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An American Dream in Full Bloom

—Sabrina Martin

The story of Behnke Nurseries is the epitome of the American Dream. A young man from Germany immigrated to the United States to seek a better life for himself while carrying on the family tradition. Now a local landmark, Behnke Nurseries began 70 years ago in Beltsville through the hard work and determination of that young man, Albert Behnke, and his wife Rose.

Albert Behnke grew up in the garden. His father, Wilhelm Behnke, owned a nursery in the northern town of Kellinghusen, Germany, where he grew roses, perennials and other flowers. Wilhelm sold his flowers all over Europe and England. In 1911, Wilhelm won a medal from the Horticultural Guild in Germany for developing a new variety of apple, the 'Stina Lohman' variety.

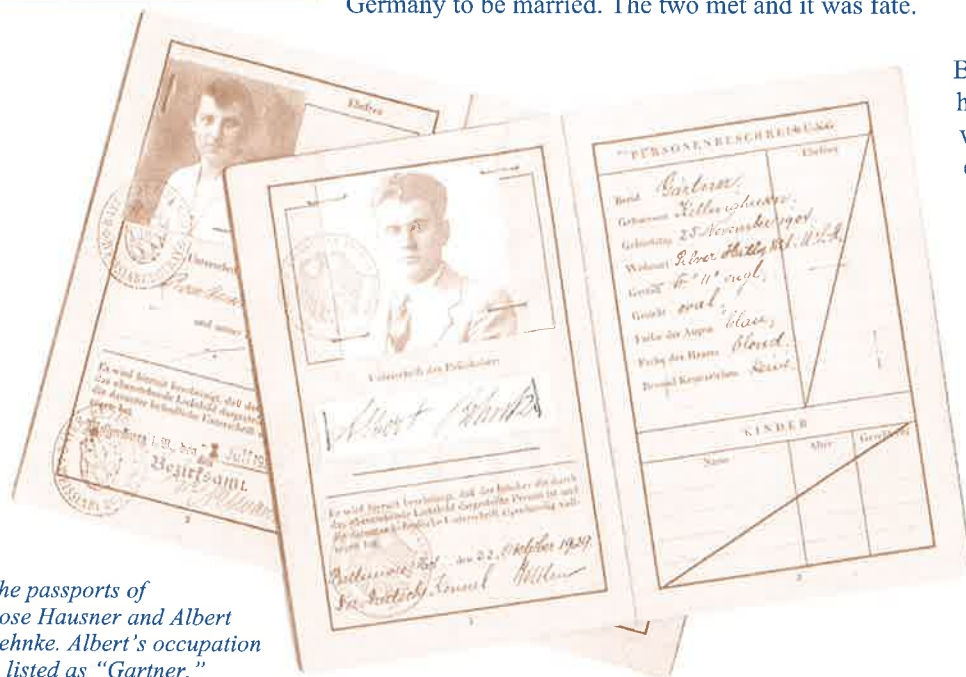
Albert was born in 1904 in Kellinghusen. He grew into a strong-minded man determined to strike out on his own and create a new life for himself in America. Deciding that there was more that he could accomplish in the United States than he could in strictly regulated Germany, Albert sailed to the States and continued working at what he knew —roses and cut flowers. Before settling down in Beltsville, he worked at several jobs on the East coast, including working in the rose gardens of Bobbink and Atkins in New Jersey. It was with this company that Albert made a deal to receive a car in exchange for grafting nursery stock. Bobbink and Atkins agreed to this deal, never for a minute believing that Albert could possibly produce enough grafts to equal the worth of the car, but Albert worked long and hard and succeeded in earning his Model A Ford.

In 1930, Albert started his nursery in Beltsville. In July of 1931 he married a young German girl by the name of Rose Hausner. During the time of the Great Depression when love was sometimes overshadowed by the struggle to survive, their first meeting was as romantic as a fairy tale. According to their daughter, Sonja Behnke Festerling, Albert and Rose were both returning by ship to Germany to be married. The two met and it was fate.

"My mother was engaged to a man in Bavaria and she was going back to marry him. On the ship, she saw this young man with the most beautiful manners who could really dance. It turned out to be my father who also was engaged to somebody back in Germany," said Sonja.

Albert and Rose knew immediately that they were meant for each other and broke off their engagements when they reached Germany. They then returned to the United States and began their lives together running the nursery in Maryland.

Rose had grown up outside Ellingen, a town in southern Germany. Her father was the mayor of Ellingen, and her family owned a mill that ground grain for the local farmers and



The passports of Rose Hausner and Albert Behnke. Albert's occupation is listed as "Gartner."

