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## The Post War Years: Prosperity at Last!

### *The History of Behnke Nurseries, Part III*

—by Roland Behnke

After World War II, Behnke Nurseries, like many other nurseries and garden centers in the Washington, D.C. area, experienced phenomenal growth. Besides their popular African violets, Behnke's greatly expanded their selection of annuals, perennials, roses, shrubs and trees.

Before the War, the greenhouse was a homemade affair attached to the side of the family house. In 1946, Albert and Rose Behnke contracted with the *Lord and Burnham Company* to provide a modern steel and glass greenhouse with redwood trim, cypress benches and a hot water, coal-fired boiler for heating. This was the first modern greenhouse constructed in the Washington area after the War. Thereafter, other greenhouses and a propagating house were built until, by 1951, there were three along Washington-Baltimore Boulevard (US Rte. 1), another double Orlyt wooden greenhouse in



*Roland and Sonja (and Sonja's doll) outside the family's first greenhouse. Circa 1939*

front of the family home, and a larger *L & B* greenhouse where the main retail area is today. Separate buildings and sheds were built for transplanting seedlings and cuttings — many of which were set out in heated cold frames covered with glass sash.

Rose Behnke, while working as a secretary in Washington, took on the responsibility of expanding the African violet business. The Behnkes were great believers in advertising, and Rose placed ads in African violet magazines offering mail-order violets and supplies. In addition, she corresponded with African violet clubs around the country, always on the lookout for new varieties and better merchandising ideas. She developed and propagated several new varieties of violets, such as 'Behnke Boy', 'Washington Star', and the 'Fantasy' series, which had lavender flowers with dark purple markings.

*(continued on page 2)*



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**Garden Center Hours**

*September - November:*

Monday - Saturday: 9AM to 6PM

Sunday: 9AM to 5PM

(CALL, HOURS SUBJECT TO CHANGE)

**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)

She also lectured at garden clubs and exhibited plants at the Washington Flower Show for many years. Rose's efforts paid off, and the orders poured in. The family often worked until late at night packaging plants and soil to be mailed throughout the United States.


Although Behnke Nurseries no longer sold aquatics or goldfish, ponds were used to supply water for the increasing numbers of roses, pansies, chrysanthemums, annuals and perennials grown at the Nursery. Around the ponds, Albert Behnke created a lovely park

where the public could picnic among shrubs, shade trees, tulips, daffodils, flowers, and waterfowl.

The fields that had lain dormant since the Depression and drought of the early '30s were cleared, plowed and planted with pansies, perennials and roses. Until he could afford to purchase it, Albert rented the land where Behnke's Beltsville Garden Center stands today.

As the Washington residential and commercial area grew, landscape plants were in great demand. Albert Behnke purchased evergreens and trees from growers on the Eastern Shore, Pennsylvania and New Jersey. He mortgaged his existing lots and rented new fields, greenhouses and sales buildings. A few friends lent money, and even the older children, Roland, Sonja and William, contributed their savings. It seemed as if Albert and Rose were always in debt: to the bank, to suppliers and to the mortgage company. But as good fortune would have it, the business grew and prospered. Eventually, everyone was repaid with interest.

In the late '40s and early '50s, there was little money for hiring labor so the Behnke family did most of the work. Albert and Rose worked night and day, and the children worked after school and in the evenings. They transplanted young plants into pots or flats which were moved to cold frames and finally transplanted into the fields surrounding the home. (This was before container-grown plants made their appearance.) As the plants were sold, they were dug out of the ground and wrapped in newspaper or burlap. In one year, over a million pansies were transplanted into the fields. It was a never-ending family effort, and Albert Behnke led the way, always urging his family on.

The Behnke Fall Catalog for 1948 had 16 pages of spring-flowering bulbs, perennials, roses, chrysanthemums, rhododendrons, azaleas, ornamental trees, clematis, French hybrid lilacs and African violets. Any order of \$3 could be delivered by truck in the Washington, D.C. area. African violets and pansies could be purchased for mail delivery. Business was brisk and growing steadily. Additional workers were hired, and Carl Nordeen became the first Manager. The most difficult years lay behind them, and the family was headed toward the success of their dreams. 



