

Landscape Lighting

—OR—

“I Paid All This Money for Landscaping and Now I Have to Work Late to Pay for It, So I Never Get to See It During the Day”

by Bruce Zaretsky

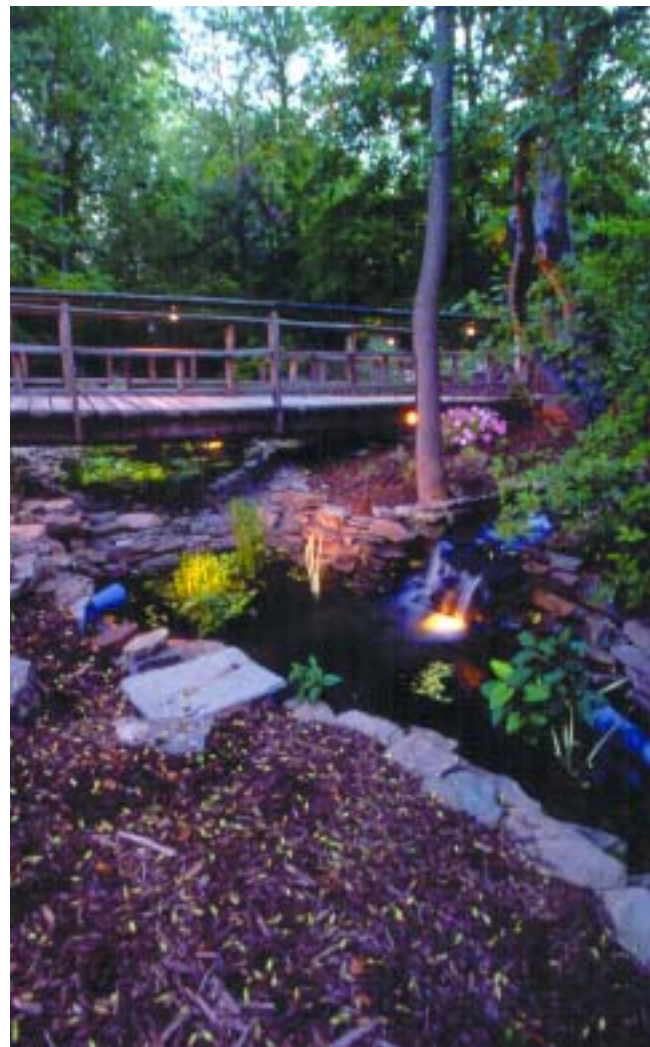
photos by John C. Menihan, Jr.

Bruce Zaretsky shares professional and practical landscaping tips for using lighting in your landscape.

Boy, what a weekend! You’ve spent the last two days digging and planting and planting and digging, and now it’s Sunday night. You’re tired, but after a quick survey of the yard, your satisfaction far outweighs your exhaustion. “Just look at that tree!” you exclaim, “and that sculpture in the garden really looks cool!” But, now it’s getting dark and you barely have enough time to admire your work before it’s too dark to see, and you still have to get in the shower and ready for the week’s work. Now you’re lamenting the fact that it will be next Saturday before you get to see the fine work you’ve done, because by the time you get home from work, it’s already dark. “Boy, what a bum deal,” you think. “That’s it! I’m quitting my job and working in the yard full time.”

But, wait. Before you quit that day job, ask yourself this question: “Why not nightscape?”

“Nightscape? What’s nightscape?” you ask.



The lights mounted under the rails illuminate the bridge for safety as well as for effect. We have used an underwater spotlight to uplight the waterfall and a Par-36 fixture to hit the plants and stonework across the creek.

Nightscaping

Nightscaping is the design and installation of lighting in the landscape. It can be as simple as putting in a few pathlights, or as complex as lighting the entire landscape, including trees, sculptures, architectural features, decks, and so on. Lighting your landscape not only provides safe access and security, but it also looks pretty cool. A well implemented lighting scheme will stand out from the surrounding landscape like, well, a beam of light. For the best effects, lighting should be designed in advance, just like any other landscape work. While it can be installed as an afterthought, it helps to have a plan of attack in



Lights surrounding this pond include various pathlights used to highlight plantings, a light in the pond, which will silhouette the water lilies after total darkness, and the hidden spotlight shining across the waterfall.

advance, especially for things such as running wires below paving, which we’ll talk about.

Let’s start with a question: “Why light?” Glad you asked. There are essentially three reasons for Nightscaping. First, there is mood or effect lighting. An example would be uplighting a tree. Effect lighting is done mainly because it looks good, but it can also be used for other things such as lighting walkways. Second, you should put lights wherever there is an elevation change (steps, etc.), at the entry to walkways, and near bodies of water. This is pathlighting. Last, there is a further safety issue and lighting dark areas eliminates places for burglars to hide. In most cases, lighting is designed to take these three items into account. The most dramatic results are in effect lighting.

In simple terms, there are two schools of thought when it comes to Nightscaping. The first is to design the lighting to mimic nature. In nature there are two types of lighting: down-

lighting and backlighting. If you can picture what your yard looks like in a full moon with subtle shadows of trees and plants on the ground, then you can picture downlighting (or moonlighting). Now picture a tree on the horizon with the sun having just set behind it. The tree is silhouetted against the bright background. This is backlighting. So the first school of thought would say that we should downlight and backlight our landscape so we can mimic what nature would do.