(continued on page 7)



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GARDEN CENTER HOURS**WINTER 2000:**

January 1st - April 1st:

Monday - Saturday: 9AM to 6PM

Sunday: 9AM to 5PM

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

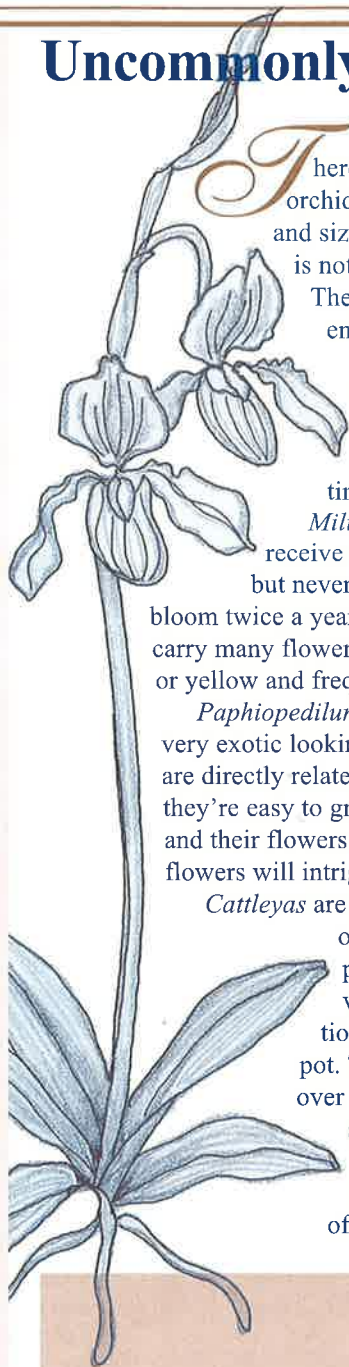
(Two miles north of the
Capital Beltway on River Road)

301-983-9200

Florist 301-983-4400

Uncommonly Beautiful Orchids

— by Carol Allen, Orchid Specialist, Potomac




There are many orchids available today, besides the well-known moth orchid (*Phalaenopsis*), which will give you a vast variety of blossom, color, and size. These exotic plants are often considered to be tough to grow. This is not so! They have simple requirements that are easily met in our homes. The trick is to learn which kinds of orchids will grow in your particular environment.

If you have a bright sunny windowsill that gets three to four hours of sun, the *Oncidium* (dancing lady) orchid may be for you. It features many small flowers, some fragrant, in shades of yellow to maroon. If their light requirements are met, many will bloom several times a year, with flower sprays lasting about six weeks.

Miltoniopsis (pansy) orchids like an east-facing window where they will receive one to two hours of direct morning sun. Keep the plants evenly moist, but never allow them to sit in water. When *Miltoniopsis* are happy they will bloom twice a year: spring and fall. They can quickly grow to fill a six-inch pot and carry many flower spikes at once. Like pansies, they come in shades of red, white, pink or yellow and frequently have a contrasting "mask" or a raindrop-like pattern.

Paphiopedilums (lady slipper orchids) and their cousins, the *Phragmepediums*, are very exotic looking. Some people liken them to the native jack-in-the-pulpit, but they are directly related to our native lady slipper orchids, the *Cypripediums*. Fortunately, they're easy to grow. They bloom once a year, usually in the winter or early spring, and their flowers frequently last five to six weeks. Although few are fragrant, the flowers will intrigue you with their unusual characteristics.

Cattleyas are the queens of the orchid world. This is the orchid that everyone thinks of as the corsage orchid. 'Catts' need five to six hours of direct sun and prosper in a south-east to south facing window. They are frequently very fragrant and come in just about every color and color combination. *Cattleyas* need to dry between watering and are happiest in a clay pot. They can get quite large and quite old. I know of *Cattleyas* that are over one hundred years old! They will bloom once a year and are very seasonal in their bloom cycle. Buy your *Cattleya* in bloom and it will bloom for you in that same season every year. With some judicious selection, you could have a different *Cattleya* in bloom every month of the year! 

Orchid Events

Exhibit: The Artistry of Orchids

Smithsonian Arts and Industries Building, January 22 - March 26, 2000

Hundreds of living orchids are on display in specially designed garden spaces. This is the 6th annual orchid exhibition, co-sponsored by the Smithsonian Horticulture Services Division.

For an introduction to basic orchid culture, attend these events at Behnke's Potomac location. Please telephone us at 301-983-9200 to register.

