

# Accent Lighting for Your Deck

Integrated with posts, railings, and stair risers, a new generation of exterior-light fixtures provides a wide range of deck-lighting options

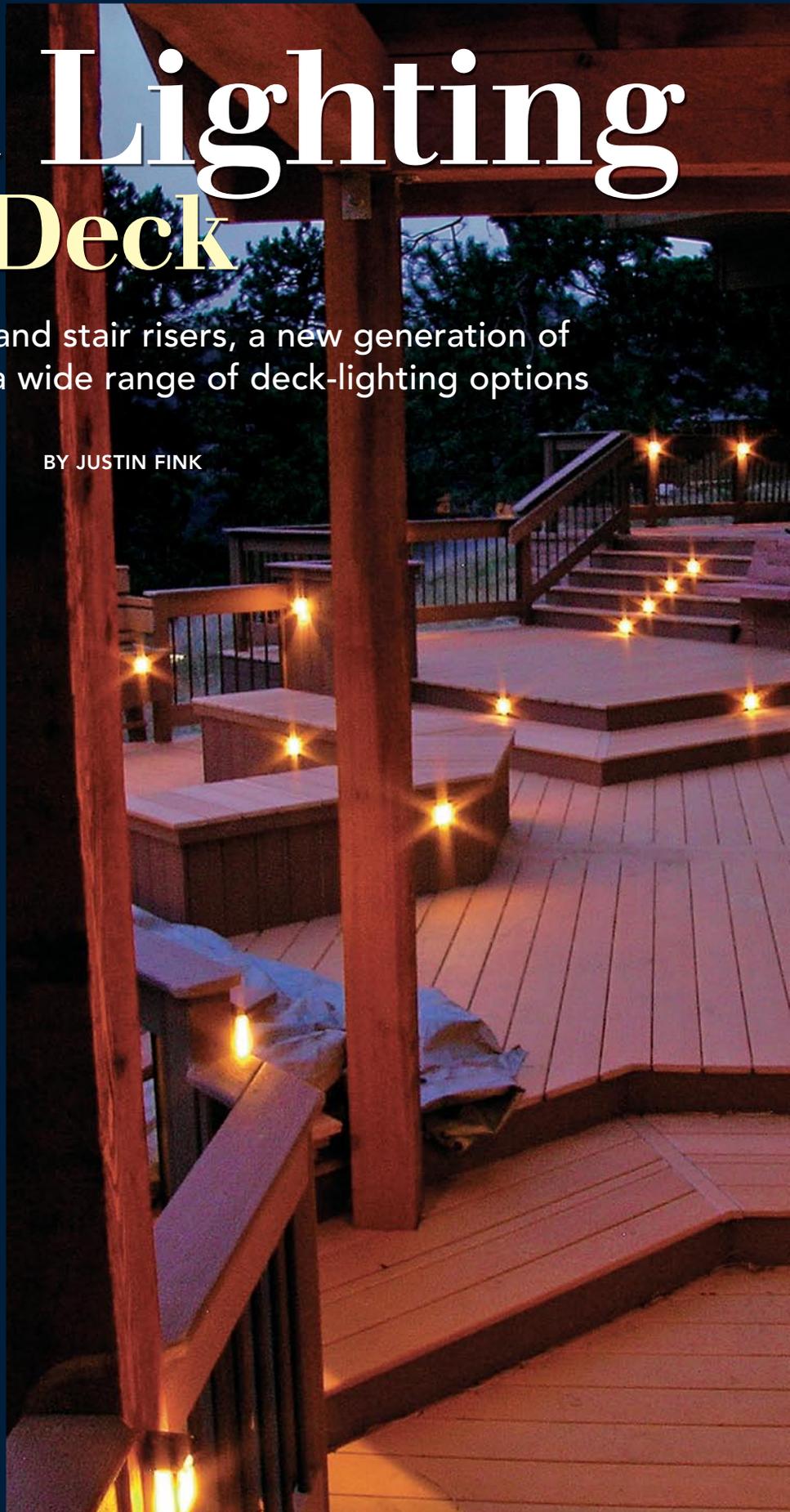
BY JUSTIN FINK



**F**rom a purely functional point of view, a deck-lighting scheme should serve a few different needs. Safety lighting lets you walk around after dark without tripping over a chaise longue. Task lighting enables you to see if the burgers on the grill are ready. Security lighting casts off the inky blackness on the other side of a sliding-glass door. But unless you plan to be interrogating intruders in your backyard, installing one or two wall-mounted floodlights to serve all these needs isn't the classiest solution.

Accent lighting can help to answer safety, task, and security requirements, but its primary purpose is aesthetic. Rather than flooding deck areas with simulated sunlight, accent lighting integrates with posts, railings, stair risers, and other deck elements to create an inviting after-dark atmosphere. By taking advantage of the variety of accent lights available, you can create a lightscape that establishes edges, defines areas or elevations, and even highlights pathways or destinations.

Justin Fink is an assistant editor. Photos by Krysta S. Doerfler, except where noted.



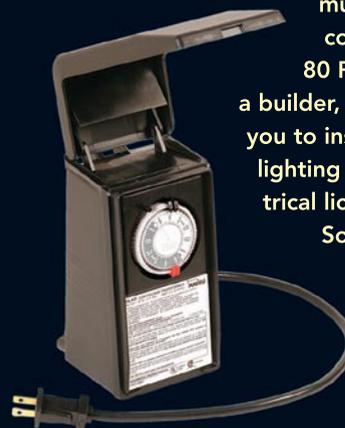


## POWER SOURCES: low, line, or solar?

The type of power source that you choose is dictated by lots of different factors, and each factor has upsides and downsides.