The second school of thought is to create a whole new landscape at night. Take that five-foot shrub in front of your house and make it look like a tree at night by uplighting it on a tall blank wall. This is called shadowing. Hide a piece of sculpture in the plantings and spotlight it so it really becomes a focal point at night. Uplight interesting trees like Japanese maple and dogwood. Shine a spotlight *across* a waterfall so it shadows the moving water on the stone



Raillights and uplighting on the cedar siding of the house complement the beauty of the light coming throughout the leaded-glass door and creates a warm, inviting entry.

work.

These two schools of thought can be combined in your design. Don't take one idea too literally because it will stagnate your design process. Relax and let your instincts and passions take over. I personally prefer to change the landscape at night with my lighting design. However, I am still guilty of climbing up into trees and hanging downlight fixtures just for the effect of moonlighting the branches onto the ground. This is especially dramatic when there is snow on the ground, which here in New York State, is not lacking in winter.

Low-Voltage vs 120v Lighting

So, how do you accomplish all this? What types of fixtures do you use? Where do you plug them in? Let's take it a step at a time. First, most

of you are aware of lights that are on your home. Most likely, you have a porch light or a post light out in the yard. These are 120v lights and they are powered by the wiring in your house. If you choose to install 120v lighting, you'll need an electrician.

In the vast majority of landscape lighting, we use *low-voltage* lighting which is a 12v system. Your car is a twelve-volt system, with twelve-volt lights. In fact, one of my favorite lights to use in landscaping are Par-36 bulbs, which are car headlight bulbs. Low-voltage lights are powered by a transformer plugged into a 120v outlet, which then transforms the 120v down to 12v. Twelve-volt bulbs are more powerful than you would think. On average, a 120v bulb three times as strong. For example, a 25 watt low voltage bulb will put out as much



Spotlighting up on to a kousa dogwood and a hinoki cypress. Notice the pathlight which will be hidden by the fountain grass as it matures.



This pond has both waterfalls lit by crosslighting the water. The dogwood behind the big falls is uplit with a Par-36 fixture and is beautifully reflected in a swimming pool to the right of the pond. Underwater lights are great for seeing the fish at night as well as for silhouetting the lilies. Don't keep lights on all night in a pond.

light as a 75 watt 120v bulb. These are simple to install, and not beyond the scope of the average do-it-yourselfer.

Transformers

The heart of any low-voltage lighting system is the transformer. Low-voltage transformers work on the principle of transforming the 120-volt electrical in your home to 12-volt. Remember your model train kit when you were a kid? They work exactly the same way. Just as you can overload the circuits in your home with appliances (ever 'pop' a breaker or fuse?), you can also overload the transformer. Most transformers are rated in total watts: 100 watts, 250 watts, etc. It's important that you don't overload the system. While you won't 'pop' the breaker by overloading, you will have dimmer lights. So, let's discuss a few basic rules of thumb when specifying transformers and lighting:

1. One principle of low-voltage lighting is that

you will tend to 'lose' electricity along the wire. This means that there will be more electricity ten feet from the transformer than there is 100 feet from it. For this reason, try to keep your cable runs less than one hundred feet for each circuit you are running.

2. Speaking of cable: low-voltage cable is specified in gauges. It will be sold as 12-2, 14-2, 16-2, etc, with the first number representing the gauge and the second showing that it is a two-wire cable. With wire, the lower the gauge, the thicker the wire (don't ask me why!) We always use twelve-gauge wire. Sometimes we'll run 18-gauge for lights mounted in trees because it's less noticeable. The thicker the wire, the less loss of electricity over long runs.

3. Do not specify more than 80% of the total wattage of the transformer. For example, you shouldn't run more than 80 watts on a 100 watt transformer. You can go more, if you wish, but be aware that your lights may be dimmer, espe-



By placing a fixture away from a tree, you can achieve excellent shadowing on the facade of the house. Also, notice the dramatic effect of uplighting a tree with a pitch-black background.

cially at the end of the run.

4. There are many ways to use the transformer to turn on the lights. You can switch them on manually, or you can use a photocell or a timer. I prefer to use a photocell to turn them on and a timer to turn them off. That way your lights will always turn on at dusk and turn off at a predetermined time.

5. In most cases, the transformer will be mounted on the outside of your house. Try to mount it out of the way. It pays to have an electrician run an exterior outlet someplace out of sight. Make sure that it is a ground-fault-circuit-interrupter (GFCI) and has a bubble cover to keep water out. Then just plug the transformer in.