Growing Orchids in the Home

Saturday, January 22, 10 to 11am

Sunday, January 30, 10 to 11am

Limit 30 each session

Orchid Potting Techniques

Saturday, January 22, 1 to 2pm

Sunday, January 30, 1 to 2pm

Limit 10 each session

Winter Air Fresheners

— by Rachel Brown and Carol Allen, Potomac Staff

We buy plants to beautify our personal spaces, but did you know that plants can clean your air? Bill Wolverton, former NASA research scientist, was first interested in greenery as part of the ecological life-support systems for space travel. He found that several of our common houseplants are capable of removing formaldehyde, benzene, and trichloroethylene from the air. All of these are toxins given off by carpet, upholstery, adhesives, and other common household products. Plants can absorb these toxins through the plant's normal transpiration process. The toxins are then carried to the plant's roots where soil microbes feed on and detoxify them with no harm to the plants. Mr. Wolverton suggests at least two plants per 100 square feet for best effect.

Some plants remove toxins better than others. In any case your air-cleaning plant needs to thrive in its new environment if it is going to do a good job for you. It is best to choose your houseplant by the light level in which it will live.

For areas that receive *partial sun*, such as an east-facing window:

Areca Palm (*Chrysalidocarpus lutescens*)

Rubber Plant (*Ficus elastica*)

English Ivy (*Hedera helix*)

Boston Fern (*Nephrolepis exaltata* 'Bostoniensis')

Spider Plant (*Chlorophytum comosum*)

Lady Palm (*Raphis excelsa*)

In bright, indirect sun, spider plant (above) will do well, in addition to:

Bamboo Palm

(*Chamaedorea seifrizii*)

Chinese Evergreen

(*Aglaonema commutatum*)


Pothos (*Epipremnum*

aureum)

In low light, grow Chinese evergreen and pothos (above), as well as:

Peace Lily (*Spathiphyllum*)

Corn Plant (*Dracaena fragrans* 'Massangeana')

The closer you are to the plant, the better the effect, so keep plants near where you work and play. A basket of Boston fern hanging by your kitchen window, a pot of peace lily next to your easy chair and a small pothos on your desk at work will help keep your air fresh and your environment pleasant. 

Meet: Rachel Brown




Rachel Brown, the manager/designer of the Behnke Houseplant/Greenhouse Shop at our Potomac site was born in Groton, Connecticut and grew up in a large family in Potomac, Maryland.

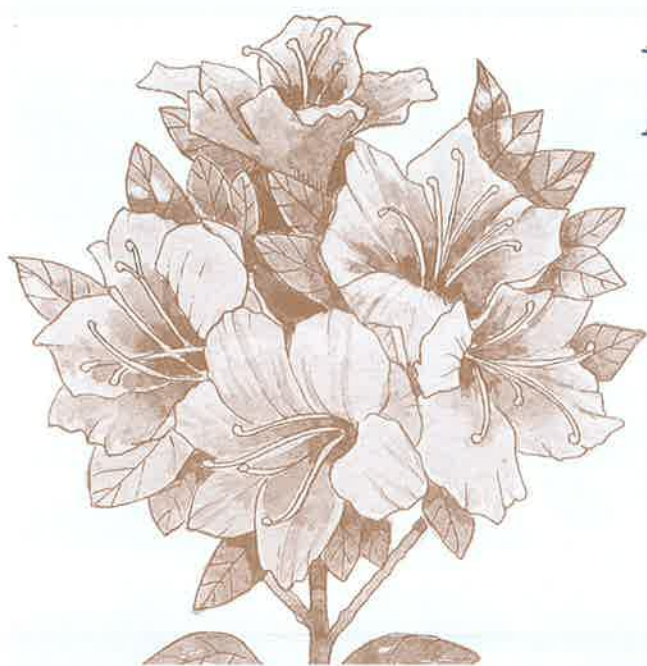
Rachel had been with Potomac Valley Nurseries for twelve years when Behnke's acquired the business in 1998. She agreed to join our large family and it has been a happy arrangement all around.

Rachel has been an invaluable asset in smoothing the blending of old customers into a new business. Customers rely on her sense of design and her inherent ability to put compatible plants together.

"I inherited my green thumb from both sides of my family," says Rachel, "my English grandfather raised many flowers, and enjoyed entering his prize chrysanthemums in flower shows. My mother inherited his skills and passed them down to me. My American grandfather enjoyed raising many trees from seedlings, and was always looking for the perfect scarlet oak. My first plant was an African violet and my plant collection still includes a number of them."

In addition to growing plants, Rachel enjoys travel and photography. But above all, she says: "I love my family; there is no place like home." 





Behnke's Free Ga

February 5th through M
Space is limited, please re

1. SHADE GARDENING

with Scott Reil, Pride's Corner
Saturday, February 5, at 10am

Gardening in the shade is always a challenge, but with the right plants the shady garden can be a success.

2. AZALEAS - SPRING GEMS

with Barbara Bullock, U.S. National Arboretum
Saturday, February 5, at 1pm

In the large selection of azaleas on the market there are some that stand out. Learn the proven performers and new introductions together with cultural practice to ensure an unparalleled spring display.

