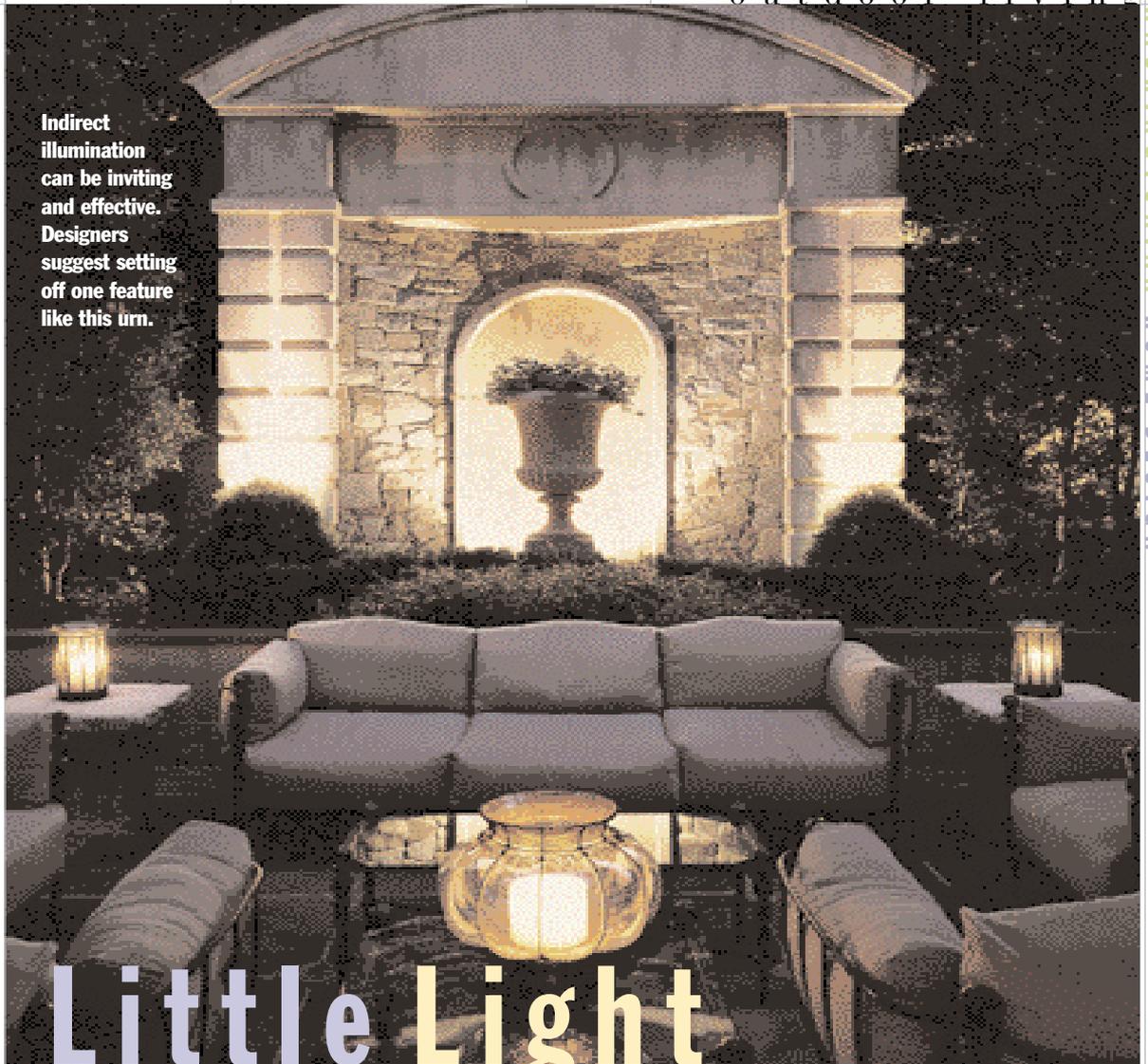


Indirect illumination can be inviting and effective. Designers suggest setting off one feature like this urn.



A Little Light

When It Comes to Outdoor Lighting, Don't Think Big

LANDSCAPE-LIGHTING DESIGNERS WOULD LIKE TO TELL homeowners: Much of your outdoor lighting is going to waste. They would add: Good, subtle lighting is just as effective for security purposes as glaring lights—plus it's prettier. "If everything's lit, then nothing's lit," says Dan Frering of the Lighting Research Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. This means focus.

You can make a space look larger by focusing lighting on walls and using it in trees, or you can define and close up a dark expanse of yard by lighting a distant feature, says Giles Creemer of Illuminations, a landscape-lighting company in Sterling.

For relaxed moods, think small and indirect. On a deck, Creemer suggests placing sconces on poles or simply downlighting areas such as hand rails for safety.

Those plastic fixtures lining walks and driveways are lawn-mower bait, according to Mark Oxley of Outdoor Illumination in the District. A well-placed fixture should call attention not to itself but to an element in the landscape. When placed at the right height, a fixture in a tree, for instance, won't be obvious. If you want footlights along pathways, go for

brass and metal over plastic, says Frering. They're safer, longer-lasting, and fairly easy to install.

The best lighting designers pride themselves on leaving the garden as they found it, with no plants disturbed and no hazards for gardeners. Check to see if they run wires through a conduit, or tube, and how deep the lines are buried. Six to 18 inches deep is optimal, depending on the space.

A basic system starts around \$2,000. Good designers can provide references—important, because you'll want to check out their clients' yards at night. Some use computer-assisted design or digital photography to give you a simulated idea of what your yard can look like.

Ask about maintenance, says Tom DeMuth, president of Vernon Daniel Associates Landscape Illumination in Manassas, which works in the District, McLean, and Potomac. Does the company have a warehouse of equipment for maintenance? Does it have a full-time maintenance staff?

Says DeMuth: "You only want to make this investment once."