Fixtures and Bulbs

Now that we have decided to use low-voltage lighting, let's talk about those fixtures and bulbs. We can simplify the fixtures into three categories: pathlights, spotlights and specialty lights. Pathlights are lights that will illuminate walkways and paths. In most cases, pathlights use a bayonet style bulb (remember the old taillight bulbs in your car?!) When choosing to light your pathways, try to avoid lining up the fixtures to

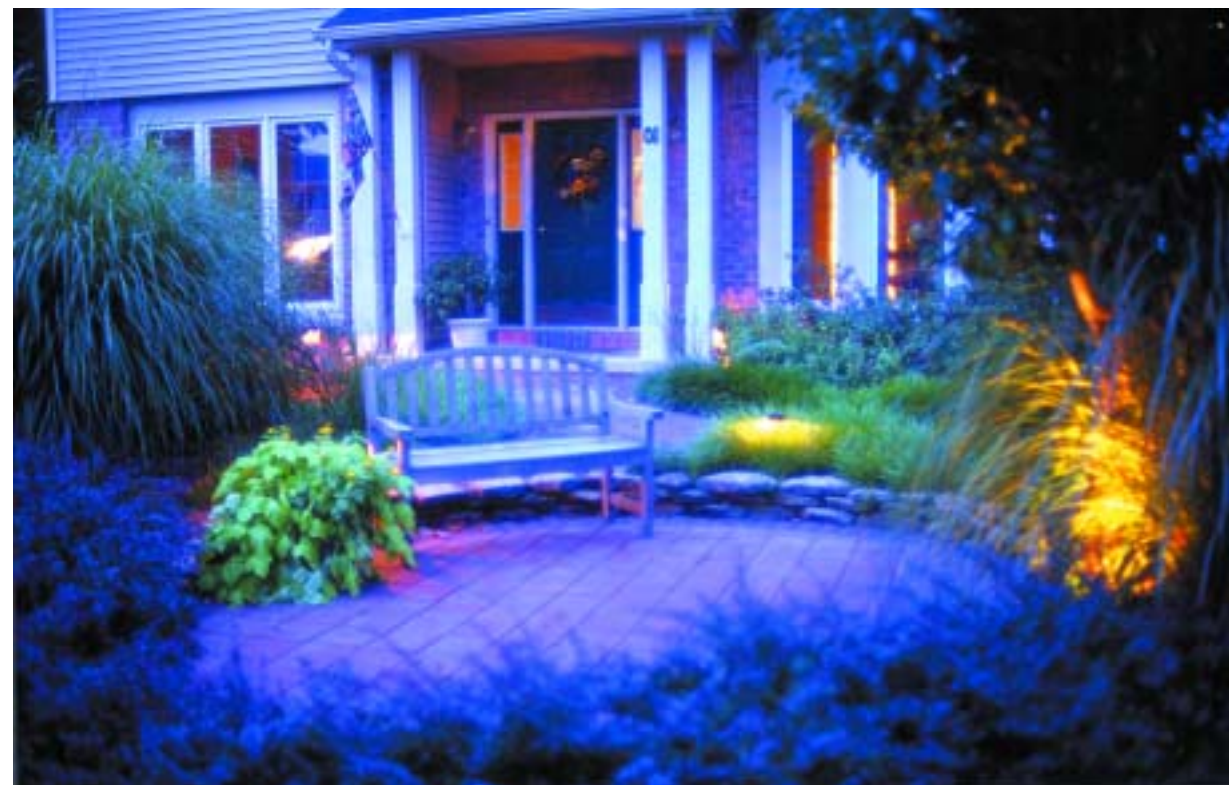
create the dreaded 'runway effect,' unless this appeals to you, or you want small planes to land on your walkway.

Spotlights can be used for virtually anything: uplighting, downlighting, backlighting, highlighting, etc. While this is mainly effect lighting, a fixture such as a downlight in a tree can also be used to light pathways.

Specialty lights are really a variation of the above lights. There are lights that can be mounted into steps or walls; these can be used as path or spotlights. We also have fixtures that can be mounted under deck railings. They highlight



This entry features lighting up on the brick facade with MR-16 fixtures, minimal pathlighting (including a small downlighter from the crabapple), and excellent illumination of the river birch in the background. Notice all the pathlights are placed *into* the plantings.



Bury pathlights in plantings to not only light the walkway, but to also highlight plant textures. To the left, grasses are a favorite lighting subject.

the railing detail, as well as shrubs or sculptures below them. Other fixtures available are strip lighting (like holiday lights) and underwater lights.

We typically use three types of bulbs. Par-36 bulbs are the same as your car's headlights; they will throw a beam a long way and are great for uplighting trees. MR-16 bulbs are high-intensity, tungsten, halogen bulbs, which give a truer white light. These are excellent for highlighting bricks and other colors at night. As mentioned before, bayonet bulbs are used mostly for pathlighting, although we will also use them for low level spot lighting (on a sculpture, for instance).

Design

Now that we have the technical stuff out of the way, let's talk about design. When designing lighting for a property, I will include light-

ing specifications in the landscape plan I've drawn. Sometimes, though, the final installation will be different from the original lighting plan. The simple reason is that ideas change; something that looked perfect on paper might need adjustment when the plantings and other features are installed. Also, we may discover that there are other features that should be highlighted (for example, a boulder that we have unearthed on the site). But the plan is useful for some things that probably will not change, like the transformer location and wiring layout. If you are landscaping from scratch, which includes installation of a walkway, driveway or patio, install a piece of conduit under the paving. If nothing else other than lighting wire will be run through the conduit, then a one-inch piece should do. If you are adding lighting to an existing landscape, the paving can be a hindrance; you'll have to



This view shows the placement of the 'hidden' spotlight used to illuminate the waterfall. Cross lighting the waterfall creates great shadowing of the water on the rocks beyond.

decide if it's better to bore under the paving or to run the wires around it.