3. EASY CARE ROSES

with Bradd Yoder, Conard Pyle Roses
Sunday, February 6, at 1pm

A stroll in the rose garden with nothing to do. Sounds like a dream if you have ever taken on the task of tending a rose garden. By selecting the "right" roses for our region the dream can be a reality. A rose expert will recommend the best choices. Having the rose garden of your dreams may be easier than you know.

4. CREATING A GARDEN FRAMEWORK

with Joan Honeyman, Jordan Honeyman Co.
Saturday, February 12, at 10am

A mossy, stone path that draws us into the heart of the garden, or a wall that creates a private, tranquil spot adds new dimension to a garden design. Learn which structures can create the right mood for your personal garden.

5. GRASSES, SEDGES AND RUSHES

with Rick Darke, Author, Photographer
Saturday, February 12, at 1pm

Rick Darke, former curator at Longwood Gardens, has searched extensively for new and unusual plants. His slide presentation will emphasize ornamental grasses and grass types for water gardens in our area.

6. NATIVE PLANTS

with Lynette Scaffidi, Brookside Gardens Nature Center
Sunday, February 13, at 1pm

Gardening with native plants can create beautiful, diverse and habitable spaces for people and wildlife alike. A surprising number of familiar garden plants are native species, and improved cultivars are available each year.

7. COTTAGE GARDENING STYLE

with Brenda Skarphol, Green Spring Gardens Park
Saturday, February 19, at 10am

The colorful and lovely exuberance of the cottage garden can be reinterpreted in our climate zone. Choosing the right plants from a wide range of perennials, biennials and easy-care roses can bring the flavor of the English cottage garden to your front door!

8. HOUSEPLANTS MADE EASY

with Shirley Friedlander, Behnke Staff
Saturday, February 19, at 1pm

Learn how to choose the right houseplants to enhance your indoor environment. Our specialist will discuss the best choices for varying light situations. Plus, a houseplant primer of simple cultural advice.

9. FROM GARDEN TO VASE

with Anne Brooks, Floral Designer and Gardener
Sunday, February 20, at 1pm

The joy of cutting a lovely bouquet of flowers from your own garden can easily be yours. Learn the best flowers for cutting plus ways to use cut groundcovers and woody plants in lovely natural arrangements.

10. HERBS IN THE LANDSCAPE

with Jo Sellers, Potomac Herb Society
Saturday, February 26, at 10am

Tucked between stones or neatly trimmed into formal plantings, hardy herbs are fragrant and colorful additions to the garden. Learn which herbs can enhance the beauty of your landscape and provide flavorful accents to your cooking.

11. ROSEMARY, HERB OF THE YEAR 2000

with Susan Belsinger, Food Writer and Gardener
Saturday, February 26, at 1pm

As remembrance of this milestone in history rosemary has been chosen as herb of the year. Susan will delve into rosemary's long history and varied uses, as well as provide a cultural primer for growing this aromatic herb in the new millennium. A tasty rosemary treat for all is promised!

12. REBLOOMING IRISES

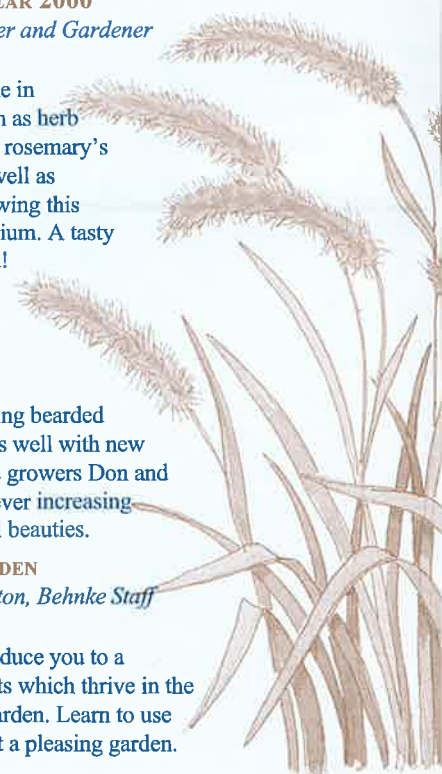
with Don & Ginny Spoon,
Winterberry Gardens
Sunday, February 27, at 1pm

The jewel tones of spring-blooming bearded irises can enrich the fall garden as well with new and old reblooming varieties. Iris growers Don and Ginny will introduce you to the ever increasing variety of these doubly delightful beauties.

