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The Colorful Past of Poinsettias

— by Larry Hurley

For many people, Christmas decorating is not complete without a beautiful poinsettia from Behnke Nurseries. On our website, we have documented how poinsettias are grown at our Largo, Maryland production greenhouses (www.behnke.com). But, where did poinsettias come from in the first place?

To trace the origin of poinsettias we have to look to our southern neighbors, home of so many economically important plants. The poinsettia is native to tropical Mexico and Central America, where it grows straight and tall to ten feet.

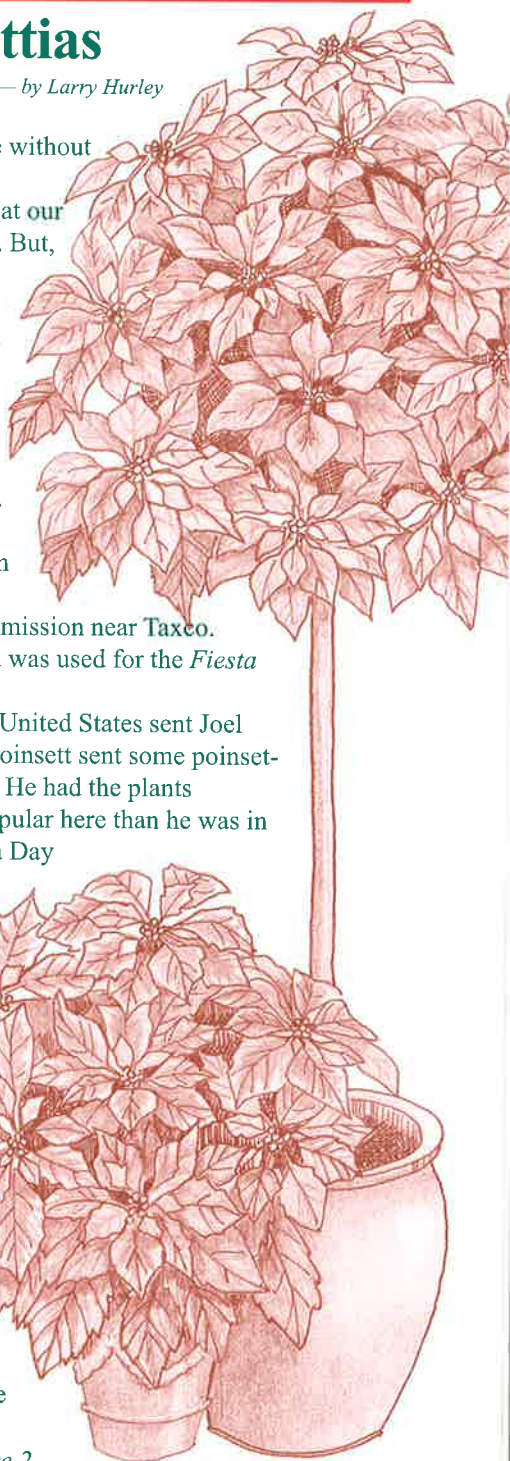
Poinsettias were grown by the Aztecs, who used them medicinally to reduce fever and to make a dye from the red flower bracts. The flowers were also used to symbolize purity. Following the invasion by the Spanish Conquistadors and the establishment of Catholicism as the state religion, many Indian traditions and ceremonies became intermingled with the "new ways." During the 17th century, the Franciscans established a mission near Taxco. Because of its color and holiday blooming time, the poinsettia was used for the *Fiesta de Santa Pesebre*, a nativity procession.

Following Mexico's war of independence from Spain, the United States sent Joel Roberts Poinsett to Mexico as our first ambassador. In 1828 Poinsett sent some poinsettias to his home in Greenville, SC, where he had greenhouses. He had the plants propagated and distributed to friends. Poinsett, much more popular here than he was in Mexico, is honored with the celebration of National Poinsettia Day on December 12, the day of his death.

In 1833, the poinsettia was officially described and named *Euphorbia pulcherrima* by a German taxonomist named Willd. The *Euphorbia* genus is a large one, with worldwide representation. Its members include many popular perennials, many unpopular weeds, and many of the interesting cactus-like succulents found in Africa.

The poinsettia remained a plant of modest obscurity until it was noticed by Albert Ecke, a nurseryman in California. In 1906 he moved to Hollywood, and began growing field-grown cut flowers, including poinsettias. By 1909, Ecke was specializing in poinsettias, and The Ecke Poinsettia Ranch, now in Encinitas, CA, is still the world leader in poinsettia production. From 1923 to 1963 all significant poinsettia varieties grown in the United States came from Ecke.

