

Stalking the Light

“All material in nature, the mountains and the streams and the air and we, are made of Light which has been spent, and this crumpled mass called material casts a shadow, and the shadow belongs to Light.”

—Louis Kahn

by Eric Hsu

IN ITS LUMINOSITY, LIGHT LURES US into the garden. Without it, we are left floundering in our decisions about color, form, and texture that animates the garden, giving it a personality that embraces or challenges our attentions. Light illuminates the approach with which we can stage—the long, angled shadows from statuary and topiary, the whimsical wit of a water feature, or the kaleidoscopic sparkle of a flowery meadow.

Henry Plummer, professor emeritus of architecture and photographer, stated, “Light has moods, which are able to infuse physical things with a metaphysical spirit...These mysterious phenomena... give it emotional depth, while keeping us tuned to the universe outside, as well as the world hidden within us.” Where light begins to diminish under trees and buildings, the feeling becomes subdued, inciting a strange proxy of calmness and foreboding threat.

Our eyes avert to wherever the trickles of light stream down through the canopy and windows, as if they are desperately questing for freedom. However, light can be forcibly blinding in its saturated state—its glowering glare can truncate shadows, drain light colors, and sap succulent growth. Both extremes can confound our enjoyment in the garden if we are unable to tame them into something congenial.

Rarely do we gardeners develop a healthy relationship with light—we obsessively plant by color or space rather than light, and observe it deferentially for cultural conditions

(i.e. full sun versus partial shade). Perhaps we need to stalk the light, witnessing its morning or evening arrival.

The Photographer as a Garden Designer

Deciphering the garden’s light begins with determining the land’s orientation—east for morning and west for evening—and factoring in trees or any structures that can change that orientation. If you are a seasoned photographer, you are already well on your journey. Seventy percent of a photograph depends on light, with twenty percent being composition and technique.

For all the wizardry of Photoshop® and digital retouching, light still holds sway. One cannot shoot aimlessly as well as one plunks a plant in a gap. It is well known that photography can make us better gardeners by refocusing on details and reevaluating the holistic view. But less practiced and

invaluable is documenting the morning or evening light.



Poppies backlit in morning

A space may beg for a focal point when a shaft of sunlight illuminates it in early evening. What we often see in gardens are serendipitous accidents rather than studied placements. We spray-paint bed outlines in the turf, place bamboo canes to visualize planting locations, and create bouquets to decide combinations. Because we concentrate intently on these tasks, we often fail to watch the progression of light in the garden. Lighting engineers influence our retail and entertainment experiences, and if we were to adapt their skills, then our gardens can achieve that elusive atmosphere.

Cameras as Garden Design Tools

While we may not have the technical skills of lighting engineers, we can turn instead to cameras as our tools. One may argue that our eyes are more competent visual receptors than our cameras, and what is seen does not translate well to photography. However, our memories are not as durable as our senses, thus photographs help us recollect those



Light can reveal the voluminous layering of leaf and flower, as well as the efficacy of the color white in brightening hard-to-reach areas. Here at Chanticleer’s Orchard, the narcissus brings the white flowering crab apple blossoms to ground level, allowing for the eye’s visual movement from one point to another.

lighting moments in the garden.

I often go around the garden with a digital SLR and a tripod, snapping away the same scene within a hour's timeframe. Should I find myself without my camera, then I resort to my smartphone. Smartphones now possess fantastic cameras that anyone can use without resorting to expensive digital SLRs.

Once you accumulate a set of photographs that capture the light from different angles in the garden, you can easily evaluate how to accentuate lighting through editing or planting. For instance, I may recognize that the lower branches of a small tree need removal to bring depth of low shadows onto the lawn. Or a shrub prevents light from penetrating the ornamental grasses for their backlit glory. However, these aesthetic decisions come about from an intimate relationship with the garden through regular observance and documentation. Such familiarity allows you to calibrate the temperament of the garden—especially the color, a task made easier with a strong comprehension of light levels.

The Color White

An infusion of white seems essential for a garden playing with light. More than any other color, white may be the most challenging for its transmutable quality under light—it can be serene, highlighting shaded areas and mediating between two clashing colors. At midday sunlight, white can be too assertive hence the expression 'white hot'.

Scandinavian countries have successfully exploited whiteness to survive their long and dark winters. The low position of the sun there



Echinops with
Bystropogon

produces long shadows, therefore daylight emanates through the sides, not the above, of buildings. Come summer, the light is diffuse, a pearly sheen reflective of northern latitudes. The Scandinavians' intuitive response to their local surroundings comes from their acknowledgment of light and adept magnification through whiteness. Likewise we

would serve ourselves well to adopt and adapt that approach for our climates—here in the Mid-Atlantic, the sun rests higher, burning brightly even during our winters. It is the advantage that we enjoy over those in northerly latitudes and unfortunately do not employ to full potential.



Juglans nigra autumn
color at Serpentine in
Chanticleer

Sometimes I will intentionally plant a white flowering annual or a white stick to act as a temporary light meter before committing to something permanent. In my garden, the pure gleam of *Hesperis matronalis* var. *albiflora*, threaded with *Allium hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation' is restful for my weary eyes after work. The *Hesperis* flowers coincide with the full leafing of the street's

maple tree, which leads to bright shade that flatters white. Next year, I know enough to plant *Ammi majus* or *Orlaya grandiflora*, balanced with darker-hued flowers. A shrub may be a *Cotinus* or *Hydrangea* that can bring definition, ushering light to higher levels. As the gradations of white are variable, it is the pure, dazzling white of these plants I value for a radiant intensity.