13. THE SHADY PERENNIAL GARDEN

with Randy Best and Pam Hamilton, Behnke Staff
Saturday, March 4, at 10am

Our staff horticulturists will introduce you to a wondrous array of beautiful plants which thrive in the cool environment of the shady garden. Learn to use foliage as well as flowers to paint a pleasing garden.



Gardening Seminars

March 26th, 2000, in Beltsville.

Register by phone: 301-937-1100

14. CREATING COLOR DISPLAYS

with Sandy Austin, Author, Designer

Saturday, March 4, at 1pm

It's time to think about the colors of summer in your garden. Learn how to use all the colors of flowers and foliage — from airy pastels to rich jewel tones as well as the muted browns and greens of our naturalized landscape.

15. TOOLS OF THE TRADE

with Bill Mann, Behnke Staff

Sunday, March 5, at 1pm

Every gardener requires a few basic tools — and serious gardeners will want a few more not-so-basic but altogether useful additions to the garden tool shed. Learn how any task can be aided by the proper tool, and discover some surprising innovations in standard tool design. Proper care and storage of tools will also be discussed.

16. DEALING WITH DROUGHT

with Wanda McLachlan, Maryland Cooperative Extension

Saturday, March 11, at 10am

The year 1999 saw us through our fourth year of drought. Many landscape plants are starting to show their stress through predictable symptoms. Come learn how plants react to drought and what you can do to make your landscape look good despite a serious shortage of rainfall.

17. CRAPE MYRTLES — PREMIER LATE SUMMER BLOOMERS

with Dr. Margaret Pooler, U.S. National Arboretum

Saturday, March 11, at 1pm

Crape Myrtle breeding is steadily improving strains of this lovely, showy shrub for the Washington area. Cold-hardy varieties ensure large, mature shrubs, and petite varieties now fill a niche of their own. Join us as we discuss the latest, smallest and hardiest varieties.

18. SPRING LAWN CARE

with Tom Jarvis, Behnke Staff

Sunday, March 12, at 1pm

Give your lawn a jump start this season with the right fertilizers and best pest control products for spring application. Our staff horticulturist will discuss all types of lawns, timing of feeding, mowing, watering, and more to ensure you have the best lawn on your block.

19. SALAD GARDENING NINE MONTHS A YEAR

with Jon Traunfeld, MD Home and Garden Information Center

Saturday, March 18, at 10am

Greens are simple to grow and can be harvested from garden plots or garden pots. With a little protection in early spring and late fall, the salad gardener can be harvesting tender greens nine months of the year. Join us as we delve into the delicious topic of salad gardening.

20. THE NEW CONTAINER GARDEN

with Eric Morrison, Gardening Consultant

Saturday, March 18, at 1pm

The huge popularity of container gardening has lead to much innovative thought on the topic. Join Eric as he describes the wide range of woody and perennial as well as traditional and exotic annual plants that can be at home in elegant, colorful and often year round containers.

21. ROCKS, BOULDERS, AND ROCK WALLS

with André Viette, André Viette Farm and Nursery

Sunday, March 19, at 1pm

Creating a new garden? Consider adding a rock wall, rock garden or just a boulder or two for a dramatic backdrop for new plantings. Andre will show the use of rock to great effect in gardens of all sizes.

22. THE GARDEN AS SANCTUARY

with Holly Shimizu, Director, Lewis Ginter Botanic Gardens

Saturday, March 25, at 10am

Respite from the frantic pace of modern life can be as close as our own back yards. Gardens that engage all our senses can promote a feeling of well being. The babble of running water, the play of light on foliage and even the way we move through the garden can instill peace. Learn to identify, through example, the aspects of garden design that impact upon the emotions.

23. NEW AND UNDERUSED PERENNIALS

with David Culp, Sunny Border Nursery

Saturday, March 25, at 1pm

The best new perennials on the market are just a start. Dave Culp reintroduces some proven performers that appear less frequently in our gardens but which deserve a second look. Join us and add some new and under-used choices to your garden.