Low-voltage lights are the most common type of accent lights. They are a safer alternative to line voltage, posing almost no threat of shock. Electrical connections are simpler, and you don't need an electrical license or permit to install them. The downsides to low-voltage lighting are that they require a transformer (photo below) and that unless the fixtures are divided into more than one run of wiring, they share the same 12v of power, which can lead to dim lights.

The installation of line-voltage fixtures is enforced more strictly. All connections must be made in an approved electrical box, and cables run in the open



must be enclosed in proper conduit, such as schedule-80 PVC pipe. Also, if you're a builder, most areas won't allow you to install line-voltage deck lighting unless you have an electrical license.

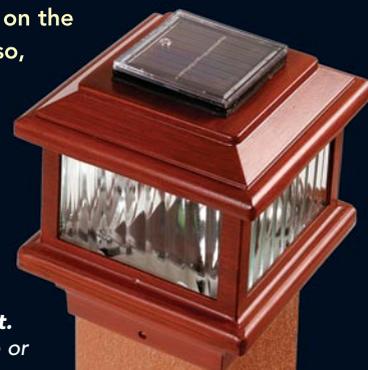
**Low-voltage lights use a transformer to convert 120v line power to safer 12v.**

Solar-powered deck lights require no electrical connections, timers, or light switches.

You don't need to drill routing holes, run wires, or make connections. But you do need steady exposure to sunlight, typically

six hours a day, according to manufacturers. Each solar light has a photo cell that charges a set of NiCd batteries during the day, then uses the batteries to power the light after dark. This reliance on sun typically limits deck applications to post-cap fixtures, but recessed solar fixtures are available as well. Unfortunately, the amount of energy collected is also limited by the size of the photovoltaic panel (which is typically small on a deck fixture) and is dependent on the location of the fixture. Also, the NiCd batteries will eventually need to be replaced, which is generally as simple as changing the batteries in your television remote.

