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Part II of the History of Behnke Nurseries

— by Sabrina Martin

Behnke Nurseries faced rough times in the early years. Albert Behnke opened the nursery in 1930. Not only was this during the Depression, but Maryland was also suffering from a prolonged drought. Business was very slow so he and his wife, Rose, took extra jobs to provide for themselves and their growing family. The Behnke's first son, Roland, was born in 1932, followed by Sonja in 1933 and William in 1934. In 1948, Albert H. was born.

With a loan from his father, Albert was able to purchase the one acre of land upon which the original office and Behnke home stood. He bought the land from the Simms-Jones family who developed Beltsville and owned a general store near the nursery. The rest of the land that the nursery occupied was rented. Horses were rented from a farmer to plow and cultivate the fields that grew the first crop of roses. The original sign was erected along Route 1 and the Behnkes were ready for business.

When business was slow, Albert landscaped for homeowners in nearby neighborhoods of Bethesda, Chevy Chase and Washington DC.

Before she had the children, Rose worked at the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) in Washington DC. During the same time, she attended Strayer College in Washington, D.C., where she quickly learned the skills necessary to further her position from stenographer to secretary. She also assisted with the IBEW's in-house publications. All of these experiences helped when advertising and other business-related tasks came up in the young Behnke Nursery.

When the children were old enough, they too helped out. In the early years of the business the Behnkes grew flowers for cutting, including gladiolas, zinnias, butterfly bush and marigolds. While Albert was busy tending the gardens, he would send the children to stand along Route 1 and wave large bouquets at passersby to entice them to come in to purchase. After a day's work in the hot sun, Albert would take the children next door to the Amoco station for a treat.

(continued on page 6)



Rose Behnke with the family dog, circa 1932.



Workers in the first rose fields in the early 1930's.



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Landscaping Smaller Spaces

— by Jeff Aronson

*We asked Jeff Aronson, of **As You Like It Landscaping**, to provide our readers with some important points to consider when landscaping smaller gardens. We think he made some excellent suggestions. **As You Like It** is headquartered at our store in Potomac, Maryland. We are confident to recommend them to our customers. The landscape design on this page is by Lillian Barrere.*

When considering a landscape design/installation in small, tight areas such as townhouses, garden condominiums, and courtyards it is important to consider many factors. A carefully thought-out design by an experienced landscape designer is the first step in achieving your goals. The professionals at **As You Like It Landscaping** feel that there are two basic functions of a good design:

1. Basic aesthetic beauty. Transforming an area to something that is pleasing to look at and to dwell in. This may include effects, such as softening the look of sharp lines and edges or enhancing the look of an architectural structure.
2. Usable personal space. Courtyards and rear yards can be designed to provide a unique look and feel that is a very personal reflection of your tastes and desires. These areas very much become private outdoor extensions of your home.

When designing, we usually try to create a few main focal points. A strategically placed bench, swing or small water feature becomes a focal point that we will design toward and around. This draws the viewer's attention and creates flow through the garden. We like to use larger evergreen shrubs with interesting texture, color, and flowers as background to enhance these areas. If there is an existing or proposed deck or paved area, we need to plan so that there is easy access to those areas.

Ornamental stone can also be a very important design feature. Boulders and river stones provide year round color and texture with little or no maintenance. When equipment access to the garden is a problem, lava rock boulders can be used. These rocks give you the size of regular rock with only about a third of the weight, so they can easily be moved out of the way if necessary.


We like to design for all the senses. The sound of a waterfall or fountain, combined with pleasantly fragrant plants in bloom will help create a very relaxing, soothing and altogether comforting setting. A good small garden design should transform an area into a significant room extension with multiple layers of interest.

Paved areas in the garden create texture and provide increased usability. By employing consistent materials a natural theme can be maintained. For example, flagstone walks work well with stone walls and steps and they, in turn, provide a logical reason to use boulders as accents in surrounding garden beds.

When choosing plant material we always start with a framework of evergreens and small ornamental trees that will provide areas of interest year-round. We will highlight deciduous specimen trees or shrubs, such as Japanese maple, crape myrtle or Harry Lauder's walking stick. We also try to design with a collection of hardy, evergreen perennials that will provide interest in winter.

