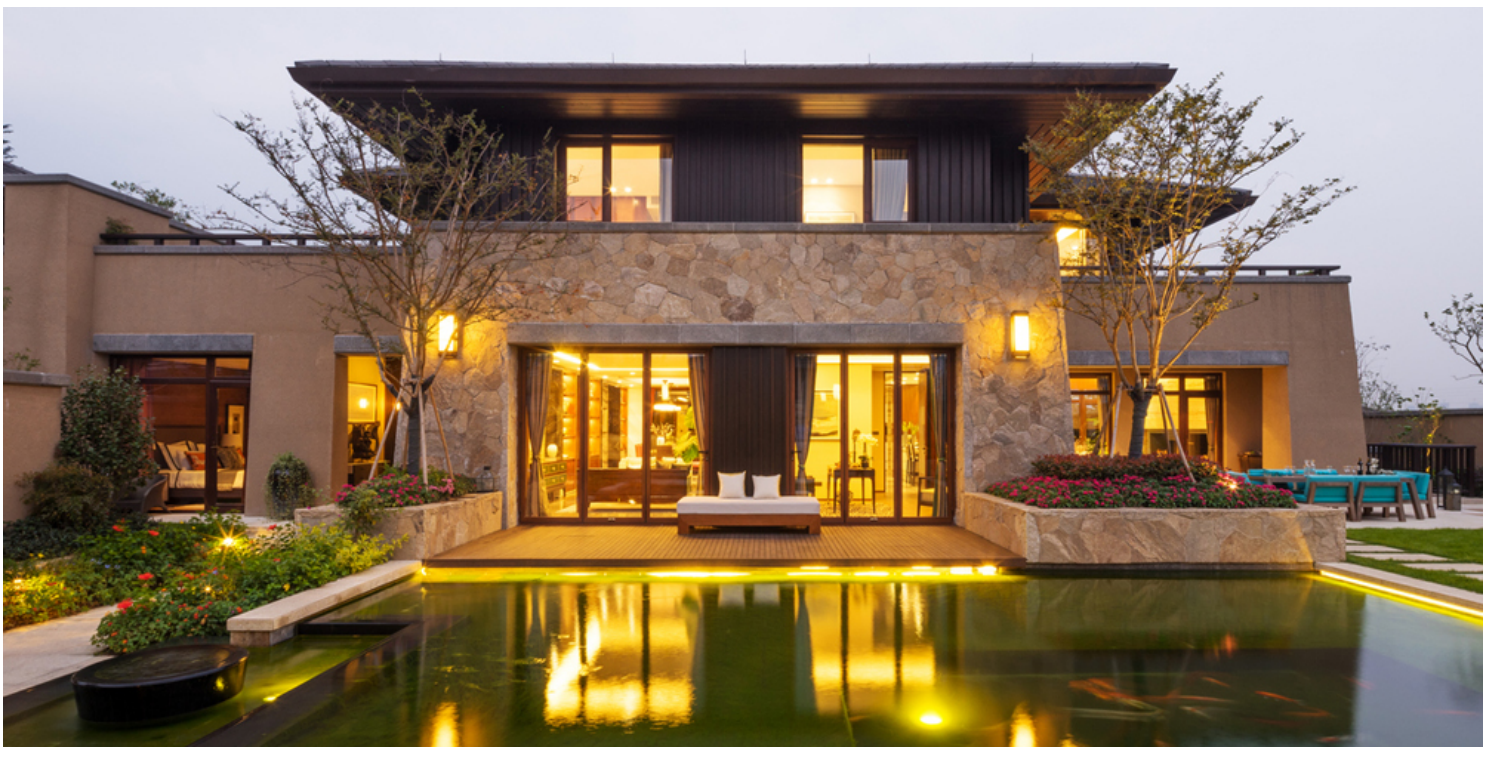
Outdoor Lighting Buying Guide

Outdoor lighting enhances the exterior of homes and illuminates dark exterior settings.



