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## Choosing Your Family's Perfect Tree

by John Peter Thompson, Chairman of the Board, Behnke Nurseries

The annual holiday “decorated-tree-selection adventure” is made simple by family tradition. Whichever style and type of tree your family traditionally chose is often the one you still choose. For some it is a “living” Christmas tree (or, as we in the nursery business like to say, a tree with roots) which avoids the post-holiday trauma of curbside pickup. Others go for the fresh-cut tree, an easier-to-handle symbol of the season. Reviewing the choices opens the window to varied opportunities of design. We shall divide the decorated tree into three categories:

- A houseplant tree for floor or desk and year-long enjoyment;
- A fresh-cut tree for ease on the budget and ease on the back, and;
- A “living” tree that reminds us of “holly days” past, growing larger as the memories recede, growing taller as we grow older.

Decorating trees has a long history, from Germanic “patron” trees, to Roman symbols of life and rebirth, to mediaeval trees decorated by children with fruits, nuts and cheeses on Christmas day. Choose the best form of tree for your own holiday traditions.

### The House Plant Tree:

From small spaces on table tops to specimen status as a floor model, the Norfolk Island pine, *Araucaria heterophylla* (synonym *A. excelsa*), becomes a tropical-flavored addition to the season, and with care can be used year after year. Widely-spaced branching allows for a string of lights and some lightweight ornamentation such as ribbons. Be sure to give the plant a few hours of direct sunlight in the winter and keep the soil moist, not wet.

*continued on page 3*



Whatever your choice or tradition, you'll find a huge selection of Christmas trees at Behnke's.

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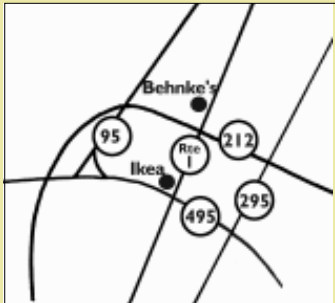
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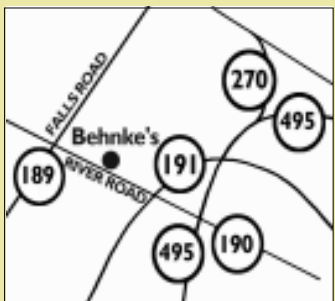
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## Meet: Susan Gelb

"Where's Susan?" is the question asked most often by customers seeking houseplant help at Behnke's Garden Center in Potomac. "If she's not in today, I'll come back," they say with conviction, "Susan always takes care of me."

Susan Gelb is a true community treasure. She's a houseplant specialist who has been dispensing sage horticultural advice along with her own experienced plant care tips to Potomac gardeners for 20-plus years (12 years with Potomac Nurseries and 9 years with Behnke's).

Born and raised in England, Susan inherited her love of plants and her "green thumb" from her mother, who still keeps a traditional English cottage garden in Staffordshire. During the 1980s, Susan became a Montgomery County Master Gardener and also took landscape design courses at George Washington University. For the past 6 years, she has been a Maryland Certified Professional Horticulturist.

When not caring for people and plants in Behnke's greenhouse, Susan spends her time at home in her own greenhouse. Her passions are orchids, ferns and jasmines but her greenhouse and property are crammed with an impressive variety of plants. On the rare occasions she's not tending plants, she enjoys walks along the Potomac, bird watching, reading and visiting family and friends in England.

If you've not had the pleasure of conversing with her, you owe yourself a treat. Just stop by our River Road location, walk into the greenhouse and ask, "Where's Susan?"



photo by Mike Behnke

## Announcing Behnke Nurseries Speakers Series

Beginning January 12, 2008, Behnke Nurseries at Beltsville will again be featuring fine speakers from the gardening community as well as notable members of our own staff. Speakers will include Fran West on pruning, Dr. Richard Bitner on conifers, Britt Slattery on the Audubon Back Yard Program, David Culp on perennials, and many others.

The talks will be held each Saturday at 1 PM at Behnke's Beltsville Garden Center. We will present one speaker per weekend, and conduct the talks year round. That way, you will know there is always someone to see at Behnke Nurseries.

Details will be posted on our website ([www.behnkes.com](http://www.behnkes.com)) in late November. In addition, you may pick up printed schedules in each of our garden centers, and we will send periodic announcements to our email list. (Email us at [behnkes@behnkes.net](mailto:behnkes@behnkes.net) to join our email list.)