Some of the evergreen shrubs that we use in small places are *Pieris japonica*, variegated aucuba, *Nandina domestica*, *Mahonia bealei*, azaleas and rhododendrons. They can be easily maintained to a height of 4 to 5 feet, and will give you consistent texture and color.

There are perennials that will also provide year-round interest in color and texture. Some of our favorites are hellebores, lavender, rosemary, coreopsis, astilbe, hostas, ajuga and liriope. A good perennial book will give you lots of ideas. (Behnke Nurseries highly recommends **The Well-Tended Perennial Garden** by Tracy DiSabato-Aust.)

It is hard to pinpoint what a detailed design for your space will cost without understanding the scope of work, but you should expect to pay between \$125 and \$250 for a good design for a small-scale yard. 

It's Time to Pick Those Summer Tomatoes!

— by Melodie Likel, Perennial Plant Specialist

*T*his warm day in the midst of winter brings the vision of bright, juicy tomatoes to my mind's eye. The time has come for avid tomato gardeners to consider which new varieties to try for the coming season.

Each year new varieties make their debut and are added to the list of hundreds of old favorites, heirlooms and hybrid cultivars on the market. Tomatoes never cease to delight me and choosing which to grow is always a futile exercise in restraint. This year will be no different.

'Miracle Sweet' with its perfectly round, 6-ounce, red fruits, abundant yields and excellent disease resistance sounds too good to miss. Visions of tomato salads glistening with fruity olive oil come to mind. Because the wait for the first ripe tomato can seem endless, 'Early Cascade' is also on my list. Ripening in just 50 days these little beauties grow in cascading clusters. A good kick off for the tomato season.

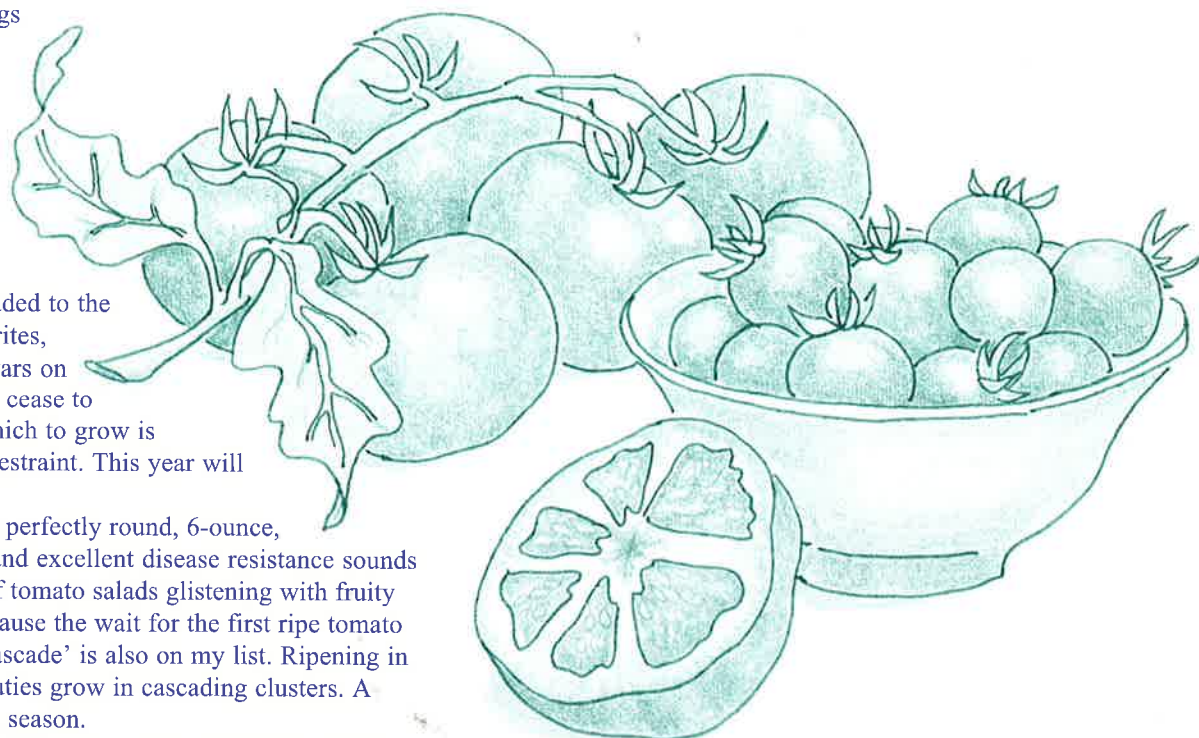
Some three weeks later, I'll be harvesting 'Abraham Lincoln Hybrid Improved'. The original 'Abraham Lincoln' has been hybridized to improve disease resistance and still keep the delicious "old variety" flavor that so endears it to tomato connoisseurs.