Continued on Page 2



The Behnke GardeNews**EDITOR-IN-CHIEF:**

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HOLIDAY HOURS*Thanksgiving Day: Closed**November 26- December 23:**Monday-Thursday: 9AM-7PM**Friday and Saturday: 8AM-8PM**Sunday: 9AM-6PM**Dec. 24, Christmas Eve: 9AM-5PM**Dec. 25, Christmas Day: Closed**December 26-30: 9AM-6PM**New Year's Eve: 9am-5pm**New Year's Day: Closed***BELTSVILLE GARDEN CENTER**

11300 Baltimore Ave. (U.S.1)

Beltsville, MD 20705

*(Two miles north of**Exit 25, Capital Beltway)***301-937-1100****Florist: 301-937-4032****LARGO GARDEN CENTER**

700 Watkins Park Drive

Largo, MD 20774

*(Between Central Avenue**and Route 202)***301-249-2492****POTOMAC GARDEN CENTER**

9545 River Road

Potomac, MD 20854

*(Two miles north of the**Capital Beltway on River Road)***301-983-9200****Florist 301-983-4400***Continued from Page 1*

Unlike today's well-branched plants, these varieties were grown as single-stemmed individual plants with one flower—perhaps three plants in an 8 inch diameter pot. Also, the early varieties were very sensitive to changes in humidity and light conditions. They responded by dropping their leaves and flower bracts. Florists compensated for the no-leaf look by wrapping the pots and stems in foil to hide the bare stems—this is where foiled pots originated. Alfred Millard, Behnke's Chief of Operations, recalls the early 1960's when Behnke's first started growing poinsettias. "We used to go out to the nursery and cut evergreen branches and put them into the poinsettia pots to hide the bare stems. In those days, poinsettias were not sold until the week before Christmas because they would not hold up for very long in the house. It was more like a flower arrangement than a potted plant."

In 1963, Mikkelsen Greenhouses introduced 'Paul Mikkelsen'. It had good foliage retention, and was the first long-lasting variety as well as the first cultivar that grew well as a potted plant. In 1968 Ecke introduced the 'Eckespoint C-1'; and in the same year 'Annette Hegg' was introduced from Norway—both breakthroughs in that they made attractive branched plants. Since that time, many new and exciting cultivars have appeared on the market, and we now are able to produce stunning, full plants, with beautifully colored flowers and deep green leaves. With reasonable care, the poinsettia will be attractive in the home for weeks or months instead of days.

Hank Doong, head grower at our Largo location, and Alfred Millard had some thoughts on differences in production now vs. our early crops. For the last ten years, Behnke's has acquired unrooted poinsettia cuttings from Ecke and other growers, which are then potted in summer and continue to grow. Alfred says that back in the early '60's, Behnke's would receive poinsettia "mother" plants from Ecke in late winter. They were field grown plants shipped dormant in railway cars. In the summer, they were planted in the area at the Beltsville store where we now sell our azaleas. "When it was time to take cuttings, everyone jumped in to help. We would come in at 5:00 AM, while it was still cool, and take cuttings with knives."

"When I started in the early '70's," Hank said, "we were still trying new ways of keeping the plants short. This was before chemical growth retardants. One thing we tried was tying the stems in a knot—the stems on the older varieties were a lot more flexible than those of today's. I don't recall that it worked very well..."

Our production staff still comes in early or stays late to process the poinsettia cuttings in the cooler parts of the day. The plants are hand-pinch to promote branching, staked and tied over a several month period. Beginning in mid-November, they are shipped fresh to our stores daily throughout the holiday season. Even the modern varieties of poinsettias detest spending time in boxes and warehouses—they respond by drooping. So, like with tomatoes, freshness counts!!

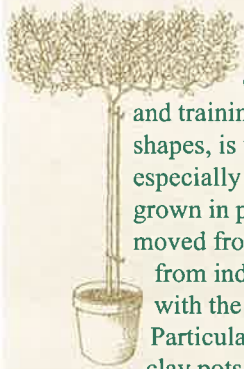
Poinsettias on Parade

In the nearly 40 years that Behnke Nurseries has grown poinsettias, we have grown and sold over a million plants. Each year, shortly after Thanksgiving, we hold an open house at the Largo production facility, where you can see 45,000 poinsettias at their peak.

We invite you to attend "Poinsettias on Parade" at our Largo Garden Center, on Sunday, November 28th, from 12 noon to 4PM. You'll tour the growing greenhouses that are absolutely overflowing with brilliant poinsettias, about 20 varieties in all. You'll also have an opportunity to take your holiday photographs with this incredibly beautiful backdrop, and we'll provide light refreshments and holiday demonstrations.

