

CONTROL FREAK

Simple control of garden lighting circuits



Exterior lighting has come a long way since it was simply a matter of an on/off switch by the back door. **Robert Webber** explores some of the options made possible by mobile technology

One of the main questions we ask during our briefing is: "How do you want to control the lighting?" It's often met by a blank face. Most designers have a rough idea of the effect they want to create, the positions of the lights and the type of finish on the light fitting but control and switching are often not thought about. After all, it is the main interface between the client and the garden lighting. It is just as much part of a good design.

Years ago, when I had hair and still could use a spade, it was as simple as fitting internal wall switches and then just running the circuits out into the garden. Now, with the advent of the 'iAge', where most people have their whole life on a smart device, it's about convenience and control. At the touch of an app, they can set scenes for dining, parties and even love! I've often wondered what my lights have witnessed.

Control needs to be discussed early on in any design. The number of circuits and the lights connected to each of them limit control for the end user. You can only



switch or dim one whole circuit. So it's imperative to know how the client plans to use the garden in order to set the circuits according to the scenes they desire.

There are some great 'out of the box' lighting systems that can cater for both standard switching, and the more intimate control that some clients demand. Most come with the facility to switch four circuits as standard, enough for the average garden. They can all be expanded to accommodate more circuits and hence more individual control.

The client doesn't need to be worried about the number of circuits. They can still press one button to control a number of them.

One touch can turn on a water feature, dim the main garden lighting, brighten a pergola and turn on a light near the barbecue. Et voila, it's dining mode!

One more touch of the app and the lights slowly fade to 25% brightness, a panel heater sited above the garden furniture comes on and a simple sculpture nearby is lit up. Romantic mode is set.

The same systems are great for the front of the house too. We often programme the garden and driveway to come on at 40% brightness at dusk, creating a warm feel as you look out. Then with discreetly placed sensors, the lights brighten to 100% for 10 minutes when you come home or go out. This saves what we call the 'Dallas effect' where the whole front of the house is lit up like Bobby Ewing's ranch all night!

Lighting control is one of the things that goes on behind the scenes; most clients don't want to get involved with going through each

circuit, deciding light levels and scenes. It's something a good lighting designer and installer should do for them. Then, when they are around, you can borrow their smart device and set it all up in about 30 minutes. For the times when iTech fails, we always supply a small wireless key fob which is programmed to the same scenes so continuity of control is guaranteed.

So, when you're next planning a lighting design or choosing an external lighting contractor, ask how they can turn you on!



Points to remember:

- Most gardens can suffice with a simple four circuit system costing around £300 in the box. We recommend Light Symphony for a quality budget solution: www.lightsymphony.com
- Find an installer who is familiar with its functions and limitations. Most suppliers will be able to recommend a good installer. www.landscapeplus.com and www.lightingforgardens.com are two good suppliers that we use.
- Don't bog the client down with all the choices. A good garden lighting installer should be able to set up three scenes easily. Make sure the lights you fit can be dimmed!

ABOUT ROBERT WEBBER

Robert Webber is the founder of Scenic Lighting, a specialist exterior lighting company based in Berkshire. He designs and installs garden lighting throughout the UK and internationally. Robert can be contacted on rob@sceniclighting.com or via his mobile on 07766 051 000.

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