So, all that having been said, let's take a look at a simple lighting scheme. Imagine a colonial style home with a brick walkway. Its facade is brick and it has simple plantings along the foundation. Outside the walkway, we have an ornamental tree with perennials below. In the front lawn, there are two newly planted shade trees.

Let's put Par-36 uplight fixtures on the three trees. Simple in-ground canister fixtures work

best. As these trees grow and spread, more lights can be added. MR-16 uplight fixtures are used to highlight the brick on the house. Put the fixtures about one foot from the wall and shine them straight up. Actually, we're getting two effects here: we're highlighting the brick and we're silhouetting the plants in front. The MR-16 would provide the best color-highlighting of the brick. Again, we'll use in-ground canister fixtures. OK, now the walkway: let's try to hide the lights behind the plantings. We may be able to use the residual light from uplighting the ornamental tree, or downlighting out of it, then we don't have so many fixtures along the walkway. This not only avoids the possibility of planes landing on the walkway, but also provides the added effect of highlighting the plant's foliage. You'll notice that we didn't specify a ton of lights and there is a reason. The first rule of lighting is this: less is more. You can always add more lights in the future, but for effect lighting, areas of dark are just as important. This simple layout will provide a dramatic nighttime effect in the front landscape.

Now, let's take a look at the rear landscape. Let's imagine that there is a deck which is surrounded by planting beds and a small stone path. In the beds there are two ornamental trees which will shade the deck from the sun. A simple design for lighting would be uplighting the two flowering trees using a Par-36 fixture in the ground. Let's hang downlights in the trees to highlight the low plantings below the trees. The effect of shadowing the tree branches on the ground will be most appreciated in the winter,



Rail lights provide safe access and a stunning effect.

especially if you get snow. The downlights in the trees are fixtures with bayonet-style bulbs. These bulbs typically range from four to twenty watts. *I never specify any less than an 11-watt bulb.* Most 'kit' systems for sale at home centers use either four- or seven-watt bulbs. These may be fine for low path fixtures which are placed closely together, but not for the soft spotlighting we're using in the trees.

For the stone pathway, we can use a low level pathlight. It will highlight the plantings next to the fixture, highlight the rough texture of the stone path, and it will light the way to the deck and illuminate an elevation change. Now the fun part: let's use lights mounted in the deck rails. These lights shine

down. I love using these lights, because they create a nice illumination of the railing in addition to highlighting the plantings below the deck. And, in the case of steps, they can be used to light the elevation change. Pretty cool.

So, with the use of a few lights, we have created an intimate dining space or a place to gather with friends in soft illumination. As I stressed before, when it comes to lighting, less can be more. And in this case, it works!

Nightscaping Water Features

No discussion of lighting would be complete without addressing one of my great loves: ponds and waterfalls. Nothing looks more dramatic in the landscape than illuminated moving water. Special underwater low-voltage lights are available for lighting up a waterfall or casting a glow throughout the pond. These are simple. Other things to consider would be lighting the surrounding landscape to highlight the water. Use spotlights (with MR-16 bulbs) to cast light across the stone work in the pond. Spot across the waterfall to shadow the moving water on the rocks beyond. If you have a still water surface, light a tree behind the pond to create a reflection of it in the water. Shine a spotlight up a



Pathlights buried in the plantings and spotlights directed up on the 'PeeGee' hydrangea create neat effects. This still-to-be-completed landscape will have a pergola buried in the hydrangea with lighting down for soft illumination.

creek. Use a sharp beam spotlight to light a night blooming water lily. And on and on.

“Hey, the lights came on!”

Whew! So many ideas, so little time. And money! And there again lies one of the beautiful things about low-voltage lighting. You don't have to do it all at once. So, start slowly. Experiment. Try one angle. Then try another. Put the light here, then there. Try a pathlight, then hang a light in a tree to see the difference. Do what strikes your fancy. In the end, you'll have a landscape that you don't need to see just during the day. In fact, you'll find that you can't wait until dark. “Hey, the lights came on!” You'll go to work and look forward to coming home in the dark just to 'illuminate' your world.

Recommended companies:

The following companies make some of the best quality lighting available. While they are more expensive than what you usually find in home centers, they will last a lifetime. Use quality, and you will never regret it.

Escort Lighting

Nightscaping by Loran

Kichler

Arroyo Craftsman

Hanover

(opposite page)

Rail lights illuminate the bridge and spotlights hit the various tree trunks and foliage surrounding this pond and creek.

Bruce Zaretsky Landscaping, Inc.