While you're in the neighborhood, you may want to visit nearby Watkins Regional Park to see the annual Festival of Lights. This drive-through lights display is quite wonderful and, after taking in Behnke's spectacular poinsettia display, will continue to thrill you with the holiday spirit.

The History



Topiary, the pruning and training of living plants into shapes, is very popular — especially “portable” topiaries grown in pots that may be moved from room to room or from indoors to outdoors with the change of seasons. Particularly when grown in clay pots, they give a “European garden” look to a room and compliment many decorating schemes.

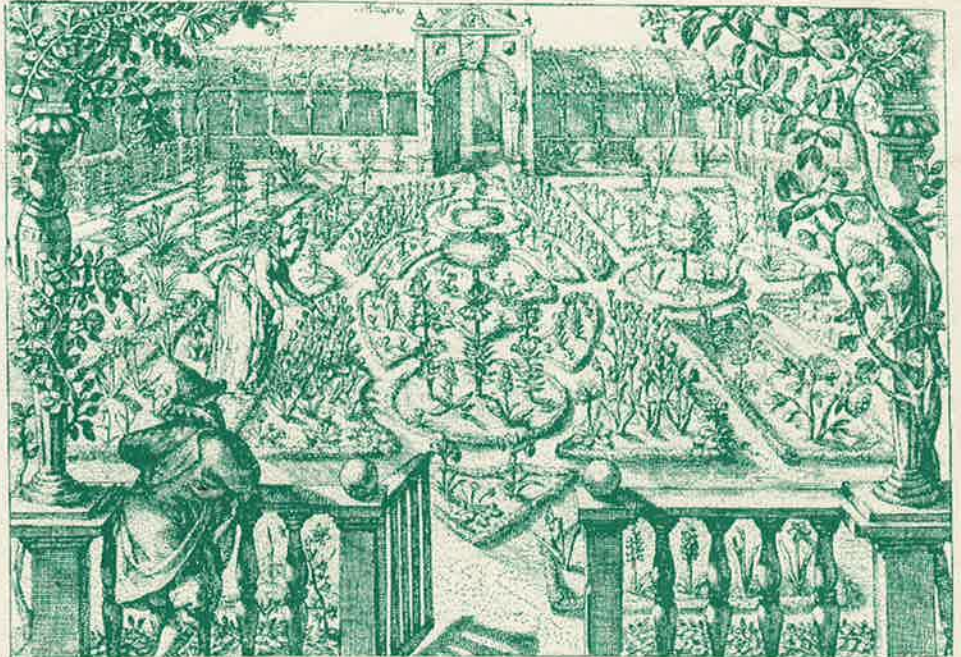
The art of topiary has a long and interesting history. The first record of these specially pruned and trained plants comes from the Greeks, although the term is from the Latin, *topiarius*, translated as “pertaining to ornamental gardening.”

The Greeks designed and built formal buildings, and it was logical that they came to accent the buildings with formally-shaped evergreens. Over time, this evolved into trimming for effect. A Roman, Cneus Matius, got the topiary bug and is credited with interesting Caesar Augustus in topiary. Politics being what they are, soon Rome was awash with evergreens clipped into hedges, animal shapes, and geometrical forms. Although it took 500 years, this probably led to the decline of the Roman Empire, and the Dark Ages.

Since plants need light to survive, not much gardening of any kind occurred in Europe for several hundred years. Charlemagne (800 AD) is said to have revived an interest in the growing of herbs and fruit trees in France. Especially after 1000 AD, the spread of monasteries reintroduced the cultivation of herbs, flowers and shrubs throughout Europe. Also, the beautiful Moorish paradise gardens in Spain and Sicily served as models of gardens for pure enjoyment's sake.

During the Italian Renaissance, an appreciation for things Roman reemerged, including the use of topiaries. The Italian garden became the basis of European gardens for several hundred years,

low, interweaving clipped hedges (often boxwood) in arabesques, an imitation of embroidery (*parterre de broderie*) at Versailles and other grand gardens. Gardens were crammed full of cone, globe



This seventeenth century herbal catalog, published in Holland, depicts medicinal and ornamental plants, including a topiary as the center focal point.

featuring formal arrangements of clipped herbs and shrubs in geometric patterns, trimmed potted plants and espaliered trees as accents, and mazes. In Islamic and Italian gardens, water features also played a big role. Baroque gardens in the 1600's became more and more fantastical, with grottoes, elaborate water features, and heavily trimmed and topiaried shrubbery. Interestingly, boxwood, the mainstay of today's topiary and knot gardens, was not much used in European gardens before 1600 due to what many perceived as its unpleasant odor.