As in the past, many presentations will be free. Pre-registration is requested so that we can have enough seats available and provide handouts. Details on registration will accompany the publication of the schedule.

Hope to see you here!



**Christmas trees, continued from front cover****The Winter-Hardy Living Tree:**

If you have a bright, unheated porch or enclosure, consider using a dwarf Alberta spruce, *Picea glauca* 'Conica.' The tree is dense and the decoration should consist of a simple layer of lights or tiny ornaments on the surface, but the pyramidal shape and the small size make this tree a good, indoors-for-the-season-only choice. After the holiday you can plant it outdoors to preserve memories. This neat and compact conical-shaped tree grows about 4 inches a year.

Keeping with the memories and permanence theme, we move now to the emperors of Winter, the spruces. Colorado blue spruce, *Picea pungens*, is silvery blue-green in color, with the intensity of the blue varying with the cultivar chosen. With stiff horizontal branching, it is easy to decorate. The Norway spruce, *Picea abies*, has short green needles on stiff branches, forming a natural pyramidal shape. Both spruces may reach 60 feet, so be sure you have the room in your garden before choosing these majestic marshals of memories.



**Dwarf Alberta Spruce trees are available in many sizes and may be planted outdoors after the holidays.**

The hardy "living" trees are not ones to stay indoors long and they will deeply resent high heat and low humidity, so plan accordingly. My grandparents, Albert and Rose Behnke, brought their tree inside on Christmas Eve and had planted it outdoors by New Year's Day.

**The Fresh-Cut Tree:**

The ubiquitous, symbolic, all-purpose representative of the season is the "fresh-cut" tree. Undemanding on the budget, ready-to-go and easy to assemble, the cut tree, sometimes referred euphemistically to as a "live tree," is the precursor to modernity's "artificial" or "permanent" tree. Cut trees are easy to handle, easy to remove, and easy to care for, and offer the added benefit of fragrance. Behnke Nurseries will offer three types of fresh-cut trees, which are sure to bring the spirit of the season indoors.

**Douglas fir**, *Pseudotsuga menziesii*, is neither fir, nor pine, nor spruce. The botanical name translates as "false Tsuga," the scientific name for the Hemlock tree. We say "Douglas fir" ("Doug fir" if we are feeling frisky), and so should you. Fragrance is important when setting the mood, and this tree delivers. Its long-lasting needles stay on the branches, not your floor, and its straight-as-a-wooden-grenadier trunk makes it an easy tree to set up. The shiny, soft needles are perfect for hiding lights which may highlight a hint of blue in the green needles.



stock photo

**A tree with strong and open branching will display ornaments to full advantage.**

**Fraser fir**, *Abies fraseri*, holds needles longer than any other tree. The soft needles, borne along stiff branches which are easy to decorate, have a slight upwards flair. Our buyer tells me that this is our "premier Christmas tree." The dark green needles are slightly scented, adding to this tree's positive assets.

**Noble fir**, *Abies procera*, arrives by truck from the Pacific Northwest. The coast-to-coast freight costs are more than compensated for by the magnificence of this woodland-scented beauty. The large, accommodating spacing between branches and the strong support the branches offer make this a particularly great tree for many, large, heavy heirloom ornaments. Easy to stand up, with naturally-occurring straight trunks, this blue-green tree is the epitome of a Christmas tree.

**Fresh-Cut Tree Care**

1. Buy your tree early and get it in water; it won't get any fresher on the tree lot.
2. Because the base of the trunk has dried, cut the bottom inch off so that it may better absorb water. (We'll do this for you.) Think of it as a big cut flower.
3. Place in bucket of water as soon as you arrive home and replenish the water daily to maintain a constant supply. It is not uncommon for a tree to use two quarts of water per day.
4. When ready to bring indoors, place in a tree stand that has an adequate water receptacle for the size of the tree.
5. Room temperature has a vital role in the retention of needles. Cooler temperatures prolong the retention of needles, a hot, stuffy room accelerates needle drop.





*With proper plant selection, an unused corner of a back yard can be easily converted to an attractive low-maintenance perennial border.*

## Getting Around to It

*by Bill Mann, Manager, Behnke Nurseries Landscape and Design Department*

“I’ll get around to it” is a great statement. I usually resort to it in the course of battling over issues surrounding home improvement tasks that I really don’t want to do.