Is a Rochester, New York-based design/build firm specializing in the design & installation of landscapes, including water features, plantings, low-voltage lighting, walkways and patios, and retaining walls. They have been the recipient of many awards at the Greater Rochester Flower & Garden Show including Best of Show for two of the last three years and Most Creative Use of Water four of the last five years. Their work has also been featured in national and regional publications. Many examples of their work can be seen on their web site at www.bzli.com. Bruce Zaretsky actually holds a BA in Chemistry from Alfred University in New York and has been designing and constructing landscapes for twenty years. Sharon Coates joined Bruce Zaretsky Landscaping Inc. in 1998 after owning her own landscape design/build company for 9 years. Recently, they were honored with the Grand Award in the 30th Annual Environmental Improvement Awards Program sponsored by the Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA) for their 'Paradise Falls' design that was featured at the Greater Rochester Flower and Garden Show in March of 1999. 'Paradise Falls' won Best of Show and Most Creative Use of Water from the Genesee/Finger Lakes Nursery and Landscape Association in that show. You can reach Bruce and Sharon at 716-377-8330 or through their website at www.bzli.com



Getting the Best from Your Waterlilies

by Reg Henley

Reginald Henley, prominent British waterlily grower and hybridizer, shares tips for the perfect waterlily pond.

Over thirty-five years ago, we built our first garden pond. It measured about 6 feet in overall length with a width of 2.5 feet and two levels, one at 20 inches and the other at 10 inches deep. We were soon given a waterlily plant with no name by a neighbor. The plant flowered well the first year. By taking a flower and a leaf to a waterlily nursery, we discovered that our waterlily was *Marliacea carnea*, a cream to white flower with pink at the base.

In the autumn, I lifted the plant to examine it and found the plant had produced an offset which had roots of its own. I separated the offset and repotted both plants in separate containers, placing the new plant in the shallow section of the pool.

The following summer both plants flowered extensively, but the plant in the shallow section had so much pink radiating from the base of the flowers that none of our visitors would believe the two plants were of the same origin. The shallow-growing plant



N. 'Firecrest' boasts soft pink petals and flaming stamens in the heart of each flower. Photo by H. Nash

also had smaller leaves and flowers and was much more impressive than the same plant in deeper water. I found such a change to take place most intriguing, and from then on, I started to collect waterlilies to an extent that all the family became involved. We have moved house twice, each time looking for a larger garden to fill with ponds and waterlilies. Our back garden now is 7 fi acres of mostly ponds and the Collection has grown from one to over 300 varieties... and is still growing.

Waterlilies come in a range of sizes with leaves ranging from 1.5 inches (4cm) to 20 inches (50 cm) in diameter with flowers usually between 1/3 to fi of the leaf size. They grow in water depths from 2 inches to around 3 feet, and, according to the Odiham

Waterlily Collection's records, with whom we share a home, there are over 300 varieties now to choose from in an ever increasing color range. While at this moment some of these varieties are not readily available to the public, once customers become aware of the beautiful waterlilies that do exist, growers, including myself, will have to extend the number of varieties grown to meet that demand.

From this information you can understand that a water garden can vary a great deal in size. In the past, I have successfully grown miniature waterlilies in a plastic washing up bowl for several years without any problems except overcrowding after the third year.

The garden pool you choose for your waterlilies should be given a lot of thought, as a well planned pool will give years of pleasure with a minimum of maintenance, but a poorly designed pool in the wrong location will bring nothing but disappointment until the basic faults are corrected.

I have always advised prospective pond makers the same thing for many years, "The best possible shape is like a saucer, the worst possible shape is like a grave." Every garden pool falls between these two extremes; the closer you are to the first, the more successful your garden pool will be. While it is almost impossible to offer a mathematical formulation for depth in relation to the surface area, because no two situations



N. 'Hal Miller' is a rugged, large white lily that performs well in the larger pool, blooming even in partial shade. Photo by Ron Everhart

are ever the same, a very rough guide for a small lily pool is if your pool is going to be 3 feet across, one foot deep would be sufficient for very small or miniature waterlilies. Remember that the clear spaces between waterlily leaves make for beautiful reflections which enhance the whole scene, whereas an overcrowded pool looks more like a nurseryman's production patch. A few other things to remember are:

Firstly, the latitude at which we find ourselves is one of the most Northerly countries where waterlilies are extensively grown by the public in their gardens. This means we need every



Tucked in the midst of this melange of waterlily leaves is Joseph B.L. Marliac's pygmy N. 'Helvola.' Not only does the pond look like a nurseryman's plant production, the lily plants cannot receive enough sunlight for their best growth and bloom. Photo by H. Nash

minute of sunlight we can get onto the water surface. It is impossible to have too much sunlight. Any shading that is thrown onto the water should be looked at seriously, while protection from the North should be encouraged. The whole idea is to create a suntrap; the warmer it becomes, the more your waterlilies will flower.

The second part is clear water where the sunlight can reach down to the crown of the plant and the soil or shingle surrounding it. This is very important to the well-being of your waterlily. As the sunlight passes through the water, it hits the dark color of the soil and waterlily crown and this is transferred to heat. This aids growth and flower production while also improving flower color.