*Sonja Behnke in a greenhouse brimming with blooming African violets.  
The violets were one of the first, and very important, profit-makers  
for the fledgling Behnke Nurseries.*



# Create a Beautiful New Garden — Just Add Water!

— Jeff Aronson, *As You Like It Landscaping*

Just as interesting plants create focal points in a landscape design, water features can be adapted to further beautify your garden. Water features come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, from ponds and streams to elaborate waterfalls. The soothing quality of flowing water is considered to be naturopathic by many, and there are no limits to water feature design and function. Water can flow or remain still. It can hold plants and fish, help define a space and convey intimacy, transport one to a captivating place, or simply suggest an elemental tranquility.


When designing the pond, first decide whether it will be prefabricated or customized. Both are self-contained systems. With a prefabricated shell, you select a size and shape. Custom ponds are built using thick, flexible liners. With liners, you can create virtually any shape and combination of streams and waterfalls. When including a waterfall, you are effectively designing two or three ponds that spill into each other. The next choice is the type of rock that will hide the edge of either liner and create a natural look. You will also need to determine how much water the pond will hold and, if you have multiple ponds or waterfalls, the distance that the water must be pumped through the system. In addition, you will need a filter system. You might only need a simple foam filter system that attaches directly to a pump. A biofilter is also an option. Biofilters are basins outside of the main pond that filter the flowing water before it returns to the pond.

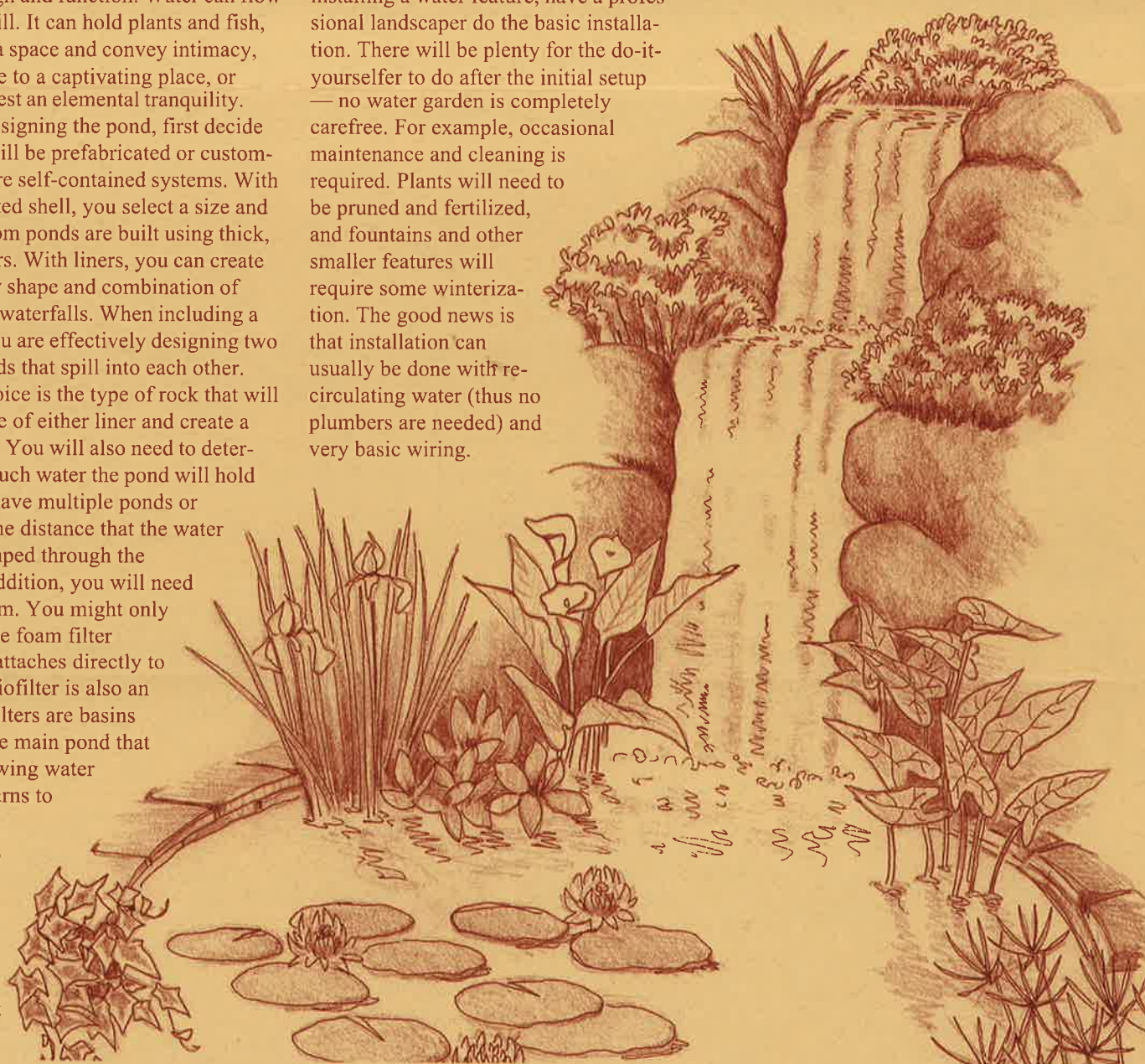
Goldfish, snails, and frogs will survive the winters as long as the pond doesn't completely