Outdoor lighting is specially designed for outdoor applications along exterior walls, ceilings, and floors. This lighting category includes many different sizes, styles, and fixture types, offering a number of advantages for outdoor settings. Each outfoor setting calls for a unique system of outdoor lighting that provides security and safety, and enhances the aesthetic of outdoor properties. Outdoor lighting can work to illuminate dark settings, providing functional illumination along pathways, and highlight landscape features. Outdoor fixtures include solar, hardwire, and plug-in designs.

Outdoor Lighting Construction

The Fixture

Primary outdoor lighting includes wall lights, post lights, ceiling mount lights, pendants, and security/flood lights. Common components of outdoor fixtures include:

- Finial: a decorative knob located at the top or bottom of a fixture
- Roof: the cover for the internal housing and bulb of the fixture that often features a hinged opening for easy changing of the bulb
- Cage frame: the main framework of the fixture's design and shape, includes metal framing as well as glass panels
- Glass panel: acts as a fixture shade, protects the bulb and inner housing of the fixture while allowing the bulb to illuminate the surrounding area. Can be crafted from seeded glass, transparent glass, translucent glass, tinted glass, or opaque glass
- Glass holder: binds the panels, frame, and light source
- Fitter: also known as a post cap, attaches the fixture to the post (post lights)

Outdoor lighting fixtures are crafted from a variety of durable materials including metals and marine-grade plastics. Since these fixtures are exposed to outdoor elements continuously, they are commonly treated with a weather-resisting coating or crafted from naturally durable materials that will withstand wear from wind, rain, and snow. Look for fixtures with a non-corrosive, UV-resistant finish for lighting that will endure in outdoor environments. Many fixtures include grading specifications to designate their ideal usage settings:

- UL Damp Location Rating: Best for lights in covered areas
- Wet Location Rating: Best for lights directly exposed to the open air
- Durable Marine Grade Resin or Solid Aluminum Fixtures: Best for withstanding wear from salty air (locations close to the ocean or beach)

The Bulb

Outdoor lighting fixtures are commonly compatible with one of three types of light bulbs: incandescent, LED, and fluorescent. Fluorescent bulbs are rarely used in outdoor applications. Each of these bulb types carries unique advantages and disadvantages.

Incandescent

- Pros: Most popular choice for outdoor fixtures, candle-flame appearance, inexpensive
- Cons: Need to be replaced often, use the most energy

LED

- Pros: Energy saving, long-lasting (up to 20 years)
- Cons: Expensive, color varies from traditional incandescent bulbs

Fluorescent

- Pros: Use 90% less energy than incandescent bulbs, emit little heat, last 10x longer than incandescent bulbs
- Cons: Expensive, not dimmable, color varies from traditional incandescent bulbs

Powering Your System

Outdoor lighting fixtures can be powered in various ways. Low voltage (12 volts) outdoor lighting systems are the most common applications because of its exposure to moisture, however high voltage or solar energy are also used. Each system possesses unique benefits and deterrents.

Note: Always consult a professional lighting electrication before purchasing or installing an outdoor lighting system. This guide is not intended to take the place of a professional's best opinion or serve as a technical safety manual.

Low Voltage

Low voltage outdoor lighting systems are defined at 10V, 12V or 24V. Low voltage fixtures are a modern option. Low voltage systems include low voltage fixtures, a transformer or power pack, and a low voltage electrical cable.

- Pros: Safer than high voltage systems, more energy efficient, easier to install and adjust
- Cons: Requires compatible low voltage equipment (transformer, electrical cable)

High Voltage

High voltage outdoor lighting systems, also known as line voltage, are defined as 120V. Line voltage systems necessitate a conduit to protect wires and an electrical junction box to power the system.