**Solar-powered deck lights rely completely on sunlight. No additional power source or wiring is required.**



## START AT THE TOP

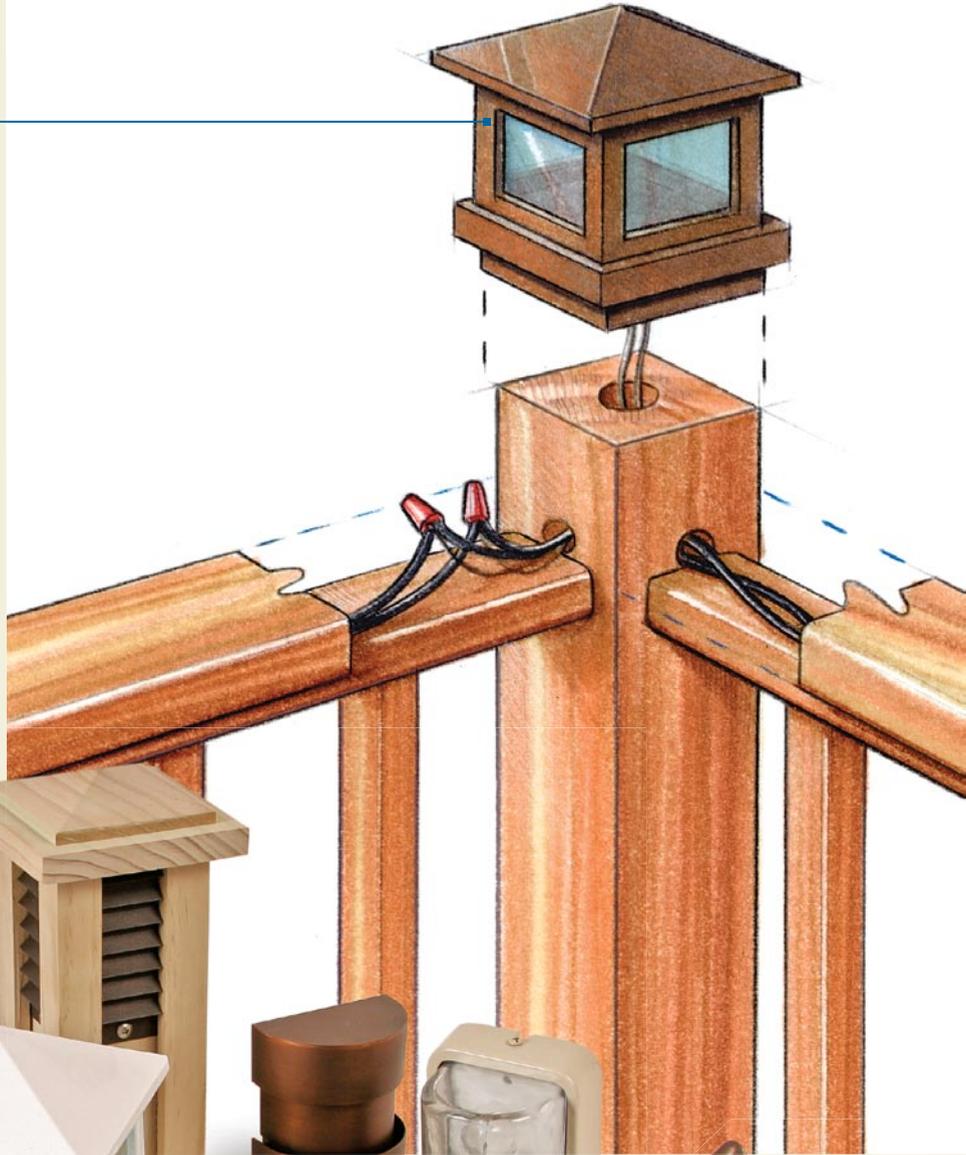
# POST-CAP LIGHTS



Post-cap lights are the largest, most-prominent fixtures in the accent deck-lighting category. They highlight the posts at the top and bottom of stairways or deck entrances, or act as markers for

intermediate posts along the perimeter of a deck. Fixtures are typically made to fit over 4x4 posts or 6x6 posts, but some are designed to fit both sizes. Custom sizes are available from some manufacturers.