freeze for an extended period of time.

While these critters do enter dormancy and their metabolisms slow down, they still need the oxygen exchange between the water surface and the air. Inexpensive water heaters can be purchased that are designed to keep a small surface area from freezing.

If you don't want to spend the time installing a water feature, have a professional landscaper do the basic installation. There will be plenty for the do-it-yourselfer to do after the initial setup — no water garden is completely carefree. For example, occasional maintenance and cleaning is required. Plants will need to be pruned and fertilized, and fountains and other smaller features will require some winterization. The good news is that installation can usually be done with recirculating water (thus no plumbers are needed) and very basic wiring.

It's now easier than ever to add a beautiful water feature to virtually any garden. For materials, plants and advice, contact any Behnke Nurseries. For information on installation, call *As You Like It Landscaping*, located at Behnke's Potomac location (Telephone: 301-983-9203). 





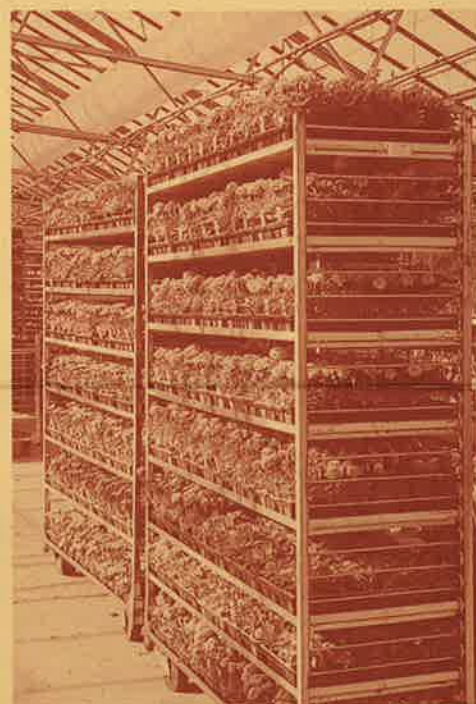
# Growing Top-Quality Plants at our 8

*I*n the year 2000 as we observe our 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we celebrate not only 70 years of selling plants to the public but also 70 years of growing those plants. In 1930, when Albert and Rose Behnke acquired their land in Beltsville, Maryland, they began by growing roses. Over the years, as the retail part of the Beltsville operation became bigger and bigger, it became more difficult to efficiently grow plants at the same site. In the late 1970's, plans were made for a second location which could be used as a production farm. Eighty acres were purchased in Largo, Maryland, and all production was moved south. There are now 200,000 square feet of covered greenhouses at Largo, as well as an extensive outdoor production area. This allows us to continue to produce our Behnke signature quality plants.

