When the sun begins to set, most flowers and shrubs in the garden lose distinction, fading into vague shapes against the night sky. But a moonlight garden is a Cinderella story — plants that may be dull or overlooked by day emerge as evening beauties with showy white flowers and silvery foliage that seems to glow in the dark.

If you're away at work all day or if you like to entertain outside at night, make your garden fit your lifestyle by adding plants, shrubs and trees that star as the main attraction as they reflect light from the setting sun and rising moon. If the plants are fragrant as well, you've easily upped the enchantment factor.

The concept is not new. White sand, moonlight reflected in ponds and fragrant sweet olive were used for nighttime meditation gardens centuries ago in China, and the Taj Mahal in India included a moonlight garden on the grounds when it was built. The idea grew in the West among the well-to-do in the 1800s, and was further popularized in the 1930s when Vita Sackville-West and her husband, Harold Nicolson, established the "White Garden" at Sissinghurst Castle in England. According to some accounts, she looked down upon the garden in the evening from the third floor of a medieval tower and discovered that the white flowering plants seemed to nearly jump out of their dark green surroundings.

While reflecting ponds, country estates...

MAKE A MOONLIGHT GARDEN

Almost-eerie beauty of pale blossoms entrances homeowners and nature's visitors.

By JILL DRAPER Special to the Star

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MARY BIBER, LEE'S SUMMIT

To brighten a wooded section, she scattered pots of white impatiens throughout the shade, along with the waxy leaves and the lovely silver foliage of lamb's ears. The same things that make a moonlight garden really pop also work for shaded areas, she notes. She uses less showy but scented plants like thyme, lavenders, mint and star-washed jasmines in pots or on garden pathways. “When you brush against them, the fragrance is unbelievable,” Bibie Chronwall recalls. Bibie became interested in moonlight gardens when she hosted a speaker, Karen Bussolini, for a garden symposium at the speaker’s garden in Conway, Ark. “How many things happen in the dusk and moonlight that are exciting,” she says. “The evening is one of my favorite times in the garden.”

Bibie Chronwall and another nighttime fan just west of Brookside, her own garden is a mix of mostly native tropicals and imported tropics that she overwinters inside. Her container plants include gardensia, Brugmansia (angel’s trumpet), nicotiana (flowering tobacco), a nightblooming cereus cactus and a relative of amaryllis called lemon verbena. Two lantana cultivars, two heliotropes, and hairpin-shaped verbena are exciting, she says. “The evening is one of my favorite times in the garden.”

Datura grows in many colors (pictured is the cultivar ‘Dove’).

In the past, she used a giant, interconnected web of naming when lit from below. Sweetbay magnolias have silvery and can look stunning over water. Table I: Moonlight garden resources

Top 10 favorite fragrant plants from Maryland native plant expert Maureen Gilmer, who combines a bit of the wild and castle towers are nice accents. Combined with white or soft yellow deerbells (such as Sunday Snakeroot, Mandragora foetida) and white phlox, Moonflower is a great addition to any garden’s flower bed. The flowers are fragrant, trumpet-shaped like daturas, but they face downward. They also protect nocturnal pollinators, and again, all parts are toxic.

Columbine is a native woodland plant that comes in many colors (painted like the catcher ‘Dove’).

Motivating growers
More than one gardener mentioned being inspired by Alan Branhagen, a naturalist and director of horticulture at Powell Gardens, who has lectured and written about moonlight gardens. A few perennial favorites he cites are white or soft yellow deerbells (such as Sunday Snakeroot, Mandragora foetida) and white phlox. Many moonlight gardens include white as a primary color. White flowers glow like white light on early spring evenings, he says, and plantings of pion, hydrangea macrophylla and mock orange plants work beautifully in late spring and summer.

Several hardy southern magnolia cultivars work well in the Midwest; in addition to creamy white flowers, their glossy leaves reflect a soft, pinkish glow. In contrast, smaller flowers and foliage, but the undertones of their leaves are silver and can look stunning when lit from below. Branhagen designed a moonlight garden for his house that he can see from the deck where he often relaxes, sometimes with a glass of wine.

Not long ago 3-birdseed-aligned strips flanked a deck, the larkspur’s blue tops growing up through the surrounding daturas. It was, he says, beautiful for 2 months of the year, but not for the rest of the time. It made no sense to him.

Branhagen believes that the beauty of a moonlight garden is doing what flowers do. They want to make their own show, and he says it shouldn’t be any different for a gardener who wants to make their own space. It should be a way to end the day.

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