Landscape projects are one of the larger home improvement projects to tackle and can often be overwhelming. There always seems to be a higher priority project or a reason to delay or sidetrack the work at hand. I barely have time to mow the lawn, much less think about upgrading my landscape. However, there comes a time when you either realize you can’t stand looking at the mess that is your yard any longer or the constant “encouragement” from your “significant other” finally drives you to action.

For me, landscape planning and installation have become akin to tuning my car. (I used to be able to do it myself but have found it is simpler when I have an expert do it for me.) In the past “fixing up” my yard may have involved replacing a few plants, mulching and trimming and that was it. Now, like many people, I look at my yard differently and consider it as an outdoor extension of my living space. Decks, patios, trellises, outdoor kitchens, fireplaces and sitting walls can provide a family with additional living space. Attention to the floor plan before adding these elements to your yard can be the key to creating both a beautiful and functional space.

From experience, I have found the two main things that prevent me from tackling home improvement projects such as landscaping are not knowing where to begin, and feeling intimidated by the amount of work required. Budget is also a key factor and will determine the size and scope of your home improvement projects. But if you really want to get it done you can usually figure out how to afford it.

Timing can also be key to starting a project. Most homeowners mistakenly think Spring is the time to start landscape projects; but the savvy project planner knows Fall is the real season to work on the yard and garden. Cooler, more predictable weather patterns and plants going dormant are good reasons to complete landscape projects in the Fall. Sunday football is a great reason to hire a professional to do the job! Completing the project in the Fall and Winter allows you to enjoy the finished product in Spring.

So don’t wait! The time to take that landscape project off your “to do” list is now! Behnke’s landscape designers and installation crews are ready to transform your yard. Our landscape services include site consultations, designs, estimates and project installations. Call the Landscape Design and Installation Division today at 240-473-6733.



# Behnke Nurseries Landscape Department Coming to Potomac in January of 2008

We are pleased to announce that we are expanding our services at Behnke Nurseries on River Road in Potomac, MD to include Behnkes' own Design-Build Landscape Service.

*Our services include:*

- **Consultations:** We'll meet with you at your home to offer advice and share ideas for your landscape.
- **Designs:** From two-acre lots to townhome gardens, our talented design staff will create an original landscape design that meets your needs, and fulfills your dreams.
- **Installations:** We'll help you with all of your landscape needs, from grading and drainage solutions to patios, sidewalks and retaining walls, outdoor lighting and other special projects such as outdoor kitchens and other living areas.

**Our highly skilled and experienced design team has over 40 years of collective professional experience and a diverse educational background.**

*Meet our staff:*

**Bill, Landscape Design and Installation Division Director.** Bill is a certified Horticulturist with a Bachelor's Degree in Horticulture from the University of Maryland.

**Christy, Design Department Manager.** Christy is a member of the American Society of Landscape Architects and has a Bachelor's Degree in Landscape Architecture from Penn State University.

**Jennifer, Designer.** Jennifer is a USDA Trained Landscape Designer & Horticulturist.

**Andrea, Designer.** Andrea has a BS in Ornamental Horticulture and Landscape Design from the University of Tennessee and is a Maryland Certified Professional Horticulturist.

**Laura, Designer.** Laura is a Master Gardener specializing in ornamental horticulture and landscape problem-solving.

Our current Potomac office hours are by appointment only. For more information or to schedule an appointment, call 240-473-6733, or email us at [landscaping@behnkes.net](mailto:landscaping@behnkes.net)



*Imagine how this inviting garden would benefit from professionally installed walkways and benches.*

## SPECIAL OFFER FOR GARDENEWS READERS

Call 240-473-6733 for more information and to schedule an appointment with one of our landscape designers. Mention this ad and receive \$100 off a professional design!

*Offer expires January 31, 2008.*

## Preparing your Shrubs & Trees for Winter

by Miri Talabac, Manager, Woody Plants Department, Behnke's at Beltsville

As the Fall planting season winds down and the garden prepares to go to sleep for another Winter, it's time to make sure all your plants are properly tucked-in.