Early Mornings and Evenings

It seems a pity that most gardens, public or private, are not open either early mornings or evenings. Expecting the owners to be receptive about

public visits at 6:00 A.M. is probably unreasonable, although evening hours of 6:00 to 8:00 P.M. are less antisocial. I used to leaf carefully through the UK National Gardens Scheme's *Yellow Book* for evening openings, and always found the few kindly obligated to such times were enjoyable, as if the owners knew their gardens' best selves. Sometimes I was fortunate to stay overnight at the property, setting the alarm clock for a predawn stroll. Colors quiver with liveliness, shadows are thrown unexpectedly in nooks and crannies, and the stillness of the morning mist is delicately ringed with birdsong. It is a calming communion with nature that fortunately comes regularly at Chanticleer, Wayne, PA where I work.

Tips

- ☛ Decide whether you spend mornings or evenings in the garden. Many people do not enjoy their gardens until they return from work, and I see my garden closely and frequently the first hour I arrive home from my afternoon commute.
- ☛ Observe and walk through the garden throughout the seasons to see how the light changes. Trees shed leaves, and areas once in full shade become awash in light during winter. Light is not simply defined as sun or shade.
- ☛ Use your camera—if you don't have a digital SLR, smartphones have reasonably good resolution and are great for those 'I-wish-I-had-my-camera' moments.
- ☛ The basic concept 'dark colors absorb, light colors reflect' pertains to the garden, too. White will be a significant color—one wants a good clean white, not an off-tone white, that works well with other bright colors in midday, as well as mornings and evenings.
- ☛ Place white buckets or white markers if you have trouble visualizing how a plant or feature will be illuminated in the garden.
- ☛ A public or botanic garden with morning or evening hours can be a good case study—pay close attention to plants that accentuate the low light or strategically positioned features that reflect light to dark areas.



Briza media at Chanticleer



Meadowburn Farm in morning light



Flowering crab apples in the Orchard at Chanticleer

Light at Chanticleer

Having the fortune to walk regularly at Chanticleer throughout the year has heightened my light sensitivity. The garden's variable topography means that it is a contrast of dark and light. Among the first recipients of morning light are the Cut Flower Garden, Orchard, and Tennis Court Garden between 6:30 and 7:00 A.M. The lower



Orchard grass

reaches of the Pond Garden are already flooded with light at 7:00 A.M., while the Gravel Garden is still shaded as the trees in Minder Woods intercept the light. Evening light pulls away first in Asian Woods and Pond Garden, pausing briefly in the Gravel and Ruin Gardens, and races over the Cut Flower Garden and Tennis Court Garden before a last encore at the Chanticleer House and Teacup Garden. Along the way you begin to see the richness of form and texture, the seamless flow between the wild and domesticated, and the buildings swept in and out of the different areas. It is a mood altering experience that comes from stalking the light.



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Ed Note: All photos ©Eric Hsu. For a full-color version of this article, go to the HPS/MAG web site, www.hardyplant.org.



Moody skies at Tasmania

Plants

Briza media

Superb in dry or wild gardens, the quaking grass is a lively bundle of shimmering heart lockets.

Chionanthus virginicus

Our native fringe tree is a cumulus cloud of diaphanous flowers in early summer. I would be keen to situate it carefully for best effect in light.

Male plants are showier than female plants, although the inky blue fruits in the latter are a bonus.

Clematis virginiana

Not to be confused with the invasive *Clematis terniflora*, *Clematis virginiana* has the same effect with its multitude of small, starry white flowers that can scent an arbor at evening.

***Cotinus coggygria* 'Young Lady'**

Of smaller stature than other *Cotinus coggygria* cultivars, 'Young Lady' 'smokes' on first-year wood rather than second-year. It is good for adding structure and height in beds.

***Foeniculum vulgare* 'Purpureum'**

Brilliant with purple alliums, orange geums, or late season tulips, bronze fennel self-seeds to the point of being a nuisance, but I circumvent it by removing the developing inflorescences and cutting hard to the base for a new flush of foliage.

***Molinia caerulea* subsp. *arundinacea* 'Transparent'**

At 6' tall, 'Transparent' is no shrinking violet. The mounded foliage permits a 'see-through' effect. When the morning or evening light hits the raindrop-laden inflorescences, the moment can be uplifting.

Orlaya grandiflora

This Cretan wildflower will self-sow to the point of exuberance—edit carefully as too much can be blinding. However, I cannot be without the clear pristine white lacy flowers.

Osmunda regalis

A majestic fern that prefers moist spots, the royal fern has rich coppery green fiddleheads translucent, like stained glass.

Papaver rhoeas

In disturbed agricultural fields, the corn poppy can be a chromatic tour de force for its saturated red flowers. Its crepe-like petals are well designed for glowing in low light. 'Bridal Silk' is a white-flowering seed strain, currently making its round in the seed catalogs.

Polystichum acrostichoides

The Christmas fern, found throughout eastern US, is seldom used in gardens, yet its unfurling croziers, covered with fine silvery hairs, glisten in spring. In mild winters, the fronds may stay evergreen, although they should be removed if badly damaged and tattered.