The Southern GARDENER

If you don't care to light up the whole outdoors, low voltage or solar lights like this one can work well.

Shine Your Light Outdoors

Need to throw a little light on the situation? Then, low-voltage or solar lights may be the answer. And both are cheaper than regular incandescent lighting.

Low-voltage lighting may be best when low-light, functional illumination is needed, as on driveways. Regular household current of 120 volts is reduced by a transformer to a safe 12 volts (about that used to run a toy train).

These lights generally come in sets of four or more. They provide more light than do most solar lights, which are typically sold as single lights. Also, low-voltage lights aren't limited to sunlit areas as solar lights are.

Even though low-voltage lighting uses household electricity, utility costs for it are much less than those for regular incandescent lighting, notes Frank Grillaert of Intermatic, Inc., in Spring Grove, Ill.

"You can run a six-light set for less than it would cost to have a 60-watt bulb on all night long," he says.

A four-light set costs around $40; larger sets can go up to $150.

Installation of low-voltage lights is fairly easy, taking about a half-hour to an hour.

Single solar-powered lights, however, may be the best choice for accent lights like those needed in a flower bed. Solar lights have no utility costs, and they can be used in areas that are hard to wire. But their reliability depends chiefly on the amount of sun they receive.

A single small solar unit can cost anywhere from $40 to $70. For example, Photocomm Inc., a Grass Valley, Calif., company, offers a 12-volt solar-powered light for $62 that "tracks" the sun.

The tracking light moves when the sun moves so the sunlight stays on the solar panel all day. "This makes the light more efficient," explains Bonnie Calmann of Photocomm. "I use the light for an entrance pathway in my front yard." It's mostly for your feet, though; it's not an overhead light, she adds.

During the daytime, a solar panel charges a connected battery; at night, the light runs off the battery.

The light cuts on automatically at nightfall and stays on for a number of hours, depending on what area of the country you live in.

The one pictured above will run for about eight hours in the Deep South. It will run for about six hours in the Upper South.

It's best to place solar lights in an unshaded area.

"There is no wiring, you don't have to dig any trenches, and there are no bills associated with solar lighting," Calmann summarizes. Also, you can easily remove the lights when you want to mow the grass.

Photocomm carries a 10-year limited warranty on its solar panels, and a 1-year limited warranty on the light itself.

Intermatic has a 1-year warranty on its low-voltage products, but the company says the low-voltage light sets generally last for 10 years.

Both solar and low-voltage lighting can be found at general merchandising and hardware stores or ordered directly from the manufacturers.

Choosing the most suitable power source to fit your lighting needs is important, as H.B. Flora of Birmingham, Ala., found out.

After installing solar lights for his driveway, Flora says, "The lights provide accent lighting only. I was disappointed with the quality of their performance."

He believes that low-voltage or regular incandescent lighting would have been more suitable.

Editor's note.—For more information, write to Intermatic, Inc., 4720 West Montrose, Chicago, IL 60641, or phone 312-282-7310. Or write to Photocomm Inc., 930-A Idaho-Maryland Rd., Grass Valley, CA 95945, or phone 1-800-544-6466.