Lights are often available in several different colors and materials so that they can complement the look of a deck. Many manufacturers also make unlighted "dummy" post caps to match post-cap lights; this way, all posts look the same.



**AURORA DECK LIGHTING**  
[www.auroradecklighting.com](http://www.auroradecklighting.com)  
800-603-3520

- ⑤ Sirius Deck Light
- ⑨ Walkway Light

**HIGHPOINT DECK LIGHTING**  
[www.hpdlighting.com](http://www.hpdlighting.com)  
888-582-5850

- ③ HP-801C
- ⑦ HP-570P
- ⑩ HP-571P

**HINKLEY LIGHTING**  
[www.hinkleylighting.com](http://www.hinkleylighting.com)  
216-671-3300

- ⑪ 1513BZ

**KICHLER LIGHTING**  
[www.kichler.com](http://www.kichler.com)  
866-558-5706

- ④ 15056WD
- ⑫ 15047OZ

**MAINE ORNAMENTAL**  
[www.postcaps.com](http://www.postcaps.com)  
866-780-3507

- ⑥ Tiffany-style sunflower solar glass post cap

**MOONLIGHT DECKS**  
[www.moonlightdecks.com](http://www.moonlightdecks.com)  
913-638-1685

- ② Copper Vein smooth post cap

**ROCKLER HARDWARE**  
[www.rockler.com](http://www.rockler.com)  
800-279-4441

- ⑧ Rectangular Deck Light

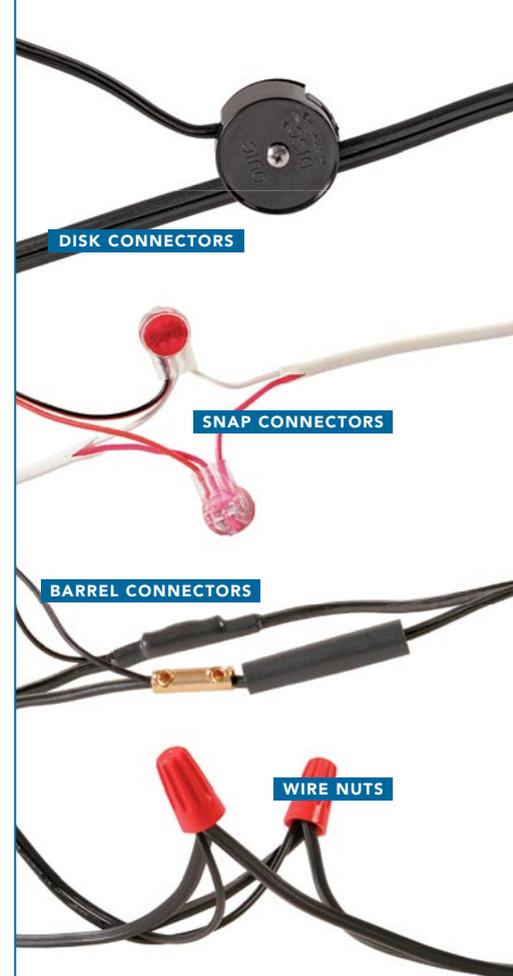
**SEA GULL LIGHTING**  
[www.seagullighting.com](http://www.seagullighting.com)  
800-347-5483

- ⑩ 92067-834 single-light landscape deck light

## LOW-VOLTAGE WIRE CONNECTORS: disk, snap, barrel, or wire nuts?

Many deck-lighting packages rely on quick-connect fittings to tie each fixture to the main supply cable that runs from the transformer. Designs differ, but most quick connectors, like the Quic-Disc (photo top right) are designed to pierce the sheathing of the supply cable with two sharp prongs to create a connection. According to Gerry DeLaVega, president of TerraDek Lighting ([www.terradek.com](http://www.terradek.com)), "Disk connectors can allow water to get into the system, and are susceptible to loosening up over time." Silicone-filled snap connectors ([www.3m.com](http://www.3m.com)) are a better choice for weather resistance, and their small size and ability to join wires without stripping off the sheathing are both big bonuses. You just slide the wires into the holes of the connector, and snap down on the tab with a pair of pliers. Trouble is, they are compatible only with solid wires, and stranded cable is used for many deck-lighting applications.