Making sure trees and shrubs go into the Fall and Winter with sufficient moisture will protect their tissues. When the surface soil freezes, roots cannot absorb water until it thaws,

burlap attached to stakes, or a cylinder of burlap filled loosely with dried fallen leaves. Most importantly, thoroughly watering plants when temperatures thaw allows them to re-hydrate in time for the next freeze. Wilt-Stop®, an anti-desiccant spray which coats the leaves to minimize evaporation, is best applied to evergreens in late Fall. Don't be too alarmed at some plants' reac-



**Broad-leaved evergreens like rhododendron react to freezing temperatures by curling. If the soil is moist prior to freezing, they should recover when temperatures warm.**

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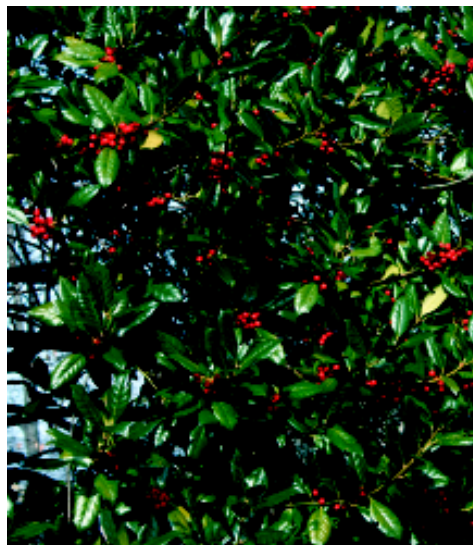
### *Thoroughly watering plants when temperatures thaw allows them to re-hydrate in time for the next freeze.*

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and leaves exposed to the drier winter air can burn and die from the outer edges in. Water-stressed plants will also be more likely to abort their dormant flower buds, and this can affect Spring-blooming plants such as rhododendrons, camellias and dogwoods that have already developed their buds by late Fall. Wounds from freeze damage can also be points of entry for disease.

To help prevent this, plant broadleaf evergreens and marginally-hardy specimens in an area that is more wind-sheltered. An exposed plant can be protected by a temporary wall of

tions to extreme cold – rhododendrons, leucothoe and some others will droop and curl their leaves to minimize the area exposed to the drying wind or sun. With warmer temperatures and moist soil, they should perk up. In Fall, a thicker layer of mulch can help insulate soil around tender plants and those recently planted. This helps to reduce the frost-heaving that can push up new plants not yet firmly rooted-in and can minimize the depth to which the soil freezes. Remember to remove the extra layer in the Spring, as it can keep the crown and root zone of plants too wet.



**Broad-leaved evergreens like magnolia (left) often show winter injury when planted in windy exposures. Watering during winter warm spells will reduce winter damage on hollies (right).**

Resist pruning anything except dead wood until plants are completely dormant. Warm spells could trigger new growth that will only freeze and be killed off. Most trees can be pruned to select a healthy branch pattern in mid-Winter, when it is easier to see the canopy and the sap flow is lowest. The pruning of shrubs that benefit from routine pruning, such as roses and butterfly bush, should be deferred since cut stems could crack during freezes and expose the branches to rot and splitting. Minor tidying-up of overgrown plants can be done in Fall, but wait to do the hard cut-backs until Spring (or after bloom on Spring-blooming plants).

Lastly, consider a final treatment or two with deer repellent. During hard times deer will taste plants they normally leave alone, and even exploratory nibbling can tear branches and strip tree bark, flower buds and leaves. Applying a repellent before they get into the browsing habit should encourage deer to try elsewhere.



## Holiday Latkes are Simply Delicious

Jim Dronenburg — harpist, plant collector and epicure



photo by Daniel Weil

Here's where the fun comes in. Potatoes are new world; the Maccabees never saw one. You don't have to stick with them—add peeled, grated carrots, or yams, or daikon; add cayenne, minced garlic, grated ginger root. If you're the adventurous sort, try celery seed or flakes, cumin, garam masala, or just about any other savory spice. When you are trying new spices, have a small bowl handy. Make your big batch of "basic" latkes and then remove a portion to mix in one spice, fry them, then try another portion with a different spice. Repeat the process until you are bloated.

Have several paper-towel-lined plates ready. Fry the cakes on one side *without turning* until golden brown, then turn and fry

**T**hey asked me for a recipe for latkes. I don't have one, I'm an improvisational cook. But I'm going to tell you how to make them.