In France, in the mid-1600's the style became much more flowing, with beds of

and obelisk-shaped shrubs as focal points and accents. At this time flowering plants became much more important — at Versailles 1.9 million pots were kept on hand, so that the extensive beds could be replanted overnight to delight Louis XIV the next day.

In England, the style of the 16th century was the knot garden, intricate interweaving patterns of thyme, rosemary, germander and other herbs. English yews were also clipped into hedges and mazes. Meanwhile, the Dutch became increasingly interested in gardening. With space at a premium, they stressed small, mathematically precise garden designs,

of Topiaries

— by Larry Hurley

and they were particularly fond of topiary. With their overseas trade, they had access to many new species, and new plants (especially tulips) were worth their weight in gold.

Seventeenth century English gardens took on many characteristics of the French style, then the Dutch —with strong geometric patterns, and topiary and statuary accents. The latter is attributed to the influence of King William of Orange, Dutch, who married Queen Mary of England. At Williamsburg in Virginia, geometric forms of boxwood were made and knot gardens were planted as colonists followed the English/Dutch style.

Eventually a back-to-nature reaction arose, beginning in England in the early 1700's. During the mid-to-late 1700's, most of the English formal gardens were ripped out and replaced by "natural" landscapes, with lakes, ruins, flowing lawns and clumps of trees. Topiaries were removed or allowed to grow out to their natural forms.

But as Michelangelo said (more or less), "the shape is already within the stone, I only reveal it;" it was only a matter of time before topiarists again reared their ugly heads. Victorian England in the late 1800's, was a time of great interest in plants. New plants were coming from explorations in China, the rain forests, and the American west. Formal gardens again became the rage with annuals being planted to look like oriental rugs, "carpet bedding" which gives rise to the term "bedding plants." Perennials, ornamental grasses and big, bold tropical

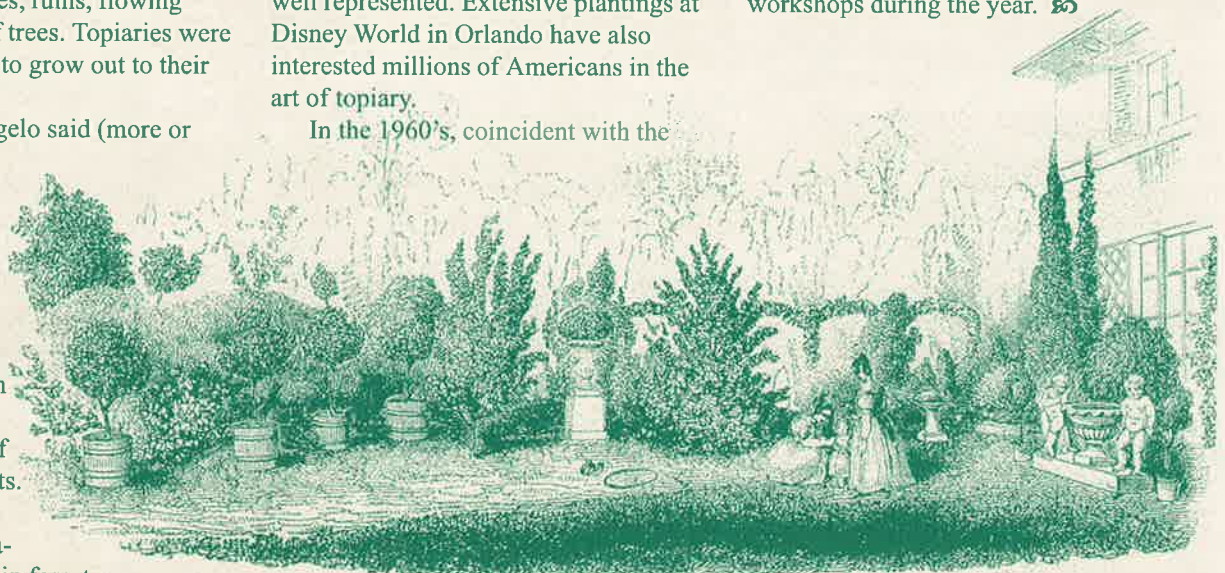
plants were very popular. Topiary animals were used to accent the centers or corners of the beds. Commercial topiary nurseries thrived in Holland and England. European interest in topiary again faded after World War I.