Heirloom tomatoes that take all summer to mature really are worth the wait, provided you've planted lots of earlier-maturing varieties to tide you over till the heirlooms are ready to be savored. In this category, I've chosen 'Polish Giant'. Huge, a lovely purple-red, juicy and sweet and it's just right for that ultimate summer treat, the tomato sandwich.

Each year one new "black" variety makes my list. 'Black Krim' from the Black Sea sounds intriguing. Deep black-red fruits with green shoulders mature quite early and all reports promise it to be sweet and tasty.

Varieties from Europe have appeal since the cooking of those regions is so strongly focused on fresh, flavorful produce. 'Dona' is a French tomato with many awards to its credit for beauty as well as taste.

A tomato that has been a favorite of gardeners in our



region for many years is 'German Johnson Pink'.

The large pink-red fruits have yellow shoulders and a wonderful, mild flavor and are produced in abundance. I'll try it!

Who can resist beautiful, striped tomatoes? 'Elberta Girl' resembles the peach for which it is named. Golden fruits striped with red on a vine with dusty, silver foliage!! These may prove too gorgeous to pick. These smallish, plum tomatoes hold the promise of the sweet-tart flavor found in other golden tomatoes.

I'll add these "new to me" varieties to the already long list of ones I can never be without. (See box below.)

Melodie's All Time Top Tomato "Picks"

- Sun Gold
- Santa
- Super Steak
- Pink Girl
- Viva Italia
- Persimmon
- Super Sweet 100
- Belgian Giant
- Park's Whopper
- Brandywine
- Cherokee Purple
- Yellow Pear

New Plants for A

In the last ten years, the number of perennial varieties available to American gardeners has greatly increased. When I was looking for additional sources of perennials to supplement Behnke's production in the early '90s, it seemed that most of the

new perennial varieties were coming from wholesale distributors in Holland. Now, most of the new and unusual perennials are coming from American growers. This is due to a combination of several things, probably the greatest of which is demand from American gardeners who have embraced perennial gardening and are looking for something new. Filling this demand are plant breeders and collectors who have selected new plants to introduce. Finally, plant tissue culture labs have allowed growers to introduce plants more rapidly and cheaply than they could in the past.

