



# Excite with Light



# Trends, tips and new options for improving Christmas lighting services

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**S**parkling icicles, glowing trees and rooflines that can be seen for streets can really light up clients' faces.

But how can landscapers continue to impress their clients with glowing designs each year? And what are ways they can find success in this niche market?

Here are trends, new products, safe practices and tips for finding success with Christmas lighting services.

McKay Landscape Lighting installed three LED cherry blossom trees and one 16-foot and two 8-foot trees that rotate through the RGB color wheel. They also added 24-inch LED red, green and blue starbursts hanging in the crabapple trees with LED white minis wrapped around the trunk. On the house, they hung a 5-foot LED multi-color wreath.

## What clients want

While tastes vary from client to client, there are a few trends that are emerging across the country. Colored lights continue to be a popular option, whether on trees, rooflines, windows or along walkways.

"For a long time, the trend was just a clean, clear look," says Brandon Stephens, president of Christmas Décor. "In the past four or five years, we've



Christmas Décor combines colors for clients looking for something a little different.



For clients wanting a more traditional design, Christmas Décor uses white lights with greenery along this residential porch.

started seeing more color in displays. People want to make their houses different, and they can do that with colored lights."

One unique way to incorporate pops of color is to use green or red bulbs every three or four lights on a string of clear bulbs, Stephens says.

Installers can also use greenery and wreaths with red berries, pinecones and lights to add texture and color. "Greenery enhancements have been huge," Stephens says. "You can really customize it to fit their tastes."

Stephens's company, Christmas Décor, recently became a Barcana distributor, so they also offer fiberglass pieces like toy soldiers, candy canes and large ornaments. "We can add those things without adding a lot of labor," Stephens says. "The pieces really make the display unique."

Andrew Coleman, outdoor lighting designer with McKay Landscape Lighting in Omaha, Nebraska, says LED lighting continues to grow in popularity with his clients. "They use a lot less energy and seem to cause less problems with moisture in our Midwest climate," Coleman says. "Although they

cost more money upfront, they are a win-win for the contractor and client. Most clients didn't like the pure white color or blue hue when they first came out, but they have developed a lot more options."

As incandescent lights fade away, being replaced by LEDs, there's an even newer light making its way to the scene.

RGB technology is trending this year, says John Jenkins, a former landscaper who manages *YardOutlet.com*. These lights are LEDs that have a full spectrum of colors that can be programmed and animated.

"They are making



The commercial Christmas lighting market is starting to rebound, as they want to attract and keep more customers to their businesses.

headway into the green industry because contractors can create amazing displays for their customers that are different each year with the same products," Jenkins says.

It appears these lights will have a larger foothold in the industry going forward, as well.

"RGB lights may change the industry," Stephens says. "They are making it so we can systematically install the lights and then push data and electricity through the line."

Stephens says installing RGB lights doesn't take more time, but there is about 15 to 20 percent more time needed to plan and design on the front end. "The product also costs about 25 to 30 percent more," he adds.

As far as clients go, the commercial market has experienced a resurgence after withdrawing during the recession, Stephens says. "It's like a floodgate opened," he says. "We install lights for everything from doctor's offices and city centers to courthouses and theme parks. These businesses are doing this to create a festive atmosphere – they want people to come and stay."

## Business sense

Like with any service, Christmas lights require landscapers to understand what all is involved, from the products to the installs.

"There are several models that landscapers use

in this business, but estimating the job, including labor and materials, is the most important part of making it a profitable and successful season," Jenkins says.

He encourages landscapers to look at all of the job's aspects, such as the height and pitch of the roof and the dimensions of trees. Also, the installer should have a good understanding of the products.

"Even LED lights, which are plastic, simple and efficient, have constraints, so understand the total amperage draw and how many can be connected

end-to-end," Jenkins says.

Managing the workflow is important, as well, especially as contractors get deeper into the season.

"You only have a fixed amount of time where you can install. If you sell the huge job, can you

## 4 TIPS FOR SUCCESS

**Location.** "A few well-done displays in the right neighborhoods are better than a ton of little jobs," says John Jenkins, a former landscaper who manages *YardOutlet.com*. "Less is more."

**Schedule.** "Also, be realistic about the size of jobs that you can do," he continues. "Don't take on more than you can complete before Thanksgiving."

**Products.** "Be sure to use professional-quality products," Jenkins says. "Don't cut corners on quality: It is you who will get the call to fix lights on Christmas Eve."

**Education.** "There's a lot of information available on this industry, so you don't have to do it by yourself," says Brandon Stephens, president of *Christmas Décor*. "Instead of spending five to six years to learn it yourself, use the training that's out there."

actually get it installed?" Stephens asks. "Have a hard date on the calendar when you will stop taking projects. Your customers aren't going to be happy if you're installing them on Dec. 26 – or even Dec. 15, for that matter."

And part of keeping the service running smoothly depends on having the right materials on hand when needed.

"Securing a good, consistent source of quality products is paramount," Stephens says. "You don't want to go out, sell it and not be able to install it."

Whether it's finalizing a schedule or finding the right lights, it all comes back to efficiency.

"The No. 1 thing is efficiency: managing costs, getting the most for the money, good margins and being able to get what you need when you need it," Stephens says.

## Preventing accidents

It's cold and sometimes icy when crews are installing the lights, so it's important they receive the proper safety training.

"Be careful with electricity, and install early while the weather is good," Jenkins advises. "Be sure to understand the OSHA requirements for working on ladders and rooftops. Landscapers usually keep their boots on the ground."

When placing a ladder on frozen surfaces, crews should make sure its safety feet are deeply embedded in the ground. They can do this by using a claw hammer to dig 2 to 3 inches



Greenery such as wreaths and garland can add pops of color and texture to lighting projects. To make them unique, add lights, berries or pinecones.

deep into the surface and placing the safety feet in the hole. The installer should maintain three points of contact – either two hands and one foot or both feet and one hand – on the ladder at all times.


To keep the ladder stable, the crewmember should also attach ropes or straps to its side rails (not rungs) to a fixed, stable object such as stakes in the ground. The spotter should stand in front of the ladder, hold both side rails and place one foot on the bottom rung. (For more ladder safety tips, visit [totallandscapecare.com/safetywatch](http://totallandscapecare.com/safetywatch).)

Not only do landscapers and their crews need to be careful when climbing ladders, but they also need to take precautions against the cold weather. "Make sure crews get out of the cold periodically," Stephens says.

Another important aspect is the electricity itself. While basic LED decorations don't normally call for an electrician, one should be called if the project requires additional junction boxes as the display increases in size away from the main power supply, Jenkins says.

"As displays grow or permanent lighting is added such as RGB or patio lighting, an electrician should be contracted to add breakers or custom-cut wires," Jenkins adds.

"In general, a good decision – including electrical requirements – before beginning the installation is critical."

To see Christmas lighting photos from landscapers across the country, visit [totallandscapecare.com/Christmas-lighting](http://totallandscapecare.com/Christmas-lighting). 

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