Travellers are fortunate in that so many wonderful gardens around the world can be visited. In the United States, large estate gardens were planted in the early 1900's. Ladew, north of Baltimore, was purchased in 1931, and Longwood, in Pennsylvania, in 1936. Topiary gardens were started and both remain excellent places to see mature topiary plantings today. Hampton Court Palace (England), Versailles, Villandry (France), Villa d' Este (Italy)...Europe is full of gardens representing many styles and eras of gardening, with topiaries well represented. Extensive plantings at Disney World in Orlando have also interested millions of Americans in the art of topiary.

In the 1960's, coincident with the

These better fit the budget, space and mobility of the modern gardener, yet give a link to the intimate Renaissance gardens as well as the grand gardens of the past. Excellent specimens of interior framed topiaries are always on display at Longwood Gardens, which has specialized in seasonal topiary displays.

Behnke Nurseries is proud to offer wonderful topiaries from **The Gardens**, a family-owned business tucked into the Appalachian foothills of western Maryland. **The Gardens** has also been discovered by national garden writers and photographers and was featured in articles in **Country Gardening's** holiday issue in 1998 and again this year. The topiaries make great gifts, and will be available in our new **Greenhouse Gift Shop**. We also offer "how-to" books and materials to make your own topiaries in our garden shop, as well as workshops during the year. *so*



In nineteenth-century England, elaborate urban gardens frequently featured topiaries.

houseplant craze and environmental movement, American gardeners began experimenting with table-top topiaries and topiaries made on preformed frames.

Editor's note: See our listing of Holiday Workshops on pages 6 and 7. You can join us and learn the tricks to making your own topiaries.

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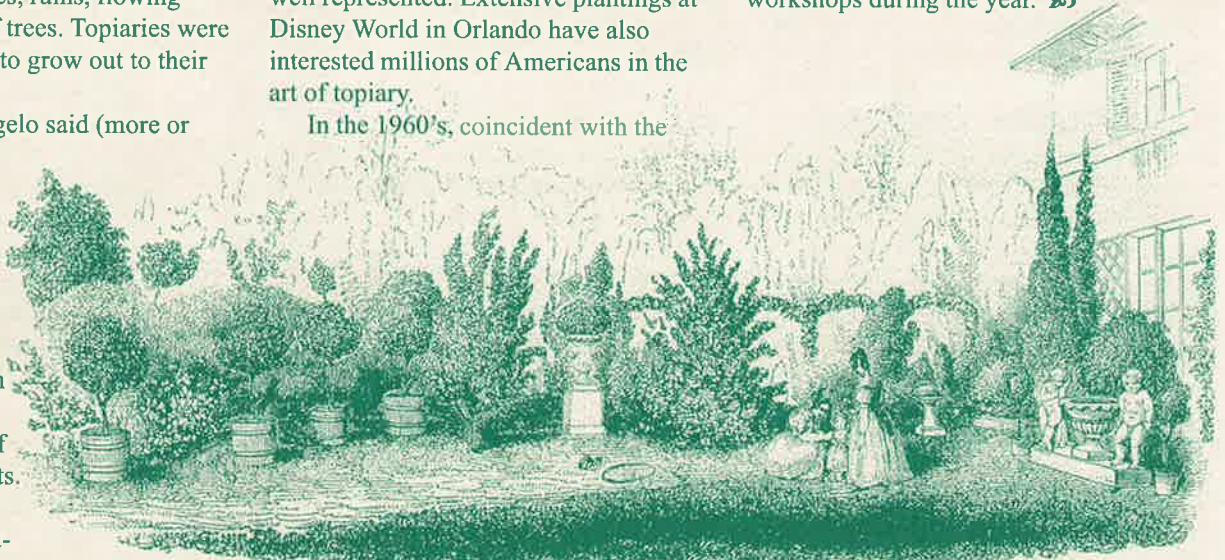
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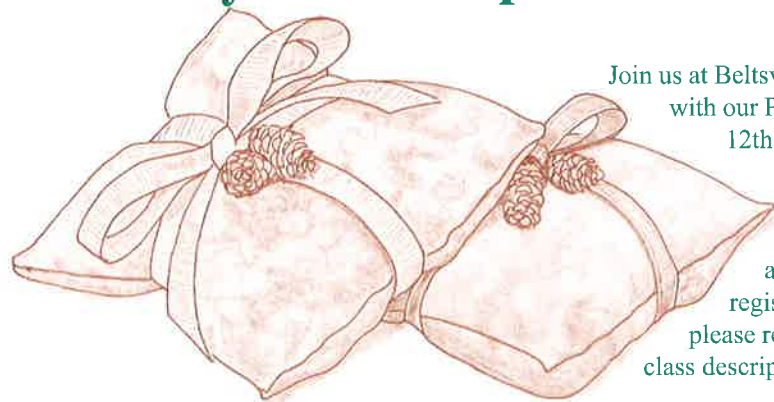