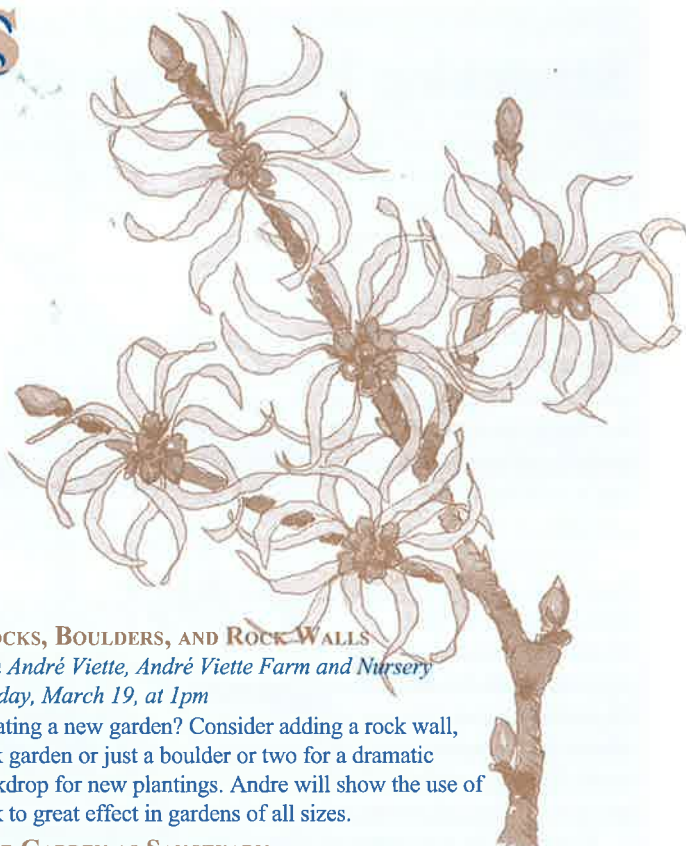
24. THE SHRUB BORDER IN EARLY SPRING

with Phil Normandy, Brookside Gardens

Sunday, March 26, at 1pm

Before the ground is warm in very early spring, there is a stirring of life in our shrub borders. Before winter is really gone and before the flamboyant colors of May are even a twinkle in our mind's eye, the garden bursts into blossom and leaf with color and subtle fragrance that lend the garden a sometimes overlooked season of interest.

All seminars are held at our Beltsville location: 11300 Baltimore Avenue (US Route 1), 2 miles north of Exit 25, Capital Beltway. Seminars will be held in our Assembly Room, which is on the second floor of the Florist Building. We regret that this room is not yet accessible to handicapped persons. We will, however, try to accommodate anyone who may be inconvenienced.



Stretching The Limits of the Gardening Zones

— by James Dronenburg, Perennial Specialist

Every so often, we get bored with the usual things and may try to stretch our limits. Gardening books label the Washington metropolitan area Zone 6, on the border of Zone 7. But experienced gardeners know that within the Beltway you can almost always get away with Zone 7 plants, and the inner-city is actually a Zone 8—if one is willing to gamble.

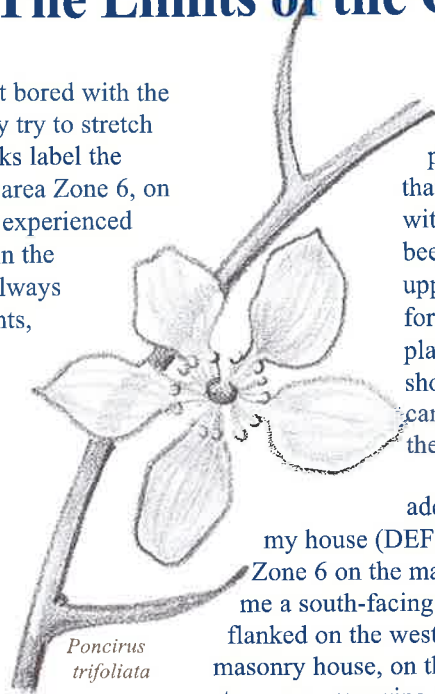
The zone areas are charted on a map created by the United States Department of Agriculture and indicate the average minimum winter low temperatures. The higher the number, the warmer your winter is.

The thing to remember is, these zones aren't carved in stone, nor is any given plant's hardiness description a certain thing. Within any zone there are microclimates, which can vary considerably from the surrounding area and can be created under a variety of conditions, including:

- exposure to wind/protection from wind,
- a south-facing exposure and a masonry wall to store and radiate heat,
- a north-facing exposure that keeps things reliably cool,
- the proximity of heat sources (every new house built upwind of you is such a source—so is a busy road).

Every plant is customarily given a hardiness rating, and if you are looking for dependable results with no sad surprises, you will not try to grow a plant in a lower (colder) zone than it is rated for....On the other hand, do you play the lottery?

Every year I place a few bets in my own garden. Some are "sure things" that are hardy here against all appearances—like the trifoliolate orange (*Poncirus trifoliata*) with its sour, orange fruits the



Poncirus trifoliata

size of a ping-pong ball, or a kind of prickly pear cactus that has no problem with our winters and has been in cultivation in upper Frederick County for generations... Other plants are sort of "long shots"—things I think I can make happy with the right conditions.

This year I have added a new wing on my house (DEFINITELY within Zone 6 on the maps), which has given me a south-facing space (a "suntrap") flanked on the west by the two-story masonry house, on the north by a one-story masonry wing, and on the east by an eight-foot-tall earth bank. Even though I'm in Zone 6, I know that this situation will allow me to grow a lot of tender stuff. So I planted up against the new wing with quite a few experiments this year.