Largo growers are busy all year round.

The mums that we are selling now were grown this summer. The plants start out as cuttings bought from specialist-propagator/breeders. This ensures that the mum crop is free of plant viruses. During what always seems to be the hottest week of summer, the 35,000 mums are potted and set outside to grow. Since our pots and plants are larger than those of most growers, this is particularly hard work. The mums are pinched back several times during the summer to ensure full plants for the fall. We then ship them on our own trucks to our three retail stores.

Meanwhile, preparations are well under way for the Christmas crop of poinsettias. Again, disease-free cuttings are obtained from specialist propagator/breeders in California. Most of the cuttings arrive in July. In order to ensure a quality plant, the unrooted cuttings are potted in the cool of the evening or the very early morning to avoid stressing the



*Market packs of blooming marigolds are loaded up and ready to roll to retail sites.*



*Acres of blooming poinsettias are a sight to behold in November. We're especially proud of our signature quality poinsettias, which are simply the finest plants to be found anywhere.*

plant. Nearly 100,000 cuttings are "stuck" (planted) to produce three acres of plants for the holiday. As summer passes to fall, all plants are pinched, staked, and hand-tied to enhance their beauty.

Fall vegetables, ornamental cabbage, and fall pansies are started as seed sown during the summer. Mr. Behnke introduced the European concept of the fall-planting of pansies in this area. We now sell more pansies in the fall than we do in the spring. In the "early days," pansy seed was hand-sown into beds of sand, and hand-dug for the upcoming weekend. Now all of our annuals are sown mechanically into individual cells of soil in "plug trays." When it comes time to plant, the plug trays go to our transplanting machine, which takes the plugs and automatically places them into pots, complete with a





# 80-acre Nursery in Largo, Maryland

— Larry Hurley, Perennial Specialist

label in each pot. Since each plant starts with its own little root ball in soil, there is no transplant shock and the plant grows rapidly in the greenhouse.


As soon as the fall pansies and the poinsettias are sold, we make room for spring pansies, other spring annuals and vegetables, and 12,000 Easter lilies (the lily bulbs are usually potted in December).

Meanwhile, the perennial department is moving full speed ahead for the next year. All through the spring and summer seed is sown, and cuttings are made from our stock gardens. Tissue-cultured plants arrive throughout the year from hosta, fern and heuchera producers. "Bare-root" plants arrive in the fall from England, Holland, Ohio and Michigan. Liners (starter plants) come from propagators around the country. All of this leads to a frenzy of potting in the summer and fall, so that the plants can overwinter outdoors under protection or in unheated greenhouses. The cold treatment allows for a more established, blooming-size plant the next spring. Altogether, we will grow about 225,000 pots of perennials. Set pot to pot in a line, they would stretch for 18 miles!

The woody plant production is sort of counter-cyclical to the rest of the nursery. They are mostly potted in the spring—trees and roses in February, smaller shrubs in May. Trees and shrubs are grown for 9 to 14 months before they are ready for sale. They need to grow for a year before they are sold next spring. Cuttings for shrubs are usually taken in winter or early spring, and may be grown for a year before potting. Trees are grown in the ground in the western United States for several years, then dug, the soil washed off of the roots, and shipped in January. (The *Woody Plants Department* workers tend to get colder and wetter than other production staff, and are the modern

equivalent of Vikings.) Summer and fall activity in *Woody Plants* is mostly maintenance—watering, weeding and pruning.