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Holiday Workshops & Demonstrations in Beltsville



Join us at Beltsville for wonderful workshops and demonstrations in conjunction with our Poinsettia Premiere Celebration, December 5th through December 12th, 1999. Surrounded by literally thousands of Behnke Signature Poinsettias, you'll learn how to create unique decorations and gifts made with Mother Nature's bounty. Then you can use our spacious workshop space to design and create, leave the mess and take your treasures home! All workshops require advance registration. Participation is limited to 15 students per workshop, so please reserve early to avoid disappointment. Costs vary, see individual class descriptions below. **Call 301-937-1100 to register for a workshop.**

Holiday Pine Pillow Sachets

with Donna Almquist

Friday, December 3, 10AM-12 NOON

Tuition: \$25

Bring home the holidays with the fresh forest fragrance of a pine pillow. Make your own mini-pillow filled with balsam fir needles and decorated with ribbon and mini fir cones. These pillows make a wonderfully fragrant gift too! Donna will have a selection of pillow kits and finished pillows available for sale.

Herbal Body Care

with Donna Almquist

Friday, December 3, 1-3PM

Tuition: \$25

Discover the satisfaction of making your own body care products from herbs, flowers, fruits, spices and simple household products. Learn techniques for making herbal body powders and body splashes. Each student will receive a body powder and a body splash to take home along with course notes, recipes, and resources. Donna will have an ample supply of her handcrafted herbal bath products available for sale.

Wreaths From the Landscape

with Randy Best

Saturday, December 4, 9:30-11:30AM

Tuition: \$25

Create a unique holiday wreath using colorful and unusual evergreens from our display gardens. Randy will demonstrate design ideas and techniques, then lend advice as you create your own one-of-a-kind wreath.

Decorative Holiday Swags

with Randy Best

Saturday, December 4, 1-4PM

Free demonstration/Fee for materials

Tired of the same old wreath? Try a new look with a door swag decorated to suit your style. Our designer will demonstrate the basic technique and give design advice. Select your greens and create a special swag for door or window display in our workshop area. Your materials cost will depend upon greenery selected.

Boxwood Kissing Ball

with Eric Morrison

Sun., Dec. 5, 11AM- 1PM

Tuition: \$25

Make a kissing ball part of your holiday tradition. These charming reminders of a Christmas Past are miniature works of art. Eric will help you create this traditional, holiday decoration using fresh greens and a cheery red ribbon for hanging.

Holiday Baskets for the Home

with Eric Morrison

Sunday, December 5, 2-5PM

Free demonstration/Fee for materials

Eric will discuss designs and techniques for assembling a holiday basket using indoor plants and holiday accents. You may then use our workshop space to create your own unique design with our assistance. Your materials cost will depend upon the plants and greenery you select.

Glorious Garlands

with Angela McCauley

Friday, December 10, 9:30AM-12:30PM

Free demonstration/Fee for materials

Turn evergreens and leaves into beautiful garlands for draping mantle or banister. Choose your own freshly-cut greens, and assemble a signature roping with the help of our staff. Let your individuality show through beautiful decorations this holiday season. Materials cost for garland will depend upon the greenery you choose.

Herb Handkerchief Sachet

with Donna Almquist

Fri., Dec. 10, 1:30-3:30PM

Tuition: \$25

Old-fashioned handkerchief sachets make very unique holiday gifts or decorations. In this class you will create a sachet using a decorative handkerchief and cotton batting filled with powdered herbs and spices. Donna will also have a selection of her herbal treasures available for sale.



Herbal Soaps for the Holidays

with Leslie Plant

Sat., Dec. 11, 10AM-12:30PM

Tuition \$25

You'll be guided step-by-step as you create marvelously fragrant soaps with an assortment of natural ingredients. Leslie will also have a generous supply of her unique handmade soaps available for purchase. Please bring an apron, rubber gloves and safety glasses.



More Workshops & Demonstrations

Herbal Bath Luxuries

Karen Cizmadia

Saturday, December 11, 2-4PM

Tuition: \$25

Create your own little bit of heaven with herbal bath salts, bath teas and herbal salt scrubs. Using salt, essential oils, dried herbs and more, Karen will help each student make soothing bath products for personal use or gift-giving. Karen will have a selection of her products available for sale.

Herbal Soap for the Holidays

Sun., Dec. 12,
3-5PM

See Page 6 for course description.