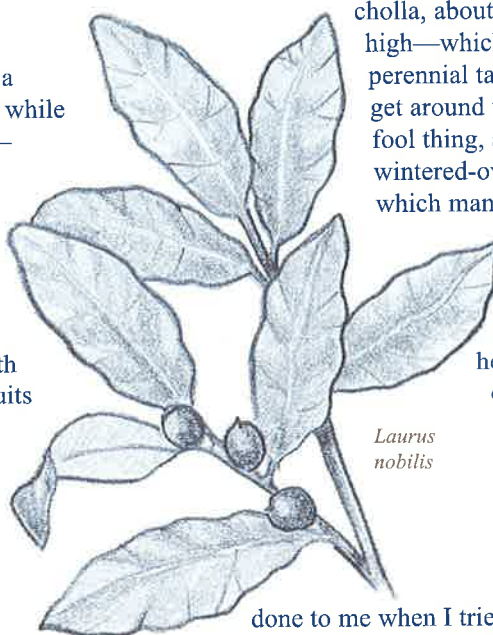
The first and best is a shrub I fell in love with while stationed in California—*Arbutus unedo*, the strawberry-tree. It's a five-foot, evergreen shrub with small, olive-green leaves and resembles a decorated Christmas tree hung with ping-pong-ball sized fruits of yellow to pink to orange to red. Lo and behold, the books call it Zone 7. Nobody carries it around here—but I got one, along with Carolyn Dixon from the Potomac Behnke's, who remembers it fondly from England—we'll let you know how they survive. They need an acid soil, which takes lots of peat

and/or acid fertilizer when you plant close to masonry, but it's going to be worth it. I hope. I'll probably rig up a chickenwire "cage," put in a foot or so of leaves, and let it go like that for the first winter.

I have grown, as an heirloom from a great-aunt, the pink *Zephyranthes*, or rain lily—which, through the summer, keeps sending out the occasional pure pink blooms a week or so after a good rain, like a crocus borne on a six-inch daffodil stem. Next spring when it's time to repot them I may accidentally-on-purpose leave a bulb or so in some good soil in the new suntrap.

Working at Behnke's has its advantages. I whined and whimpered and got a cutting from a bay laurel (*Laurus nobilis*) which has grown outside in the DC metro area—I won't tell you where—the past three years—wish me luck.

Last year, I happened to be at a little nursery outside of Charlottesville, VA, and got a small cactus—it looked like a cholla, about eight inches high—which was out on the perennial tables. I never did get around to planting the fool thing, and I forgot it—it wintered-over in the pot, which many reliably hardy things cannot do. So I think I'll give it some sun space. I just hesitate to give any of my good sun to a @#\$\$% cactus with \$%^& half-inch spines that spear you good and proper, as this has already



Laurus nobilis

done to me when I tried to clear it of some tree leaves.....Incidentally, many things, not just cactus, will die in the winter from wet feet rather than cold temperatures. Good drainage is a Very



Good Thing for stretching your limits.

Every so often something in the garden will go off in a burst of illogic like a Road Runner cartoon and survive because nobody told it it should have died. Three years ago, my roommate liked the look of a Portugal laurel (*Prunus lusitanica*) and bought it. We sell them at Behnke's, with a warning that they're at the northern end of their range in the DC area, and that a bad winter will probably take them out. Nobody told my roommate, who brought the fool thing up to our hilltop on the Frederick-Washington County line, and planted it in a northwest exposure, in howling winds, and on fill dirt besides! Do not ask me why the thing is now ten feet tall and growing like a weed. The curator of Brookside Gardens is an acquaintance, and each year he falls all over himself and goes away muttering "That thing is NOT supposed to grow here..." Of

course, each year Frederick and Washington Counties become more and more suburbs of Washington and Baltimore, and each year the winters seem warmer, due, I suppose, to all those houses putting out heat.

As I write this I've begun the planning stages for next winter's experiments. I already have a little one-foot Cedar-of-

Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*). I'll winter it over indoors for safety's sake this year and plant it outside in the spring. It's listed as Zone 6, but for whatever reason, I haven't seen it growing around here. The list of "things to get" is already started. High on that list is the sugar pine (*Pinus lambertiana*, Zone 7), which makes no great statement as a tree but bears those whomping huge one-foot-plus pine cones that Behnke's sells for Christmas and runs out of each year.

Stay tuned for a follow-up later. If plants survive for me out in the Howling Wilderness, they may live for you nearer DC. And who knows? Maybe we'll start carrying them (HINT). ☞

Editor's note: Brave gardeners like Jim are an inspiration to us all. We'll continue to keep an eye on his collection of "long shots" and make them available to our customers if they fall more reliably into the "sure bets" category.