Thirdly, and equally important, is the depth at which you grow your waterlily. While catalogs try to give you some idea of the depth range of a waterlily, they are, at best, vague. The only information I can tell you after over 30 years of growing waterlilies is that every waterlily will grow better in a shallower water depth than the depth recommended, and very few will grow deeper. So often the depth quoted is what a waterlily can develop to when growing naturally in a soil-based pond with a root system reaching out in a six-foot-radius from the crown and feeding on all the nutrients available in that



A recent Kirk Strawn introduction, *N.* 'Georgia Peach.' offers variegated leaves and lush apricot color. Photo by H. Nash

area. For your garden pool with your waterlily in a plastic container, growing in 5-10 liters of soil, it can hardly compete. Fortunately, waterlilies are very adaptable. A plant of quite strong growth will, even with limited food supply and shallower depth, still survive producing smaller leaves and flowers, but not so many as a plant that has been allowed to develop to its full potential. Adding to this the fact that in the UK the sunlight is unable to increase the soil temperature any deeper than in 3 feet in crystal



Marliac's *N.* 'James Brydon' offers a lovely cup-shaped flower of exquisite color. The lily blooms well even in partial shade, although tending to bloom in anxiously awaited spurts. Photo by Ron Everhart

clear water, you can understand that any garden pool over about 30 inches in depth is a waste of time and energy. Waterlilies that grow at greater depths are best suited to large lakes.

Waterlilies, as you can understand so far, require sun, warmth, and clear water. However, they do not like moving water in any form. Fountains cause brown spots on the leaves and flowers, and waterfalls keep the water cool. If you already have a garden pool with an existing waterfall which is powered by a water pump, or if feel you need one in your particular instant, locate the pump at the base of the waterfall to leave the rest of the pool with relatively undisturbed water where you can grow your waterlilies.

Another point to consider in this planning stage is the water level. This should be controlled by an overflow, thereby maintaining a consistent level as near to the top of your pool as is possible. When people have fish ponds they tend to allow the level to drop 4-6 inches below the surrounding ground level, thereby making fishing by the neighbor's cat more difficult. This idea is detrimental to waterlilies, as the shade thrown onto the water surface deprives the plants of vital sunshine in early morning and late evening. It is impossible to over emphasize the value of sunshine on your waterlilies. On occasions in the past, I have personally moved a waterlily in its container from the sunlit side of the pool to the slightly shaded side, only to have



N. 'Comanche' (formerly 'J.C.N. Forestier') is a changeable Marliac cultivar that offers successive color variations with each day's bloom. Photo by Perry D. Slocum

buds that were a few days from flowering go black and rot away.

As stated above, there is a tremendous number of water lilies to choose from, and each year brings more, unfortunately not always better than those that have existed for many years. My advice is to take the time to visit a National Collection of Waterlilies. There are 2 in the South of England, 1 in the Midlands, and 1 in the North. They are all registered with the National Council for Conservation of Plants and Gardens. (*In the U.S., large named collections can be found at the Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis and in Denver at the Denver Botanic Gardens.*) That way you will be able to see first-hand what beautiful varieties can be grown in your garden pool. The best time to visit a Collection is between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m., June to September. This is, of course, dependent on our English summers. A

few years ago, while researching hybridizing of waterlilies, I was able to carry on pollinating lilies until November with plenty of varieties still flowering.

All the information given so far has been for the benefit of waterlilies only. While a lily pool will succeed and prosper without the introduction of fish, this does not mean fish will not survive with waterlilies. However, overstocking with fish can destroy the delicate balance that keeps the water crystal clear, so do take care when stocking with any type of fish. Do not be tempted to stock your pool with a scavenger fish such as tench or catfish. These fish do not eat general rubbish in the bottom of our pools, but they do eat the small insects that develop in pools and which help to break down the waste products that accumulate there, as well as stir-

ring up the bottom silt and clouding the water in the process.

A lot of our customers have thought over the years that a garden pool without fish was a haven for mosquito larvae, but this is not strictly true. Mosquitos are attracted to stagnant water that has been held in a static position without any form of submerged plant life growing in it, such as a rainwater butt used to collect rainwater from the roof. A garden pool with a few submerged plants, generally called oxygenators, planted in containers with good garden topsoil will keep the water sweet and clear and not attract mosquitos at all.☺

Reg Henley, his wife Ann, and his daughter Clair own Wychwood Waterlily Farm in Odiham, England where they also manage the Odiham National Waterlily Collection.



(above) Leaving space between your water lilies allows for reflections as beautiful as the blooms themselves. This picture of Kirk Strawn's *N. 'Charlene Strawn'* was taken just after a rainfall. *Photo by Ron Everhart*
(opposite page) While tropical water lilies are the mainstay of the warm climate garden, their special beauty is a delight in Northern temperate gardens, too. Show here is Monroe Birdsey's *N. 'Albert Greenberg'* and George H. Pring's purple, cluster-centered *N. 'Midnight.'* *Photo by H. Nash*



Roadside Blue

by Jim Leonard

Photos by Jim Leonard unless otherwise noted.

Plan a trip this spring to southwest Louisiana and the country of the native blue Louisiana irises.

Southwest Louisiana is Cajun country, land of rice fields, cypress swamps, prairie lands, crawfish, spicy food and Zydeco music. The area is a living cultural museum where French, German, Anglo and African-American struggle together on small farms to raise families and enjoy life. It is a land whose beauty lies in the hearts and spirits of the people. It is also a land where the giant Louisiana native blue iris grows tall and proud.

The southern parishes of Southwest Louisiana are natural water gardens. A large percentage of the land mass in Cameron and Vermilion parishes is covered with water. All types of aquatic plants can be seen from the roadways, but the most spectacular,

absolutely breath-taking, and totally unexpected sight are the acres and acres of wild blue irises in full bloom.