- Pros: Same voltage as appliances, lower cost fixtures, bulbs, and installation
- Cons: Less energy efficient, difficult to install, high operating costs

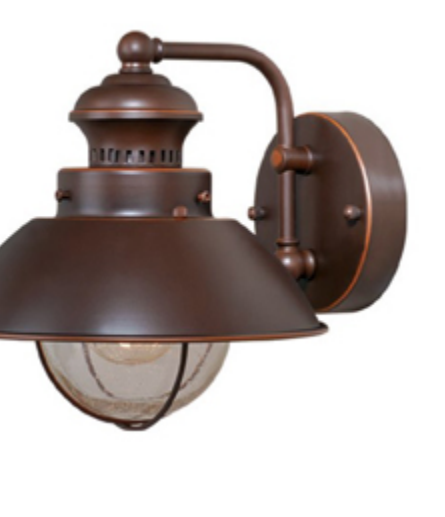
Solar Powered

Solar powered lighting systems are powered by the natural energy of the sun. These outdoor lighting fixtures commonly include sensors to illuminate only when the light outside passes a set threshold of darkness. Solar powered lights do not require any wiring, and require minimal installation effort. These fixtures must receive 6-8 hours of sunlight a day to operate at full capacity. Solar lights are ideal in settings where power is inaccessible.

Motion Sensors and Timers

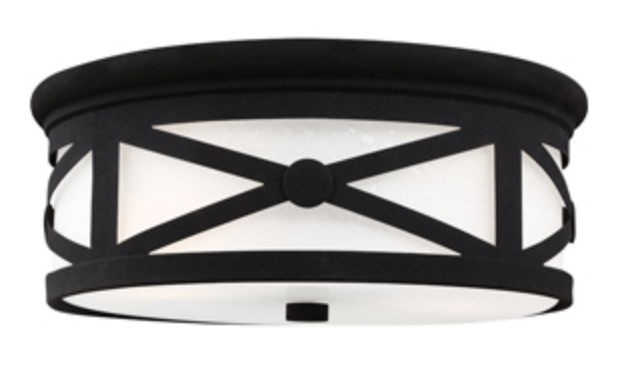
Popular features in outdoor lighting systems, motion sensors and timers help to save energy and optimize lighting use. Timers can be programmed to power outdoor lighting systems at certain hours or for a certain amount of time. Motion sensors only illuminate when they sense movement. This feature can help to deter intruders and ensure a consistently safe and illuminated walkway.

Outdoor Lighting Types



Wall Lighting

Outdoor wall lighting includes any fixture placed along a vertical surface, such as lanterns and sconces. These fixtures are affixed along the walls of structures, and can cast an uplight or downlight to illuminate surrounding areas. These types of lights eliminate shadows and illuminate hazards in home and yard design such as along paths, walkways, or stairways. Wall lights can be used to highlight entryways or street address numbers on the front of some homes. A decorative and functional addition, wall lighting adds instant curb appeal.