Zephyranthes

(American Dream, continued from page 1)

raised hops for beer. The house that the family lived in was also the mill. It was built over a creek and the wheel of the mill ran in the center of the home, constantly churning to run the gears that ground the grain. This unusual building still stands [after about 200 years] and plans are being made to add it to Germany's list of historic landmarks.

The Hausners were people who stood up for their beliefs and helped out others when they could. Despite strict rationing of grain during war time and the close government watch, Rose's mother risked her life to sneak grain and other food to the displaced people traveling through their part of the country during World War II. And Rose's father was thrown in jail as a result of his refusal to raise the Nazi flag on the town hall.

Flowers were a part of Rose's life even before she met Albert — she worked at a nursery in her hometown. When she was old enough, Rose went to Nuremberg to further her education, the only one of the Hausner's daughters to do so. In Nuremberg, she learned typing, shorthand and other secretarial skills, but returning to life in her small town was not what she had in mind. Like Albert, Rose sought more and wanted to leave Germany. She sent letters of inquiry to a relative in South America and a family in New York City.

"She just wanted to do something, to make something of herself...She almost went to South America to live with a relative but went to New York because she received an answer from them first," said Sonja.

Rose immigrated to New York City and found work as a governess for a wealthy family. It was her job to teach their two young children French and German. It was from here that she departed on that fateful ship back to Germany and met Albert.

When the two returned to America, Albert knew that the piece of land along the new Washington-Baltimore Boulevard (Route 1) was the best spot for his new business. He immediately realized that the heavily trafficked road and public transportation lines that ran by the store would bring customers from miles around.

"He thought it was a great opportunity...He saw U.S. 1 as the main road going up and down the East Coast, especially between Washington and Baltimore. The train was out there...the buses were making regular runs. He saw this as a great opportunity to raise roses and other plants, and make them available for purchase to all who passed by," Sonja said. ☞

To be continued. We're celebrating our 70th year in 2000. This article is the first in a series of historical recollections of the origins of Behnke Nurseries. The next installment of this story will appear in the early spring issue of GardeNews, in March 2000.




The Class the Pots Fell On

Several of our long-term employees date back to the Beltsville Jr. High's 9th Grade class of 1969-70. In that year, **John Peter Thompson**, grandson of our founder Albert Behnke, and now Behnke's Chief Executive Officer, turned 14. He sought to recruit his friends to work at Behnke's. He focused on girls, but somehow a few guys managed to make it onto the payroll. Like baby geese, some of these folks were imprinted on the nursery at an early age and have never left the nest.

Hank Doong is the head grower at our Largo production facility. He recalls Mr. Behnke in the old days as being a tough boss but one who liked having young people around — and they liked him, too. Kids were hired for their brawn, not their brains. When Hank came to his job interview, the head grower at that time was Leo Bicknese. He told Hank: "Make a muscle." Hank was hired on the spot. Luckily, Hank turned out to have a well developed brain, too. "We used to go to Mr. Behnke's place at Burtonsville to dig dogwoods and other trees. It was hard work, and I could smell sawdust for years."

Karen Upton, Beltsville's Seasonal Plants Sales Manager, recalls that in the "old days" of the early 1970's, there were no adding machines to tally a customer's purchases. Checkout clerks were given paper and a pencil. "Sonja [Behnke Festerling] interviewed me over the phone," says Karen, "the first two questions she asked me were: 'Can you read?' and 'Can you add?'"

On her first day of work, Karen was trained to use the new intercom system, which hung on the wall and looked like a telephone. The actual telephone was answered at the main counter in another area of the nursery, although the ringing could be heard just about everywhere. At one point during her first day, the phone was ringing busily and a large gray-haired gentleman approached Karen's counter and picked up the intercom. "Hello, Hello," he kept calling into the phone, becoming flustered and unwittingly broadcasting his voice over the entire nursery. Karen gently wrestled the intercom from the gentleman, patiently explaining to him that it was not a phone. The frazzled older man, of course, turned out to be Albert Behnke, who had not as yet been enlightened as to the workings of the new intercom system. He was old school, and his booming voice and commanding presence had always served him well enough!

We're lucky and very grateful to have John Peter and his friends as devoted Behnke employees. They bridge the gap between the past and the future. Those kids saw myriad changes and overwhelming success over nearly three decades. They now are the leaders that will steer Behnke Nurseries into a new millennium, yet they all still remember Albert and Rose, the proud founders of a local landmark and American success story. 



Karen Bentley (now Karen Upton) in her Horticulture Class at High Point High School. She was already a Behnke Employee.

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