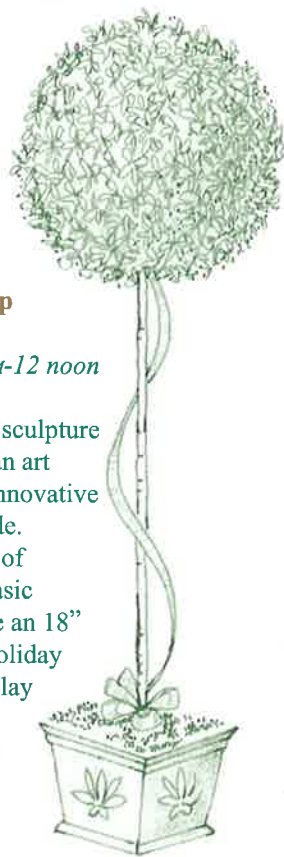
Topiary Workshop

Joan O'Rourke

Sun., Dec. 12, 10AM-12 noon

Tuition: \$25

Creation of topiary sculpture in live greenery is an art used by countless innovative gardeners worldwide. Besides the history of topiary, learn the basic techniques to create an 18" ivy spiral tree for holiday decoration and display for years to come. Basic care and best plant choices for topiary will be discussed.



Evergreen Holiday Centerpiece

Susan Karchmer

Thursday, December 16, 10AM-12 NOON

Tuition: \$30

Create the perfect holiday tabletop decoration. Susan will have examples to spur your creativity and will guide you through the process of decorating your ring arrangement with boxwood, white pine, cedar, berries and beautiful flowers.

Free Holiday Demonstrations

We have plenty of helpful and interesting free demonstrations planned for the 1999 holiday season. Below is an abbreviated listing — you'll find more details, including dates and times, in the holiday issue of the Behnke Events Bulletin. Pick one up at any of our three locations.

• Woodturning Demonstrations

Sat. & Sun., Dec. 4 & 5 and 11 & 12
10AM to 5PM each day

The Chesapeake Woodturners will demonstrate their unique craft during our **Poinsettia Premier Celebration** the first two weekends in December. These talented artisans will demonstrate a wide variety of wood turning techniques and will offer their artistically sculpted creations for sale. Find the perfect gift for everyone on your list from their offerings of one-of-a-kind tree (know what that is?), holiday decorations, tableware and more, created from Maryland woodland timber felled by nature.

• Hardy Container Gardens

Learn to create attractive, cold-tolerant mini-gardens that will last all winter.

• Holiday Evergreen Container Gardens

See how to transform empty outdoor containers into welcoming holiday arrangements.

• Fruit and Candle Centerpieces

Learn to make a striking table arrangement with just a few leaves, fresh fruit and ribbon.

• Scandinavian Stars

Learn to make beautiful three-dimensional stars for holiday decorating using a simple folding technique and strips of paper.

• Poinsettia Care

Learn to keep your holiday poinsettia in good condition long after the holidays.

Meet: Kyong Theison



Kyong, Manager of our Beltsville Florist Shop since 1994, was born in a small town in the Republic of South Korea, and grew up in Kunsen on the west coast of South Korea near the Yellow Sea.

She met her husband Dave in Korea, then came with him to the United States and settled in Laurel. Kyong decided that Behnke's in Beltsville was the place she would like to work, and applied for part-time work. She was hired during the Christmas rush of 1987.

After Christmas, she transferred to sales in the Florist Shop. Her sense of floral design was readily apparent and, after a floral design course at the University of Maryland and an advanced design course given by FTD, she quickly moved into a position as floral designer in 1990. Kyong has amassed a fan club of customers who ask for her help with all their floral arrangements.

Kyong and Dave live in Laurel, with their dog Zippy and two birds, Eddy and Ming. She is an avid gardener, and also enjoys cooking and various arts and crafts such as traditional basket making.

Kyong believes that you should find a job you really enjoy, where you can learn and your talents can grow. And, although it comes as no surprise to us that know her, she insisted we pass on her personal conviction that "listening to Jimmy Buffet makes everything go better!"