For seventy years, Behnke Nurseries has been known for quality plants. As we

continue into the new century, Largo Production will protect and enhance that valued tradition. 

*Tour the Largo greenhouses during Poinsettias on Parade (see page 6).*

## Meet: Charlie Breitschwerdt

Charlie is the affable Operations Manager of the Behnke Nurseries 80-acre complex in Largo, Maryland. He has the challenging job of overseeing all aspects of activity at Largo, which comprises an impressive and ever-growing garden center and a large-scale production facility, including 200,000 square feet of greenhouses and over 20 acres of perennials and woody plants. He manages his many tasks with his trademark blend of dedication, good humor, and hard work. Hard work is certainly no stranger to Charlie—his personal experience prepared him well for his job at Behnke's. Charlie grew up on a 75-acre farm in Howard County, where, as a teenager, he operated a roadside stand, selling produce from his family's farm to a following of loyal customers.



Charlie attended the University of Maryland in College Park on a full academic scholarship. He holds a degree in Floriculture and Ornamental Horticulture. While in college he worked for Gude Brothers, a company which grew hot-house flowers for the florist trade. But when he graduated in 1983, Charlie made straight for Behnke Nurseries, "the finest nursery in the state."

Although he intended to apprentice at Behnke's for a few years before striking out on his own, Charlie quickly rose through the ranks and became the Assistant Manager of the Beltsville store in two years. Within five years he was offered a permanent position at Largo as Operations Manager for Production and Retail. He accepted, and in January of this year he was promoted to the position of Vice President of Production.

Charlie married his high school sweetheart, Kerri, in 1983. They are the proud parents of three "beautiful and intelligent" daughters: Jessica, 15; Cortney, 14; and Chelsey, 11. Although he has many interests and hobbies, including gardening, building projects, and hunting, Charlie most enjoys spending time with his family. The five of them recently spent 6 weeks of summer vacation on an extended camping trip across the country.



# Autumn Events at all Behnke Garden Centers

## Beltsville

### FALLING INTO CONTAINERS

Saturday, September 23, 10 AM

Steven Mott, Behnke Staff

Steve, who interned at Longwood Gardens in Pennsylvania, will show you how to combine plants in unusual and delightful ways in fall container gardens.

### ANNUALS IN AUTUMN

Saturday, September 23, 1 PM

Randy Best, Behnke Staff

Randy knows plants and understands the impact you can achieve with colors and textures in your fall garden.

### COLD HARDY CAMELLIAS

Saturday, October 7, 10 AM

Ray Watson, Cam-Too Camellia Nursery

This world-renowned grower from Greensboro, North Carolina, will discuss camellia culture and introduce you to the new cold-hardy fall and spring-blooming camellias.

### DISCOVER NEW PLANTS AT BEHNKE'S

Saturday, October 7, 1 PM

Randy Best, Behnke Staff

Randy is always on the lookout for fabulous plants. He'll share his recent discoveries and best picks.

### BRINGING HOUSEPLANTS BACK INDOORS

Saturday, October 7, 3 PM

Gene Sumi, Behnke Staff

Gene offers practical advice and love of plants. Let him give you tips that will help your plants make the transition from outside to indoors with minimal trauma.

### PRUNING PRIMER

Saturday, November 11, at 10 AM

Gene Sumi, Behnke Staff

Using display gardens and other sample plants, Gene will discuss pruning basics—from when to prune to caring for tools.

### WINTER GARDENS

Saturday, November 11, at 1 PM

Chris Upton, Behnke Landscape-Design Consultant

Chris will discuss the beauty of the garden in winter, and show you how to achieve lovely landscapes throughout the year.