If you're wary of all quick-connect systems, wire nuts are still a great choice, as long as they are weather resistant. The trouble with wire nuts is that they create what DeLaVega calls "bunny ears," which sometimes don't stay hidden when you're trying to run wire under a railing. For these situations, consider barrel connectors ([www.nightscaping.com](http://www.nightscaping.com)). These connectors allow two wires to be joined together, end to end, and then covered with a weather-resistant heat-shrink tube. They lie flatter than wire nuts or quick connectors and are great for spots where hidden connections are necessary.



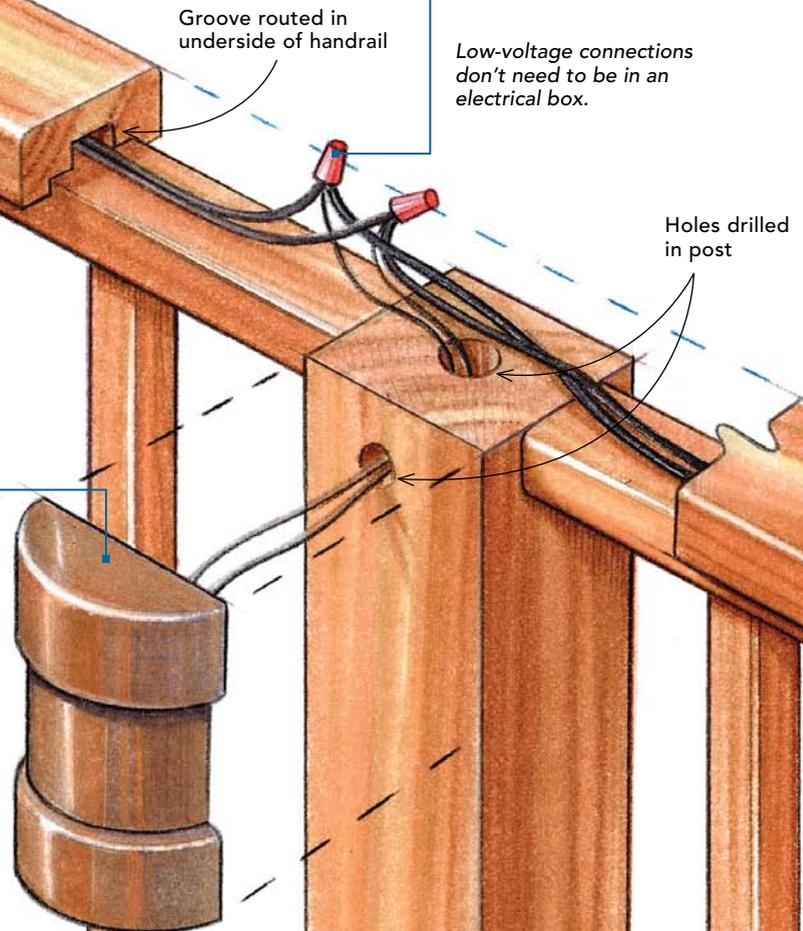
*Low-voltage connections don't need to be in an electrical box.*



## LOWER THE BEAM SIDE-MOUNT LIGHTS

Many deck-lighting manufacturers suggest that the light from post-cap fixtures is too close to eye level when you're sitting on a deck chair or bench. Instead, these companies recommend that customers consider lowering fixtures to the sides of the deck posts, about 32 in. to 34 in. from the deck surface.