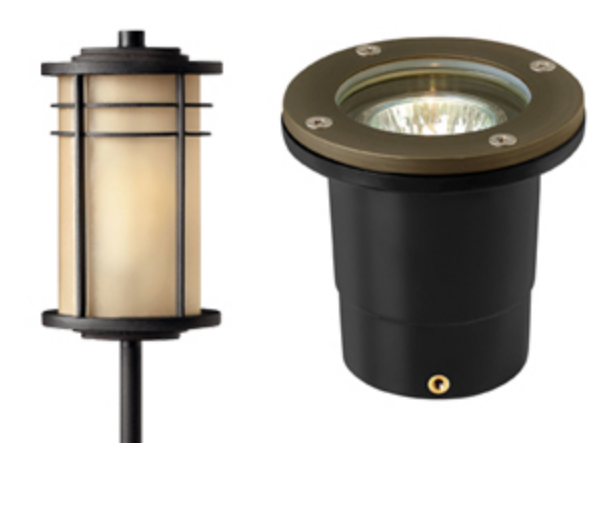


Ceiling Lighting

Ceiling lighting refers to overhead lighting that casts downlight illumination from above. Ceiling lights effectively illuminate spaces by providing a fixed radius of illumination below. Popular for installation in enclosed outdoor areas such as porches, entryways, and gazebos, overhead lighting is best suited for areas where a high level of illumination is desired. Two popular ceiling light types are flush mounts and pendant lights. Flush mount lights are attach directly to the ceiling, while pendant lights include a rod or chain that suspends the fixture from a designated distance from the ceiling. Flush mounts are ideal in spaces with low ceiling heights to provide discrete illumination to spaces. Pendants offer a more dramatic look, best suited for tall or arched ceilings.

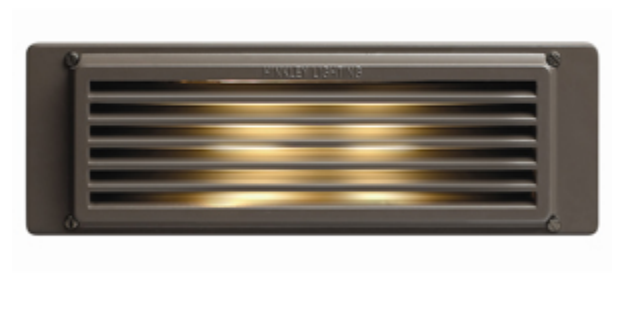
Post Lights

Post lights are lights that are mounted on posts, railings, or fences. These lights are primarily used along pathways, walkways, and around pools, and other various applications. Post lights measure low to the ground, highlighting tripping hazards and landscape features, and offers added visibility. Post lights with taller posts will cast a wider light, whereas designs with shorter posts will only illuminate a small area. Many post lights are solar powered for versatility of styling.



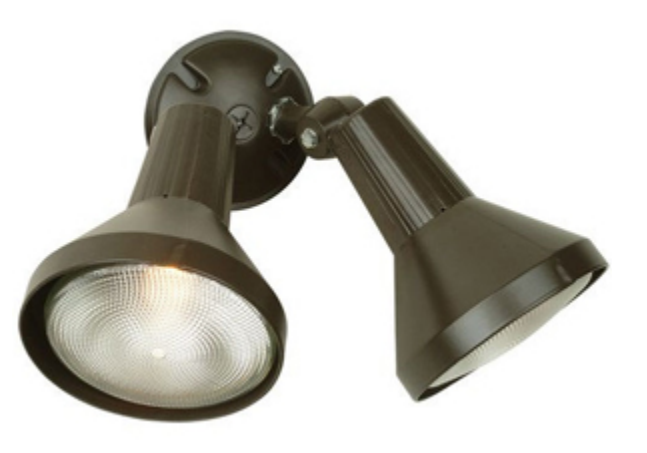
Landscape Lighting

Landscape lighting works to highlight surrounding terrtain such as trees, fountains, shrubs, and flowers at night. Landscape lighting can also accent architectural features. This category includes path lights, post lights, and spotlights. Landscape lighting brings decorative illumination with an ambient glow, while also highlighting tripping hazards and other outdoor obstructions. Decks, gardens, and walkways are popular choices for installation of landscape lighting.



