

50plus Handyman



Outside Lighting

50plus Handyman director Roger Runswick looks into fitting outside lighting.

Fitting an Outside Light?

The sun is shining, the days are still long and probably the last thing on your mind is the outside lighting. Most people naturally wait until they can't see when coming home before deciding they need some additional lights. But now is the time to think about it, not least because at this time of year any work is likely to cost you less.

If you already have security or safety lighting check it's still working. It's quite amazing how many lights seemingly fail immediately the clocks change in October!

If you are thinking of installing or upgrading lighting then from the installer's perspective (and probably your wallets) the period when it's nice and dry and one can see where to run the cables is the right time to do the work. That means now.

The good news is that sensible outside lighting that provides security and prevents accidents is relatively inexpensive both to buy and install.

What to fit

There are two points to consider with regard to lighting, aesthetics and functionality. Both will impact cost, aesthetics to the greater extent. What are the options?

Solar. In recent years a variety of solar lighting has become available. It doesn't need power running to it or replacement batteries. Although individual units are cheap (typically from £5) a series of solar lights will be required to show you where a path is and won't illuminate it brightly. Higher priced (around £60) security and decorative lights powered from a solar panel via a rechargeable battery are now available. These provide up to 50 short illuminations per night after full charge in strong sunlight. Although technology has improved they offer limited use during overcast British winters.

Low voltage. The 'low' part means the lights are fed from a transformer, typically installed in the house, that converts 240 volts mains power to a safer voltage, usually 12 volts. The great advantage is that the cabling for these lights does not need to meet the strict safety conditions applied to mains powered lights (although it still needs to be protected) whilst a high light output is obtainable. Versatile and a good range available.

Mains powered. Still the usual solution, particularly when attached to the house. Costs range from around £8 for a basic manual light to £100's for feature lighting. A typical PIR (passive infrared) unit is priced from £10. There are some points to be aware of:

- most have a detector which means they switch on only at night but try to avoid the situation where every passing cat, fox or car switches the light on. Careful sighting and use of the sensitivity controls alleviates these potential problems
- illuminating the night sky, half the neighbour's property or blinding motorists is an increasing problem with the 'flood' variety. Do you really need 300 or even 500 watts of power to light up your drive? Probably not, so select a lower wattage model (e.g. 150W) and remember it's you paying for the light pollution.

About cabling

Assuming basic lighting is chosen the prime cost is usually getting the power to the lights i.e. running a cable from a suitable point. Lights should be fed from lighting circuits but a fused spur from a 13A mains point can also be employed. Always fit a switch otherwise you can't change the bulb safely and remember automatic lights are often reset via a timed switch on/off sequence.

Cabling look tidiest if it's fed straight through the wall but a run can be clipped to the exterior of a building or laid in trunking. 240 volt cables run in the garden must be suitably protected and armoured if underground.

Lastly, do be safe. As with all electrical work the installation should meet IEE 16th Edition Wiring Regulations (BS7671) standards. If in doubt have work checked by a qualified electrician or company. Some electrical work is now subject to Part P of the Building Regulations and must be undertaken and certified by a competent person.

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