[www.finchomebuilding.com](http://www.finchomebuilding.com)

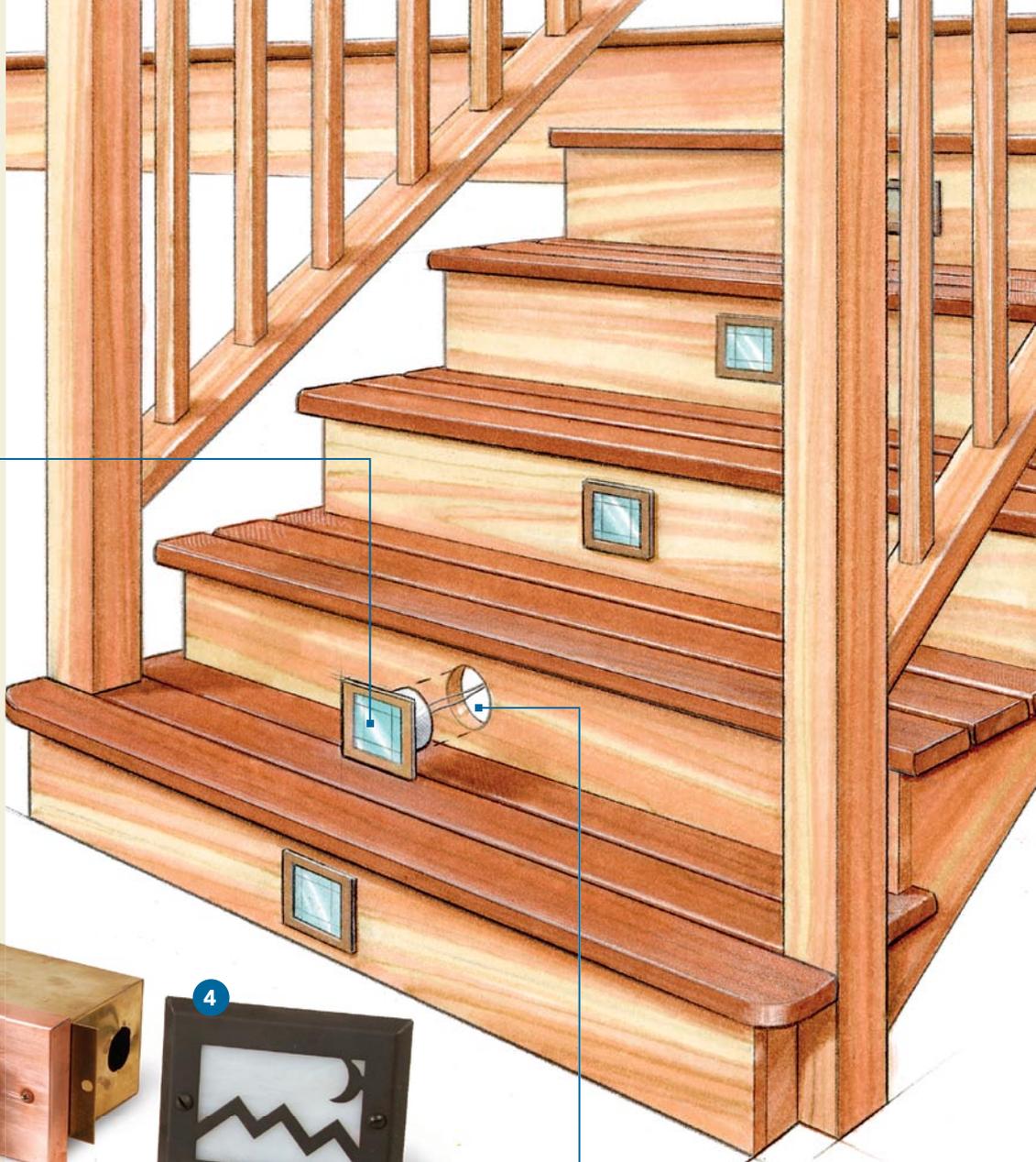




## GLOW FROM WITHIN

# RECESSED LIGHTS

Recessed lights are the perfect example of how to accent a deck without overlighting it and also offer the best chance at concealment during daylight. These light fixtures are available with either LED or incandescent bulbs, and each has a slightly different effect.