Pecan Island, Louisiana, is where you can see and photograph the native blues at their peak bloom. There is not a travel bulletin on Louisiana which mentions the grandeur of this three-week event; but be assured that a trip to see the bloom between the last week of March through the second week of April far exceeds any garden or swamp tour recommended by the experts.

Pecan Island is not really an island surrounded by water, for it rests on a 'chenier' enclosed on both sides by marshland. Chenier means oak place, and it is an ancient beach ridge which is several feet higher in elevation than the surrounding marshland. The chenier acts as a barrier between the Gulf salt water marsh and the freshwater marsh to the north side of the cropping. The chenier also offers a place upon which people can build homes and live in harmony with nature around them. The population of Pecan Island is approximately three hundred and fifty, and the majority of the inhabitants make their living by raising



In the foreground, the swamp pond at the Winch home on Pecan

cattle, fishing, trapping, or oil field service work.

Getting to Pecan Island is a trip within a trip. Along the way there is a lot to see and do, so bring along a pair of binoculars, camera, and a bird identification book. The entire trip from the first turn off of Interstate I-10 onto LA Hwy 27 to the last turn back onto the interstate outside of Lafayette will take about five hours and cover approximately 150 miles. The roads are decent, if somewhat narrow.

Along Interstate 10 and about twenty-five miles from the Texas/Louisiana border, near Sulfur, Louisiana, is the exit to Louisiana Highway 27. Head south on 27 and shortly thereafter the highway becomes designated as a national scenic byway and is called the Creole Nature Trail. The industrialization of Sulfur quickly gives way to cattle pastures and country scenes. Further south the fields get wetter and wetter as the elevation slowly decreases. Soon the pasture lands share their space with small ponds and meandering bayous. About fifteen miles from the Sulfur turnoff, the Ellender bridge crosses the intercoastal canal and on the other side of the bridge the environment suddenly changes to a marsh prairie. The few

people that live near this prairie inhabit the town of Hackberry, and a few miles past Hackberry is the Sabine Wildlife Refuge.

A stop at the refuge is well worth the time. The visitor's trail is a 1.5 mile walk out into the marshland, and it is one of southwest Louisiana's most popular tourist attractions. The preserve was established in 1937 with 125,000 acres of coastal marsh. In March and



A native white *giganticaerula*. Photo by Sue Bridges.

April the birds are everywhere, and from the walking trail thousands of migratory birds can be seen, including ducks, geese, warblers, king birds, kingfishers, orioles, yellow-billed cuckoos, white-fronted ibis, purple gallinules, roseate spoonbills and great blue herons. The alligators attract attention, and more likely than not, the trail visitor will see a juvenile gator swimming around...and where there is a young alligator, the mother is not far away.

Leaving the Refuge, head south to Holly Beach. This is a shore beach, and it is one of the few Louisiana coastal shore areas where the roadway goes all the way to the surf. Louisiana has a small natural sandy coastline, but access to it is extremely limited. Southwest Louisianans come to Holly Beach to “pass a good time,” which usually includes drinking a few beers, telling stories while fishing or crabbing, and then eating the catch.

At Holly Beach Highway 27 ends at Highway 82. Highway 82 runs in both an easterly and a westerly direction. The roadway starts in Texas near Port Arthur and ends in Abbeville, Louisiana. Eastward is the way to Pecan Island and the giant blue irises, and shortly after the turn there is a public ferry across the Calcasieu River. On the way to the ferry, an occasional iris stand may be seen, but these clumps are mere precursors of the ones to come.

The ferry docks near Cameron, Louisiana. Cameron is the Parish seat, and it is home to several oil field service companies. These service companies provide men and material to the offshore oil and gas platforms which are scattered over the other continental shelf in the Gulf. Cameron is also a fishing village where local processors accept catches of menhaden and shrimp. Menhaden, commonly called pogy fish, is a small oily and smelly fish which, after



Take a boat ride to immerse yourself among the irises.



Along the driveway to the Winch home on Pecan Island, a treasure trove of native blues.

the extracting process, is reduced to an oil used in cosmetics, paints, medicine, and margarine.

Continuing eastward on Highway 82, the next community is called Oak Grove, and not more than a quarter of a mile from the blinking light at Oak Grove is the Oak Grove Hunting Club. The facility is one of the most famous duck hunting camps in Southwest Louisiana. During the duck season, hunters come from all over the country to shoot their limit and enjoy the hospitality of camp life. Duck hunting is a passion in this area, and the art of the hunt is passed down from generation to generation. It is told that Dwight Eisenhower was hunting at the camp when Pearl Harbor was bombed. Immediately behind the club is a low marshy area which contains thousands of native blue irises. Pull into the front of the facility and ask permission to look. The blooming irises are



Purple native Louisiana iris. Photo by Sue bridges mixed among moss draped trees, the scene representative of Pecan Island's grandeur.

From the hunting club, continue to head east

on Highway 82. Pecan Island is about forty miles away, but on the sides of the roadway, stands of blue irises will suddenly appear nestled in among willows and other hardwood trees. Grand Chenier is the next small community and shortly thereafter is Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge. The Refuge is an internationally known alligator research center, containing 84,000 acres of marshland. The preserve has a visitors' center which is open week days. The road continues along the oak chenier for about six miles. With tree limbs forming a canopy over the highway, the shade and filtered light provides a sharp contrast to the open fields of the marshland.

