

FEW GARDENS PUT AS MUCH effort into lighting as West Green House, Hampshire, where, to accompany outdoor opera, the whole garden is lit for a few nights every summer, as a series of set-piece tableaux.

It follows a strong tradition of night-lit gardens, from ancient Rome to Renaissance Italy, from 18th century *fête champêtre* at the French court to British promenade theatre. The tradition reappears in domestic gardens too, especially in towns, enlivening and extending their use as outdoor rooms, or creating a picture to be seen through plate glass where, with nothing but blackness beyond, curtains might have been drawn.

The gardens at Abbotsbury Subtropical Gardens, Dorset, and Westonbirt, Gloucestershire, are well known for their colourfully lit, night-time openings. They are timed to show off autumn colours and architectural foliage, and early autumn sunset means that a lighted opening can quickly follow afternoon visiting.

Complex lighting is expensive and time consuming to install, even temporarily, but it offers a rare opportunity to recharacterise an established garden by creating new, unexpected vistas and connections



between features, new points of attraction, a new narrative. At West Green, garden owner Marylyn Abbott and her team take this to the fore, bringing to life unexpected – or potentially ignored, especially in daytime – elements of garden structure.

Lights can be used to pace how the garden is seen. For example, rope lighting can hurry people through an open area such as a lawn, where one would automatically linger during the day. Lighting plays with the contrast of light and dark, and it is important to use that darkness positively, as relief, to make the colourful scene more effective. Darkness is to the night-time garden what green is to daytime flowers.

Coloured light must be used selectively, but can bring real melodrama. Lights themselves can be designed to be seen (such as lanterns at ground level) or they can be hidden, placed to highlight garden features and plants, helping create remarkable shadows. Still water offers the chance to make minutely contrived reflections, and moving water sparkles most compellingly when lit. Dramatic shadow-play can be created by the flame of torches and even by cleverly used glitter balls.

At West Green, lighting is used throughout the garden to round off an evening already made magical by the make-believe of opera, preventing any sense of anticlimax after the show. It is also unashamed, hard-working fun, just like fireworks.

Best of all though, lighting can be changed, just as one might experiment with bedding displays, and there is as much fun in experimenting with different effects applied to the same scene as there is in the finished tableau. It is just another form of theatre. ■

Stephen Anderton is a garden writer for *The Times*

IN THE NIGHT

Garden lighting can be a dramatic addition to any landscape. **Stephen Anderton** explains how the gardens at West Green House come alive after dark, enhanced by the sound of outdoor opera. Photography by Derek Green



GARDEN

BRIGHT SPARKS West Green's Persian water garden (above): the geometry of the formal pools and (apparently) floating birch trees is accentuated by LED rope lights. Illuminated moving water is especially conspicuous at night. The island aviary and Chippendale bridge (right) dramatically combines a range of colours. Whether day or night, a garden needs moments of simplicity between busy set pieces – here, in the walled garden (opposite), it is achieved by a tunnel of white lanterns.

i West Green House, Thackham's Lane, nr Hartley Wintney, Hook, Hampshire RG27 8JB. 01252 845582; www.westgreenhouse.co.uk. Garden open Weds, Sat & Sun, 11am–4pm, until 19 Sept. Opera evenings: 31 Jul and 1 Aug, *Così fan Tutte*; 7 and 8 Aug, *The Beggar's Opera*. For information on Abbotsbury Subtropical Gardens and Westonbirt, see p80 and p97 (respectively) of the *RHS Members' Handbook 2010*