### EASY INSTALLATION

Regardless of how they look, the best recessed fixtures have round backs, which allow them to fit cleanly into a hole bored by a Forstner drill bit (shown below) or a hole saw. Fixtures with square or rectangular backs are much harder to install, requiring the use of a reciprocating saw or jigsaw. The fixture can look crooked if the cutout isn't perfect.



**DE-KOR LIGHTING**  
[www.de-kor.com](http://www.de-kor.com)  
 303-991-2285  
 ⑥ LED downlights

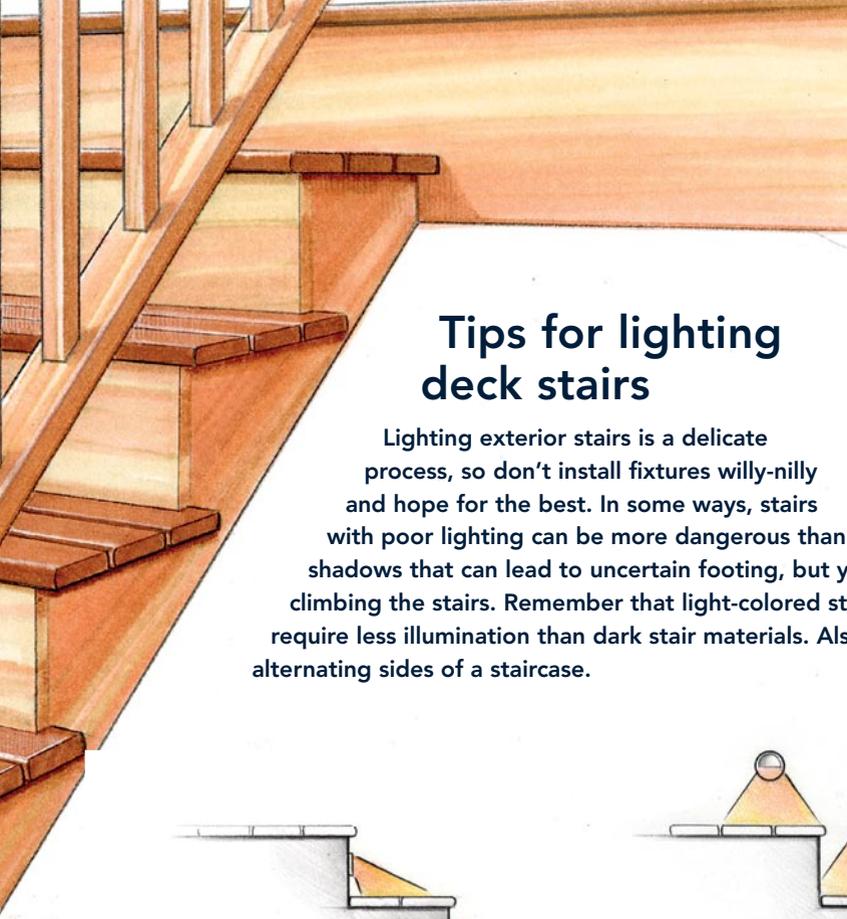
**GARDEN SUN LIGHT**  
[www.gardensunlight.com](http://www.gardensunlight.com)  
 626-581-2288  
 ⑦ ST212