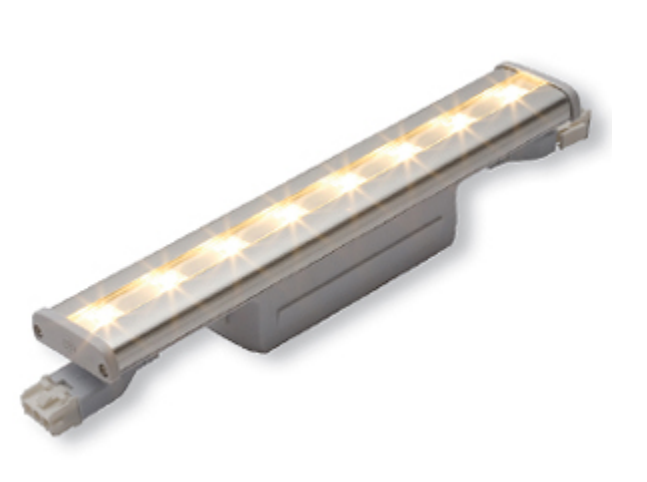
Step Lights

Deck lights or step lights help to illuminate stairs or steps in outdoor settings. Step lights can also be used near pools, driveways, or any setting with an edge or tripping hazard present. Often installed flush with a deck surface or on stair risers, step lights bring security and safety to uneven surfaces.



Security and Flood Lights

Flood lights provide a wide-beamed concentration of illuminated directed towards a specific location. These lights "flood" sizable spaces with ample light coverage to deter intruders and increase security around a home. Flood or security lights may feature a motion sensor that causes the light to turn on when movement is detected. Motion sensors bring an added level of security to flood lights, alerting homeowners to potential criminal activity. Flood lights can also be used to illuminate a sizable area of yard space for late-night activities.



Cove Lighting

Cove lighting is used to illuminate swimming pools, fountains, signs, paths or other similar spaces. Cove lights are comprised of hidden strips of LED bulbs, for an unobtrusive, long-lasting option with versatile applications.

Good To Know

Energy Star-Rated Lighting reduces energy use and operational costs, while still delivering high-quality features. Both bulbs and fixtures can have an Energy Star certification, granted by the U.S. government.

Dark Sky Approved fixtures help to reduce light pollution. Approved lights minimize glare and protect the nighttime environment, providing ample light without bleeding over into neighbors' properties or compromising light levels in the nighttime sky. The International Dark Sky Association determines which fixtures are environmentally responsible and will receive a Fixture Seal of Approval.

Outdoor Lighting Style

Contemporary

Contemporary fixtures feature sleek lines and straight-forward styling. Geometric shapes, clean finishes, and modern glass are trademark characteristics of the contemporary look.

Transitional

Transitional lights bridge the gap between traditional and contemporary styles, lifting elements from both contemporary and classic design for a casual aesthetic. These fixtures may include sleek lines paired with decorative ornamentation such as elegant curved frames and ornate detailing.

Traditional

Traditional fixtures draw upon time-honored motifs for their design. Traditional lights are highly ornamental, and usually recalls a vintage European aesthetic. Popular features in traditional design include frosted glass, curved frames, and antiqued bronze finishes.

Rustic

Popular in country-styled, relaxed settings, rustic lighting integrates textures and well-worn weathering for a warm, decorative look.

Industrial

Industrial style refers to turn-of-the-century factory design, for an aesthetic that brings a gritty, urban edge. These lights use vintage spare light bulbs and reclaimed motifs to achieve the industrial aesthetic.

Outdoor Lighting Placement

- Install floodlights at least 9 ft. above ground level. This ensures the fixture cannot be reached or tampered with, and helps to cast a wider radius of light
- Wall lanterns flanking the sides of a door or garage should measure ¼ the height of the door or garage
- A single pendant or ceiling light above a door or garage should measure 1/3 the height of the door or garage
- Outdoor wall lights should measure close to eye level, with 8'-10' between light sources
  - 5'6" - 6' above the ground
- Path lighting fixtures should be placed evenly, with 2' - 4' between light sources
- Outdoor lights will appear 50% smaller from 50 feet away; opting for larger outdoor fixtures is always preferable
- Balance ambiance with illumination by choosing lower wattage light bulbs when lighting a space with multiple fixtures

Outdoor Lighting Care

Select fixtures crafted from weather resistant materials or shielded by a durable powder coating. Consider moisture, UV exposure, and climate when choosing fixtures, to ensure your lights will stand up to the outdoor elements where they are installed.