The vista suddenly opens up onto a panoramic view with marshland on both sides of the road. Even though a drop in elevation is not felt, the chenier evaporates and the road cuts through the marsh. This section of roadway to Pecan Island could easily be called the alligator

beltway, for in the next twenty miles alligators of all sizes can be seen in the ditches on either side of the road. Also along this stretch of road an occasional grouping of blue irises blooms, but they are partially lost in the vastness of the marsh landscape. Slowly the road gains in elevation, and the big blue irises appear everywhere. Pecan Island is on the horizon.

Pecan Island doesn't have any town boundary. The highway runs the length of the town for about six miles. At any particular location the irises can be seen, but three particular turns of the highway lead to special sights. Do not be hesitant to make a wrong turn, for it is impossible to get lost. Highway 82 is the only main road in the area and most side roads quickly end at the marsh.

Approximately two and one half miles from Rollover Marina on the right is Front Ridge Road. It is difficult to read this road sign, but



Behind Oak Grove Camp are huge stands of native blues.

Exxon has a sign marking the turn for its employees to turn right to get to its dock. After the right hand turn, the big blues immediately appear on the left next to an old wood frame cottage. A little further down the road and right after it makes a turn to the left is a large field of wild native blues.

At this location it is hard to get a good close up photograph, and it is best to head back to highway 82. Turn right or eastward and travel for approximately two miles to Ibra Road. Turn left from the highway and less than a quarter of a mile on the right side is a large cypress swamp carpeted with the wild blue irises for as far as the eye can see. This is a picture you won't want to miss, and it is easy to get a good one from this location.

Another close-up shot can be taken at Donna Winch's. From Ibra Road head eastward again for about a mile to Mrs. Winch's driveway on the left. It is a hard shell road and as soon as you turn onto it, the iris swamp immediately captures the view. Irises fill the entirety of the open spaces between the giant cypress trees in the swamp. Besides the blues, different shades of blue or even purple may be seen, only hinting at the natural color spectrum of the Louisiana irises.

Deeper in the marsh, native white *giganticaerulea* hide, but most of the giant white stands were destroyed after a series of hurricanes moved mountains of water over the chenier in the

late fifties and early sixties. Although Mrs. Winch reports that she has seen several big stands of white irises deep in her marsh, the only roadside view we gained was one white surrounded by various shades of blue on one of the side roads.

When it is time to travel on, turn east again on Highway 82 and head to Abbeville for a great meal. There are not any restaurants on Pecan Island, but the drive to Abbeville and a delightful culinary experience is a brief forty



White and purple natives on Pecan Island's Winch property. Photo by Sue Bridges



Along Grand Chenier Road, stands of native blue iris adorn the marshland.



On Pecan Island, the native blues.

miles away. Highway 82 continues its easterly direction from the Winch's driveway for about two miles before turning to the north and slicing through a vast marshland as the chenier ends. Here large areas of wild irises are growing intermixed with other aquatic plants on both sides of the roadway. Along this section of the road, roadside pullovers and wooden piers allow visitors and locals to fish or look at the wildlife. The marsh extends all the way to the inter-coastal canal bridge, but it ends almost abruptly here. After crossing the bridge, rice fields and cattle pasture lands reappear. It is as if different worlds are joined by the canal. A very short distance after the bridge, Highway 82 turns east again to lead to the towns of Ester and Perry.

This part of Highway 82 is also designated as

one of Louisiana's scenic highways, and the road signs give adequate directions to Abbeville. The drive is pleasant and the charm of Abbeville's town square, small retail shops, courthouse and Cathedral is captivating. Several notable restaurants are near the Catholic church, which is in the center of the community. Fortunately at this time of year, oysters, crayfish, shrimp and alligator are available on most menus. The Abbeville

area is also special in the iris world, for in the swamps south of Abbeville is where the native red *fulva* was discovered. This small red iris was extensively used in cross breeding with other natives, resulting in hybrids with a wonderful range of color and form which are the hallmarks of the Louisiana iris. These combinations of color, size and shape can be seen in Lafayette at the tourist center.

From Abbeville take Highway 167 and head north toward Lafayette. Stay on the highway as it passes through an extensive strip of retail stores to intersect with Highway 90. Turn left or northwest onto Highway 90 and travel for about two miles until the Lafayette tourist center appears on the left. The center is a nice place to stop to get additional information about Louisiana, and the grounds have been extensively planted with ornamental plants and hybrid Louisiana irises. Walk along the boardwalk and compare the beauty of the hybrid Louisiana irises with the giant blues of Pecan Island.

Within a short distance from the visitors' center is Interstate 10 and a choice of motels in which to spend the night. You are back in civilization for better or worse and the vastness of the marshland and the grandeur of the world of blue irises are but pleasant memories. This tour is dif-

ferent and full of unusual, unforgettable sights that surely will have helped to "pass a good time."

Jim Leonard lives in Lafayette, Louisiana. His avocation is growing Louisiana irises. Together with his neighbor, Bob Cole, they grow and distribute Louisiana irises on a mail order basis. The company is called Louisiana Iris



A native blue Louisiana iris. Photo by Sue Bridges