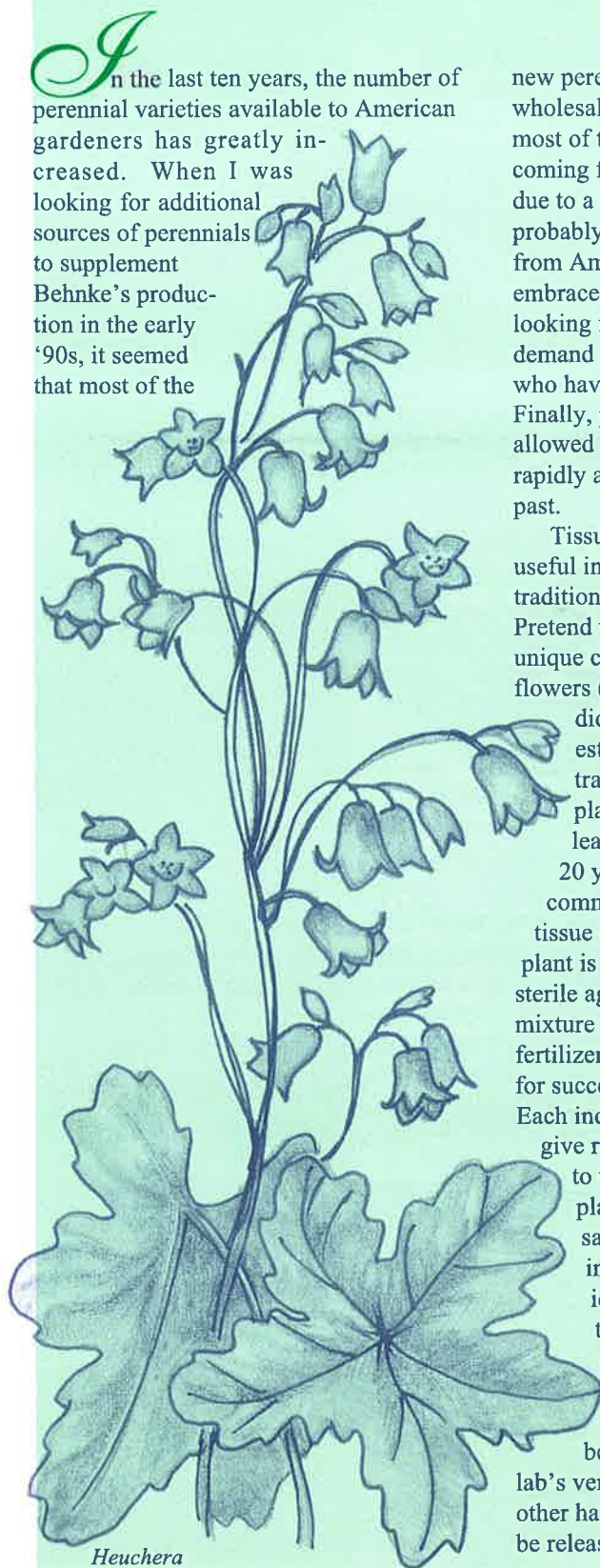
Tissue culture has proven particularly useful in producing plants which are traditionally propagated by division. Pretend we have a new hosta with some unique characteristic such as scarlet flowers (which we don't, because if we did, we would retire to garden on our estate). When propagated in the traditional way (that is dividing the plant into small pieces, each with at least one "eye"), it might take 10 or 20 years for a good variety to become common in the marketplace. In the tissue culture process, a small piece of a plant is placed in a bottle containing a sterile agar medium. The agar contains a mixture of various plant hormones and fertilizer nutrients—the mixture required for success varies from species to species. Each individual cell has the potential to give rise to a new plant that is identical to the parent. In this manner, a single plant can yield hundreds of thousands of copies of the original plant in just a few years. Well, usually identical. The main problem with tissue cultured perennials is that mutations that occur result in slightly different clones. Ultimately one lab's Hosta 'June' may be slightly different from another lab's version of the same hosta. On the other hand, a mutant that occurs may itself be released as yet another new cultivar.

To take a virtual tour of a state of the art commercial tissue culture lab facility, visit the web site of Terra Nova Nurseries (www.terravanurseries.com).

Dan Heims of Terra Nova Nurseries is behind many of the new perennials on the market and Behnke Nurseries has been growing Dan's varieties for a number of years. *Heuchera*, (common names include "coral bells" and "alum root") is a genus of plants native to North America. Most of the fancy-leaved *Heuchera* hybrids that have appeared in garden centers in the last few years have been Terra Nova releases. Some "old timers" include 'Amethyst Myst', 'Smokey Rose', and 'Plum Pudding'. Every summer at the Perennial Plant Association annual meeting, Dan unveils new cultivars. Each year there are selections with leaves that are bigger, or more ruffled, or have more intense silver or ruby or brown leaf coloration. Now, with selections such as 'Veil of Passion', Dan has combined attractive flowers with attractive foliage. Speaking of flowers, another standout new heuchera is 'Strawberry Candy', with large (for a heuchera) pink blooms over silver-marbled green leaves.

Randy Best, our perennial buyer (common name, "Randy"), and our production greenhouses in Largo ensure that we have a good selection of the newest Terra Nova heucheras for sale each year. These low growing, evergreen perennials do best in our area in a place where they get some protection from hot afternoon sun in the summer, and are provided with good soil drainage. Foliage color is more intense in cool weather, especially spring, and they combine very well with spring flowering bulbs.