Latkes are fried potato "pancakes", which are traditionally eaten at Chanukah, the Jewish Festival of Lights. Since the festival commemorates the recapture by the Jews (led by the Maccabees) of the Jewish Temple from the Seleucid Greeks and the subsequent miracle of the little cask of oil that lasted eight days in the temple lamps instead of the one day it was supposed to, the Jews—and we're never ones to shy away from food—make a point of foods fried in, or using, oil for the holiday.

Now, how do you make latkes? Start with the oil. Olive oil is traditional, and healthy; canola is healthy too. Peanut oil is not, but gets things so nice and crisp and brown...I use a mix of olive and peanut for frying. Nonstick skillets are good, but I like the old cast iron—you can get it good and hot and not worry about the finish. You will want perhaps a quarter of an inch of oil—none of this "spray the pan" business. We aren't deep frying here, but we want a good bit of oil.

There are two schools when you talk latkes. One is the "mashed-potato pancake" and the other is the "grated potato pancake." I prefer the latter because—*there* is art.

To begin, scrub and grate unpeeled potatoes (russets are good), an onion or two according to your taste, and mix. Add salt, pepper, eggs, and then to bind the latkes together, add matzo meal or bread crumbs. (You can use flour in a pinch.) Drop large spoonfuls of batter into the hot oil and fry. That's it, it doesn't get more basic than that.



photo by Daniel Weil

until done. Remove from pan and place on paper towel-lined plate. When the plate is full, add another layer of paper towels and start another layer of latkes.

Latkes can be taken to the table straight from the pan (the cook, of course, is starving while others gorge) or can be kept hot in the oven. Serve with sour cream, yogurt, applesauce or apple butter, or just about any other sweet or savory you can think of.

There are two things to watch out for. One, if you don't have the tradition of making latkes, your first batch may turn out a bit odd. Err on the side of a dry batter at first; they will all *taste* just fine. You will get the hang of it by the end of a large batch, I promise.

The other thing is, latkes are addictive. They just sit there begging to be eaten. They are just too good to be put away for leftovers... and then the next thing you know, you've stuffed yourself simple.

## Potomac Outlook

For us dedicated band of horticulturists and merchants who ply our humble trade on the six acre slice of heaven just outside the village of Potomac, life this past year has been pretty darned exciting. As Winter (very) slowly turned to Spring, our off-season construction projects climaxed with the birth of a beautiful new front deck. New display walls and fixturing sprouted in the garden shop and almost twice last year's number of nursery tables sprang up all over the property loaded with more lush, Behnke-grown plant product than ever before.

As we moved through Spring into June, drought began to creep up on us. Amazingly, the increased labor requirements of dry garden beds didn't seem to deter our wonderfully loyal customers. They just kept shopping as we kept watering and by August we had posted some record sales figures to go with the record heat.

On the evening of August 4<sup>th</sup> Behnke's Potomac hosted a very well-attended reception for *The Dog Days of Summer*, a showing of recent works of *Potomac Artists in Touch* hung in Behnke's main garden shop area. As recipient of 10% of the proceeds from the sale of PAinT's work, PetConnect was also on hand with some very cute adoptable pups. Boordy Vineyards provided a wonderful tasting of their fine vintages and Chef Debbie Ciardo served up a sumptuous table of bruscettas and fruit. To quote the *Potomac Almanac*, "From beagles to bagels it was a class act."

This Fall's crop of Behnke-grown mums and pansies was as beautiful as ever. During September and October we participated in several charitable events including the St. Francis Home Tour and the Holton

Harvest. Our new Fall Wreath Desk and spooky Halloween area seemed to be a big hit with customers.

With our pumpkin patch picked clean and all the spooks, goblins and ghosties gone to good homes, we are looking forward to our favorite time of year. Our customers will find our Christmas Shop to be bigger and better than ever. We've chosen to offer only high-quality decorations and supplies, beautifully merchandised for shopping enjoyment and holiday enrichment. Our perennial Custom Holiday Wreath Desk is open and in full production mode and our Christmas trees and greens are fresh and fragrant. We sincerely hope every one of our valued customers comes by for a cup of cider and a "Merry Christmas!"



***Behnke Nurseries in Potomac was redesigned to be more "shopper friendly" and included the addition of many new display tables.***

*Behnke Nurseries Landscape and Design Department  
coming to our Potomac location!*

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