**HIGHPOINT DECK LIGHTING**  
[www.hpdlighting.com](http://www.hpdlighting.com)  
 888-582-5850

③ HP-770R  
 ④ HP-744R  
 ⑤ HP-740R  
 ⑧ 3-in. Forstner bit

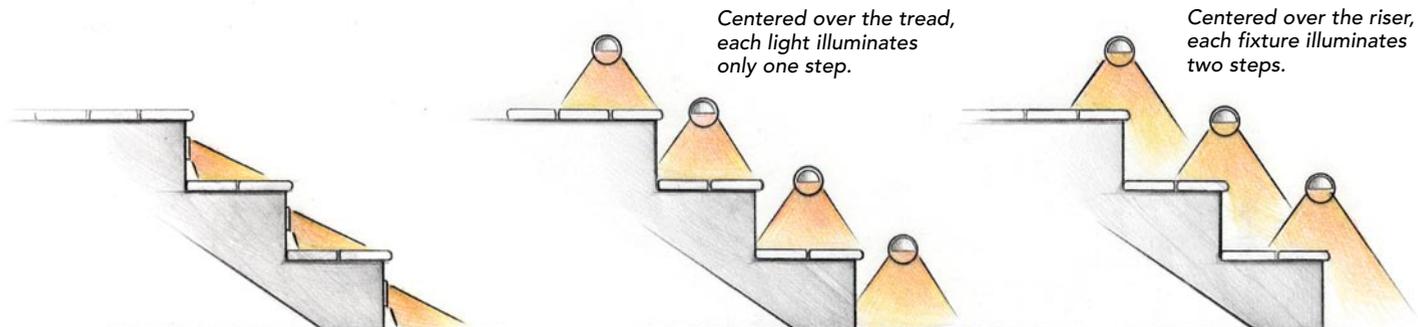
**HINKLEY LIGHTING**  
[www.hinkleylighting.com](http://www.hinkleylighting.com)  
 216-671-3300  
 ① HD1170

**ROCKLER HARDWARE**  
[www.rockler.com](http://www.rockler.com)  
 800-279-4441  
 ② Deck/Dock Light



## Tips for lighting deck stairs

Lighting exterior stairs is a delicate process, so don't install fixtures willy-nilly and hope for the best. In some ways, stairs with poor lighting can be more dangerous than stairs with no lighting at all. As a rule, you want to avoid creating shadows that can lead to uncertain footing, but you also don't want to flood the area with light and blind someone climbing the stairs. Remember that light-colored stair materials, or treads and risers built from contrasting materials, require less illumination than dark stair materials. Also, unless beams of light overlap, avoid positioning fixtures on alternating sides of a staircase.



Centered over the tread, each light illuminates only one step.

Centered over the riser, each fixture illuminates two steps.

When mounting light fixtures on stair risers, select recessed fixtures to avoid trip hazards. Shaded or louvered fixtures direct light down rather than straight out and won't distract people ascending the stairs.

When mounting light fixtures on stair stringers or near the bottom of stair railings, consider their height and placement in relation to the treads. If space allows, raising the fixture casts light over a wider area.

## BULB TYPES: incandescent or LED?



**Obscure the bulb.** According to John Davis, owner of Highpoint Deck Lighting, "No matter which type of light you choose, it should always be shaded by a louver or softened by frosted, swirled, or coated glass. You should never see the bulb."

The world of exterior accent lighting is dominated by incandescent bulbs and LEDs. Incandescent technology is well-established, and the bulbs are widely available in several different shapes and wattages for only a few bucks apiece, making replacement quick and easy. They cast a softer, warmer light (photo left) than LEDs, but are inefficient because 95% of the energy they consume is emitted as heat. Also, incandescent bulbs have a relatively short life span of 1000 to 2000 hours of use. LEDs (below) are more expensive because you are paying not just for the bulb, but also for the housing and circuitry that go with it. Their life span is longer—from 10,000 to 100,000 hours of use, depending on the quality of the unit—and LEDs produce little heat. Also, rather than burning out like ordinary bulbs, LEDs dim slowly over time. The trade-off is that unless mirrors or reflective surfaces are used, the light output is focused narrowly in only one direction and can be harsh on the eyes in contrast with a dark backyard.



**A versatile LED cap.** De-Kor post caps use LEDs rather than incandescents, and they are sold in five different configurations, so you can choose how many sides of the cap will cast light.