Tiarella (foamflower) was another overlooked evergreen perennial until recently. There are a number of excellent selections of native species on the market, and Dan Heims and others have released numerous hybrids as well. Breakthroughs include patterned foliage and foliage with



Heuchera

American Gardens

— by Larry Hurley, Perennial Plant Specialist

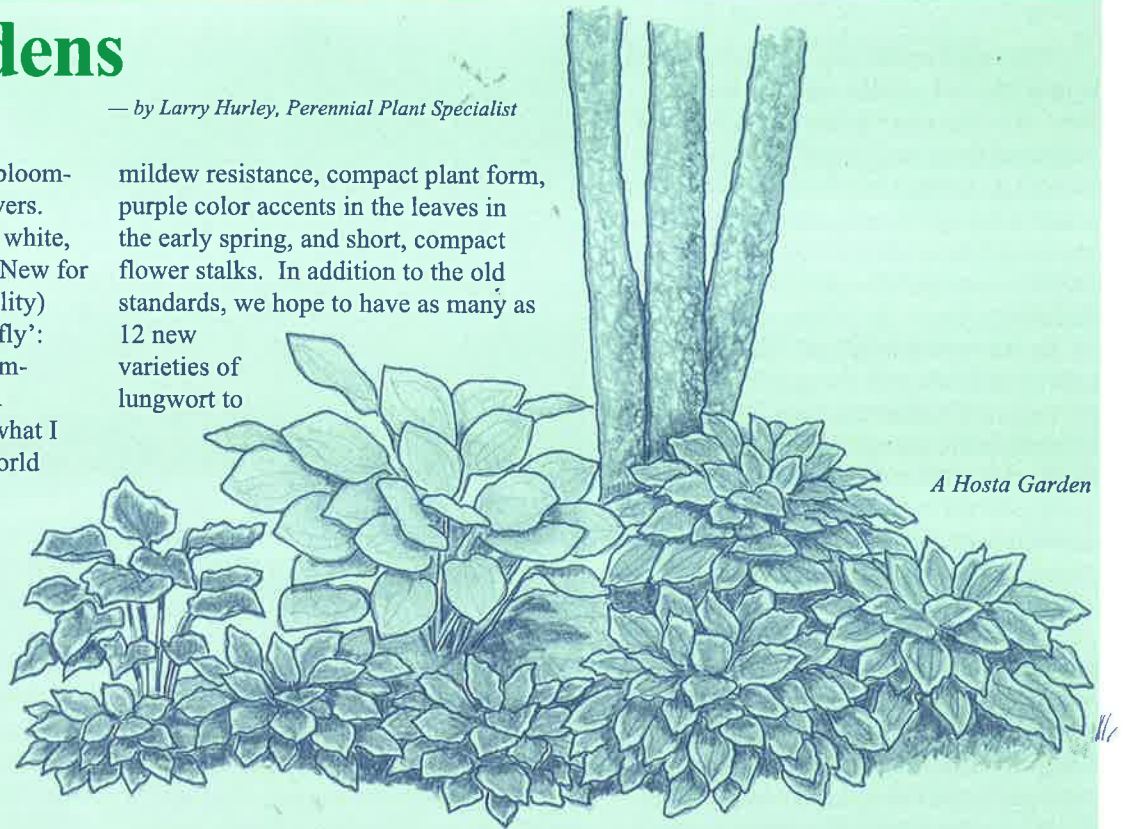
dramatic shapes, as well as longer blooming periods and more dramatic flowers. (Flowers not only in the traditional white, but also beautiful shades of pink.) New for us this year (and in limited availability) will be Dan's favorite, 'Iron Butterfly': "Large, fragrant flowers, striking, immense, contrasting, cut foliage, and beautiful plant form combine into what I believe is the best *Tiarella* in the world today." Another new foamflower that is sure to be popular is 'Heronswood Mist' discovered by Dan Hinkley of Heronswood Nursery. This cultivar has a "paint splash"-type variegation pattern of cream on white, and the new leaves have a pinkish overlay as well.

In our area, foamflower takes part to full shade, and prefers a soil with a good organic matter level, moisture and good drainage. (On the other hand, five *Tiarella wherryi* I planted 10 years ago in my yard have self-seeded to fill a 75 square foot patch of rock and clay, albeit sloping.). Foamflowers are short plants, and depending on the selection, may be either clump-forming (resembling *Heuchera*) or trailing. The running types will nicely fill in around the "feet" of taller plants, and as such make a superb companion plant for hosta. They are nice evergreen shade ground covers.

