

The Boston Globe

Amp up your home lighting know-how from pros

Brilliant advice

By Jaci Conry
February 20, 2011

From one-touch systems that control a home's entire lighting scheme to uberefficient LED fixtures and minuscule lights set into floors and walls, home lighting options can seem endless these days. Yet many people aren't sure how to go about choosing the right illumination and don't realize how much a well-planned lighting scheme can do for a space. "People just don't know what's possible," says [Marblehead-based lighting designer Nancy Goldstein](#). "Unlike kitchen cabinets or furniture, lighting is hard to envision in advance because you don't know how it's going to look until it's installed." While working with a lighting designer is a surefire way to get professional-looking results, Goldstein and other local lighting experts offer the following suggestions to get you started.

Consider your lifestyle.

"Some people need more light than others. For example, older eyes need more light than younger eyes," says Goldstein. "In a kitchen, someone who cooks regularly needs more light than someone who orders out every night."

Fill in with floor and table lamps.

Often overlooked in the design phase of a lighting scheme, lamps are important for task lighting, says Lucy Dearborn, owner of Lucia Lighting & Design in Lynn. "You shouldn't be reading by overhead lighting; you want a floor or table lamp for that." Lamps also balance the spread of light through a large room, and when spaced strategically, they work to even out the glow.

Layer your illumination.

"You can't expect one type of fixture to do all things," says Dearborn. She recommends using a combination of three layers to properly illuminate a space: ambient lighting, that is, recessed or overhead fixtures that provide enough general soft light for someone to navigate a room; task lighting, using fixtures with brighter lighting trained on a particular area for activities such as reading or food prep; and mood lighting (also referred to as accent lighting). This last "is your bling – a layer that your eye enjoys: Use pretty pendants or sconces to focus attention on artwork or an architectural feature," says Dearborn. A crystal chandelier over the dining room table falls under this category. "Make sure you run it at low intensity, otherwise it becomes a glare-monster," cautions Goldstein. The most important thing to remember, she says, is that "the chandelier shouldn't be the main lighting in the dining room."

Make yourself – and your guests – look good.

“Don’t position lights over furniture where they might shine in your face. That causes glare, which is uncomfortable and creates unattractive shadows,” says Doreen Le May Madden, owner of Lux Lighting Design in Belmont. “One of the most important considerations in the placement of fixtures is the glare they produce. It causes eyestrain and fatigue. Aim lights away from where you think people’s eyes will be.”

Use dimmers.

“Dimming allows you to control the theme or mood you want at different times,” says Le May Madden. In addition to ensuring that lights aren’t overwhelming and cold, dimming also saves energy. Dearborn adds, “By dimming a light by as little as 10 percent – a difference in light output that your eye can’t discern – you can double the life of a light bulb.”

Don’t shortchange the bathroom.

“People often put just one layer of light in the bathroom,” says Dearborn. “But multi-layers are important.” She advises using recessed ceiling fixtures as well as lights on either side of the mirror to combat shadows. “You want light coming at you from the sides, rather than raining down on you.”

Bounce light.

While you want to be sure light isn’t going to bounce off objects and into people’s eyes, Le May Madden says one way to keep things bright and cheerful is to bounce light off light-colored surfaces like walls and ceilings so that it reflects back into a space.

Weigh your light bulb options.

Incandescent bulbs, which produce a warm white light, are the most common, says Dearborn. But they’re inefficient and will be phased out by 2014. More efficient are halogen bulbs, which emit a bright light and are used mostly for task and down-lighting. But as incandescents disappear, you’ll find halogen versions of the everyday light bulb, Dearborn says. Affordable compact fluorescent bulbs are longer-lasting and use a fraction of the electricity that incandescents do, though they contain mercury, which makes disposal more difficult. More expensive than compact fluorescents, energy-efficient LED lights have a wide range of colors and don’t contain mercury. Make your lighting plan a priority.

When you’re building or remodeling, give lighting as much thought and consideration as you do all the other major decisions. “Lighting shouldn’t be an afterthought,” says Goldstein. “Often I’m called in late, after construction, and that makes what I can do limited.”

Send comments to magazine@globe.com.

© Copyright 2011 Globe Newspaper Company.