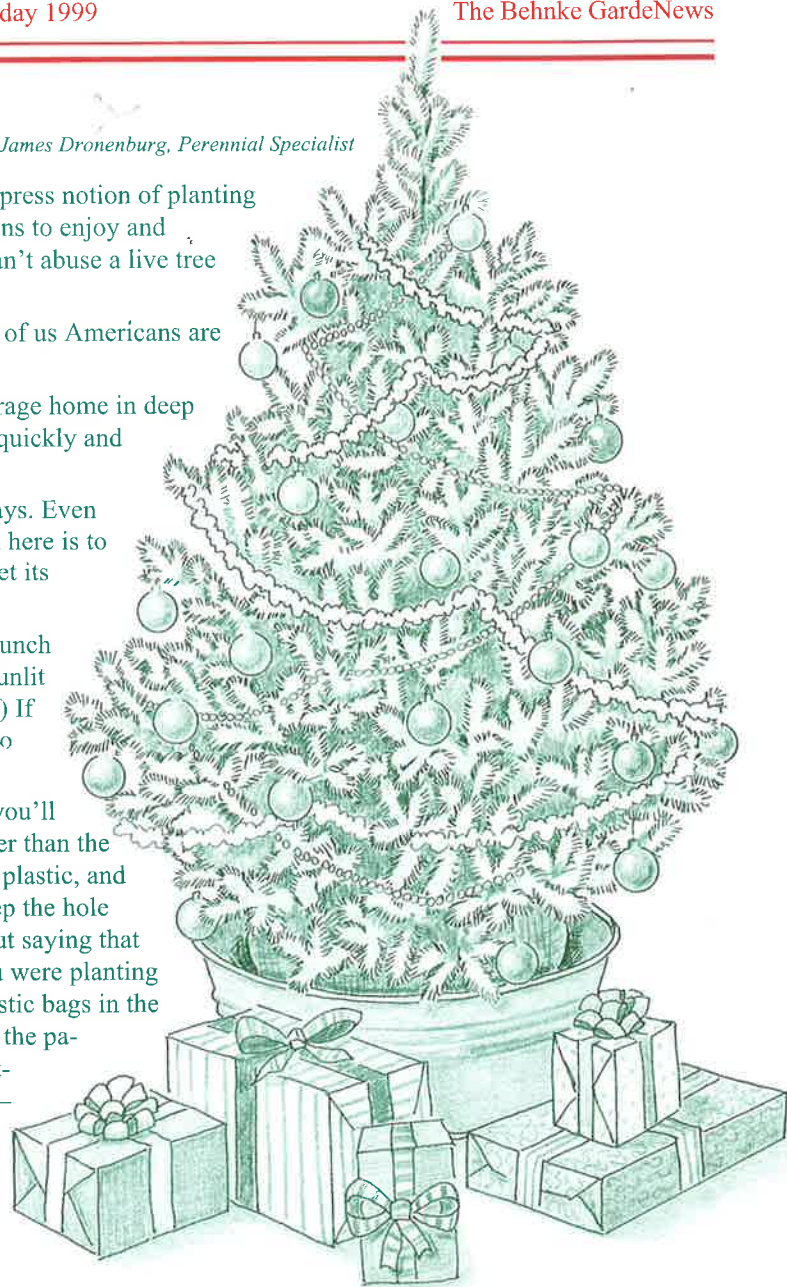
Christmas Memory Trees

—by James Dronenburg, Perennial Specialist

Many people will buy live Christmas trees with the express notion of planting them outside after the holidays for future generations to enjoy and admire. This will work, *if* you remember that you can't abuse a live tree like a cut one. Here are some points to keep in mind:

- Resign yourself to a smaller tree than the ceiling-scrappers many of us Americans are used to. Large trees have unmanageable rootballs.
- Remember that the soil ball *must not* dry out. The air in the average home in deep December is not kind to live evergreen trees. Water will be lost quickly and must be replaced.
- Keep the tree outside until needed, and inside for a just a few days. Even then, keep the room at the lowest temperature possible. The idea here is to keep the tree from thinking spring has arrived, which would upset its dormant cycle.
- Consider not putting lights on. (When the mid-1970's energy crunch came, my parents retired the Christmas tree lights and liked the unlit trees so much that they kept them unlit for the rest of their lives.) If you do put lights on, use the smallest type of bulbs, and try not to have them too near the needles.

If you decide on a living Christmas tree, dig the hole in which you'll plant the tree before the weather gets really cold. It should be deeper than the rootball of the tree, and twice as wide. Cover the hole with boards, plastic, and mulch over that — to keep the soil below from freezing, and to keep the hole from filling with water if we experience heavy rains. It goes without saying that the planting soil should be amended with organic material as if you were planting any other tree at any other time. Have the soil to fill the hole in plastic bags in the garage or some other place where it will not be frozen. If you have the patience, ease the transition for the tree by putting it in a cold-but-not-freezing place for a day before it goes outside. Stake the tree well—remember, the roots will not be anchoring it to the ground yet. An antidesiccant (for example, Wilt-Pruf®) is the final step. If you are planting it in a wind tunnel (with an eye to stopping the wind), remember to shield the plant the first winter with a windbreak of burlap and stakes, or similar arrangement. ☞



Join us for our
Poinsettia Premiere Celebration
December 5th - 12th, 1999
at our Beltsville location

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Florist 301-937-4032

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