Pulmonaria (lungwort) is yet another shade-loving plant that has become a Terra Nova specialty. Resembling a hosta, this rosette-forming plant, has leaves that vary from green to silver-spotted, to almost completely silver. It is a very early spring bloomer, with flowers in blue, pink, or white. Often flowers begin as blue, but then fade to pink as they age.

The leaves are a bit hairy, which gives it a reputation as a deer-resistant perennial (good news), but many selections are prone to the annoying-but-easily-prevented leaf fungal disease, powdery mildew (bad news). Terra Nova is breeding plants for

mildew resistance, compact plant form, purple color accents in the leaves in the early spring, and short, compact flower stalks. In addition to the old standards, we hope to have as many as 12 new varieties of lungwort to



A Hosta Garden

present to you this year.

Probably the perennial that has benefited the most from tissue culturing is *Hosta* (common name, "hosta"). Wholesale producers such as Walter's Gardens in Michigan pump out hostas by the millions, and as a result, the selection of hosta cultivars is truly overwhelming.. (And...it is only an ugly rumor that they all look alike!)

Terrific garden hostas such as 'Sum and Substance' and 'Great Expectations' are now relatively easy to obtain at a good price—certainly much more available than they would have been by division. Randy Best (alternate common name, "Mr. Hosta") combs the catalogs and each year introduces the best of the new, as well as providing the less expensive standards. This year Behnke's will have about 90 cultivars for you to choose from.

A lot of gardeners are unaware that some hostas have intensely fragrant flowers. Randy recommends 'Fragrant Bouquet', 'Guacamole', 'Hoosier Harmony', 'So Sweet', and new-for-us this year, 'Moonlight Sonata'. Of course, there are the terrific foliage effects as well.

Think of a mass planting of hostas: a wave of tall blue-leaved hostas, stepping down to shorter green and white variegated hostas, and ending up on a "beach" of short, golden leaved hostas....

Culture—most hostas prefer bright shade (especially the blue-leaved types), although the golden leaved hostas will generally have their best color if they receive a few hours of direct morning sun. They certainly prefer evenly moist soil, but will tolerate drier soil, perhaps showing some leaf-burn if it gets dry for extended periods.

If you have an established shade garden, it's time to consider reinvigorating it with some of the new heucheras, tiarellas, pulmonarias and hostas. If you are just starting out, your options are greater than they've ever been. You might adopt the Terra Nova mission statement tag line, "to boldly grow what no man has grown before."

Availability of mentioned items is limited, due to staggered shipping and potting schedules mentioned varieties may appear in our stores any time from mid-March to June. ☺

(Behnke history, continued from page 1)

"Life was very simple," Sonja remembers of her early childhood. The family lived in a four-room home that Albert had converted from the original office on the nursery property. There was no running water to the house, so Roland had to pull a wagon and two milk cans up the hill to the neighbor's to fetch the drinking water for the family.

By the early 40's, World War II was upon them. Although the war did not prove good for business, more jobs were created for the country in general, resulting in more traffic up and down Route 1, going past the nursery. By then, the children were old enough for Rose to be able to go back to IBEW. She more or less supported the family through this period.

The Behnke family, like many other families at that time, contributed to the war effort. The school children worked together gathering milkweed seedpods for life preservers. Old tires and scrap metal were also collected and picked up routinely by army trucks. The nursery supported a large Victory garden, as well



Sonja Behnke picks a bouquet in a field of chrysanthemums in 1940.

closet for jars and jars of beans, tomatoes, peas, peaches, etc., that the entire family helped in picking and canning. Near the end of the war, he added another greenhouse to the property.

Rose was still working in the city, so Sonja would visit a neighbor after school where she practiced crochet and embroidery. It was here that the idea of African violets, for which Behnke's became known, began.


"The neighbor had these pretty flowers sitting in her

windowsill with purple and dark blue blossoms. She gave me a plant and said it was called 'Blue Boy,'" Sonja says.

Sonja brought the plant home and grew it in her bedroom. Her father became intrigued with this beautiful, ever-flowering plant.

"It bloomed and bloomed, my father thought it was wonderful," Sonja said.

Rose researched the plant — finding out who was growing them and how much they cost. Soon thereafter, Behnke Nurseries began selling African violets and Rose became involved with the hybridization of the plants, developing the 'Behnke Boy' and 'Washington Star' varieties and several others.

When the war ended in 1945, business picked up. The African violets were selling briskly, and the post war development generated an increased demand for plants and garden supplies. The Behnkes were soon able to buy a one and a half ton Chevy stake-bodied truck, and even install their first indoor plumbing! Everything was coming up roses, and the Behnkes enjoyed this period of post war success. 



Albert near the family home in 1945.

as raising chickens, rabbits and turkeys that supplied food for the family and were sold for additional income.

The Behnkes strove to make their American dream come true. Albert was able to expand their home, adding a living room and a large



William, Sonja and Roland on Easter Sunday in the early '40's.



Meet: Fran Deas



Fran was born in Washington D.C. and grew up in Riverdale, Maryland. She is a graduate of Bladensburg High School. She married and settled down in the area to raise her two sons. Fran says she always enjoyed tinkering in her garden, having learned to appreciate gardening from her parents. Her mother loved roses, and her father once worked for the Botanical Gardens. Fran says, "I remember dad saying, 'You can't go wrong if you throw a bucketful of cow manure in a hole when you plant anything!'"

"You can't go wrong if you throw a bucketful of cow manure in a hole when you plant anything!"

After working as a waitress for 30 years, Fran decided to seek employment at Behnke Nurseries. Fran is, no doubt, a familiar face to our customers who shop at Behnke's Largo Garden Center. She is our head cashier and can always be found near or about the retail sales area.

In her spare time, Fran loves to garden, almost as much as she loves spending time with her 5 grandchildren. And she's happy in her new career at Behnke's. Fran enjoys assisting customers and trading information with them. She says, "I learn something new every day!" ☺

Celebrating 70 Years of Gardening

— by Larry Hurley, Perennial Specialist

To celebrate our 70 years in the nursery business, we at Behnke Nurseries have assembled a list of plants that were particular favorites of Albert and Rose Behnke. We will feature these plants in the **GardeNews** and at our garden centers as seasonally appropriate.

Gardeners have embraced *Helleborus* as a solution to color in the early spring shade garden. This year we reintroduce the Burtonsville strain of hellebores, hybrid seedlings from clumps grown at the Behnke's former home in Burtonsville. These particularly vigorous plants will bloom in shades of pinks, whites, and greens. Sonja Behnke Festerling says that Mr. Behnke liked hellebores because of their evergreen habit and ease of culture. He also like watching the flowers open to see if a new color might appear. ("Look Sonja, this might be a red one!") Alex Dencker, one of many Behnke employees who worked as a gardener at Burtonsville, says that the Behnkes liked hellebores, astilbe and lily of the valley because they reminded them of their homes in Germany. ("Boys back home would give them to girls on Saint Valentine's Day because it was the only thing blooming so early.")

Mail order African violets kept Behnke Nurseries going in the lean years. Rose Behnke supplied African violets to all of the first ladies from Eleanor Roosevelt to Roselynn Carter. Unfortunately, we no longer grow the varieties that Rose Behnke hybridized—they have been lost over the years. Cultivars available now have larger flowers than the older cultivars, and there is a wider range of colors from which to choose. An exceptionally easy houseplant to rebloom, African violets still are our most popular indoor blooming plant.

The Behnkes loved fragrant plants. Alfred Millard, Senior Vice President of Behnke Nurseries, remembers that Mr. Behnke would get up early to walk through the garden to appreciate the fragrances while the air was still and cool. He loved daphnes both for the fragrance

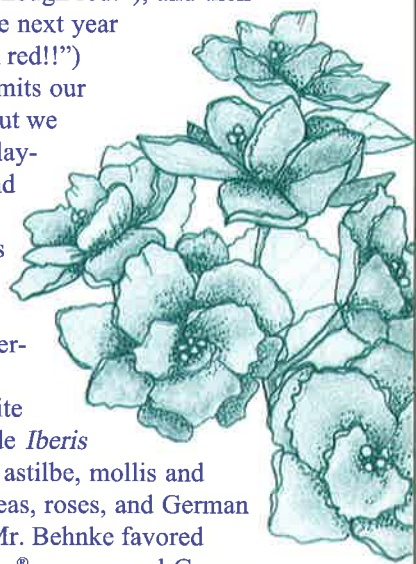
and the challenge of growing them. He bought them in, and Helmut Jaehnigen and Joe Festerling would figure out how to propagate them (they are notoriously difficult to root). Mr. Behnke would always cut branches of blooming plants and bring the fragrance into the house. He also loved fragrant lilacs, another standard in cooler, northern climates, and was particularly fond of Korean lilacs (they were found all around the Burtonsville gardens).

Mr. Behnke loved pansy plants because of their multi-seasonal use. He pioneered the fall-planting of pansies in this area, and blended his own color mixes of seed (coincidentally called "The Behnke Mix"). Pansies were grown in beds, and bunches of seedlings were dug fresh each day for customers. (This was done until the early 1990's, when greenhouse technology and pansy "plugs" replaced the old system.) As the pansies bloomed, he would adjust his mix ("Not enough red!"), and then reevaluate the next year ("Too much red!!")

Space limits our discourse, but we will be displaying these and other items in our stores with a distinctive "70th Anniversary Logo."

Other favorite items include *Iberis* (candytuft), astilbe, mollis and exbury azaleas, roses, and German iris. Tools Mr. Behnke favored include Felco® pruners and German-made Tina® knives ("Your knife should be so sharp, you could shave with it.")

Watch for employees wearing the distinctive "I actually knew Mr. Behnke and survived" button. Tell them your favorite Behnke story. ☺



Decorating Outdoor Living Spaces with Elegance & Whimsy

— by Carol Allen, Behnke Houseplant Buyer

*W*ild and wacky? Peaceful and serene? Magical and filled with whimsy? Whichever feeling you seek from your garden, there is no better way to help create the fantasy than with carefully chosen garden accents. As the garden evolves into an extended living space, our desire to decorate moves outdoors as well.


The Victorians used arbors, benches, gazing globes, and fountains to bring a note of whimsy or elegance to their gardens. Our decorating pallet is even larger, as renewed interest in "garden living" has brought a profusion of outdoor ornaments to the marketplace. Garden accents endure through the seasons, adding continuity as the garden borders and beds change. Especially now, in the quiet time of the year, your garden's mood is still expressed through the accents you place in it.

Gazing globes bring a magical and mystical touch with their bright, reflective surfaces. This year we have found several new sources for these old favorites, and have a selection with more colors and patterns than ever before, including lovely, bejeweled globes in an array of colors and sizes. You can choose from a variety of elaborate cast concrete pedestals or an airy metal stands to elevate your globe to the desired height for gazing.

A serene oriental theme can soothe and relax. You might choose a pair of Foo dogs, or a Chinese warrior to guard the entrance to your landscape. An oriental water feature, such as a bamboo fountain that gently spills water into a waiting trough delights the eye and is sure to inspire relaxation in all those within earshot. Lanterns made of concrete or cast metal, illuminated with candles, enhance the mood in the evening hours.

Perhaps a statue would be the ultimate expression of beauty in your garden. Choose a classic style that will stand in quiet dignity through the seasons, or a modern interpretation to amuse, inspire, or provide a perfect foil to a traditional planting. A statue or stone sculpture can serve as a memorial to a beloved pet or serve to commemorate a special event, such as a marriage or the birth of a child.

Whimsy in the garden can be easily expressed with sculpture. Let a pair of leaping frogs frolic amid the hostas and astilbes, or a harmless concrete bunny sit right in the middle of the lettuce patch. Let garden fairies, dragonflies and hummingbirds on slender stakes amid the greenery or flowers delight those who pass by. Even when flowers fade these whimsical denizens bring a charm to the garden. And let the notes of a beautifully tuned wind chime enhance the mood of the garden, as well as all who enter there.

Whatever your style, indoors or out, garden accents will add the finishing touch, and will encourage your creative imagination to soar. We invite you to visit our displays of garden ornaments at all Behnke Nurseries locations. 



*Behnke's Top Ten Tips
for gorgeous gardens...
www.behnke.com*

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