## Largo

### PLANTING TREES AND SHRUBS

Saturday, September 16, 11 AM

Tom Jarvis, Barry Burrows, Behnke Staff

*An in-depth demonstration by our experts on the proper planting techniques for these valuable landscape additions*

### THE BASICS OF PRUNING

Saturday, September 23, 11 AM

Tom Jarvis, Behnke Staff

*Tom will take the mystery out of how, when and where to prune your trees and shrubs. He will also cover basic tools, and their care.*

### FALL CONTAINERS

Saturday, September 30, 11 AM

Cindy Burke, Behnke Staff

Learn some of the tricks of the trade in designing containers for refreshing autumn beauty on deck, porch or patio.

### SPRING BULBS

Saturday, October 7, 11 AM

Al Gardiner, Behnke Bulb Consultant

*He's back!! Join Al, long-time Behnke expert, as he entertains and explains the wonders of lesser-known spring bulbs.*

### POINSETTIAS ON PARADE

Sunday, November 26, 12 noon to 4 PM

*Take advantage of this unique opportunity to see acres of Behnke Signature Poinsettias during a tour of our Largo Greenhouses. Stop by for a photo opportunity, holiday cheer and our warmest wishes for the beginning of your holiday season.*



## Potomac

### FALLING INTO CONTAINERS

Saturday, September 9, 11 AM

Cindy Burke, Behnke Staff

Delight the senses with newly planted containers for fall decor! We'll share ideas for new looks in fall annuals and perennials for container gardening.

### HIDDEN TREASURES IN YOUR GARDEN

Saturday, September 16, 11 AM

Carol Allen, Behnke Staff

Join us for an in-depth introduction to bulbs, including an overview of the various types, planting techniques, and long term care.

### ORCHID DAY

Saturday, September 23

Carol Allen, Behnke Staff

Carol Allen, a national expert, will share her tips for growing these exotic beauties.

*The events are free, but space is limited. You must reserve a seat for each section. Please phone: 310.983.9200*

**Section 1, 10am:** Growing Orchids in the Home - Basic care and culture, Q & A.

**Section 2, 1pm:** Basic Repotting - Each attendee may bring one orchid to be repotted.

### FALL AND WINTER INTEREST

Saturday, October 14, 11 AM

Greg Scott, Behnke Woody Plant Expert

This discussion will highlight some of the plants that have breathtaking fall color to brighten any autumn landscape.

### COLD-HARDY CAMELLIAS

Sunday, October 15, 1 pm

Helmut Jaehnigen, Behnke Staff

Helmut will discuss the exciting varieties of cold-hardy camellias for the Washington area.

### PUTTING YOUR POND TO BED

Saturday, October 21, 11 AM

Carol Allen, Behnke Staff

Learn the easy steps to properly prepare your pond to weather the winter successfully.

*Unless noted, advance registration is not required. For more information on any of these events, please pick up a Fall Events Bulletin at any Behnke Nurseries location.*



## The Signature Blossom of Fall

— Larry Hurley, Perennial Specialist

One of the best ways to celebrate fall is to attend a chrysanthemum display show. Mum shows are always interesting and the horticulturist-growers really get a chance to let their imaginations run wild. In the conservatory you will see mums grown in unusual ways: hanging baskets, cascades, and topiary shapes. Outdoors, you may also see new varieties in trial beds, or interesting plantings. Below are three places well-known for their annual fall mum shows. Make this the year you go afield to see some spectacular shows.

Closest to home is Brookside Gardens, in Wheaton, Maryland. The Chrysanthemum Display will run from October 14th through November 26<sup>th</sup> in the conservatories. Kerrie Nichols of Brookside says that this year's display will be spectacular with a Renaissance theme. Exhibits will include a castle and a full-size dragon, all made of mums. The Chesapeake and Potomac Chrysanthemum Societies will also have a show at the Brookside Visitor Center on October 21-22. This show will include flower quality judging, as well as unique floral arrangements. We believe that Brookside will also be featuring a display of the Belgian mums (see the article at right).

Brookside Gardens is located at 1800 Glenallen Avenue in Wheaton. The phone number is 301-949-8230. The web address is [www.mc-mncppc.org/parks/brookside](http://www.mc-mncppc.org/parks/brookside).

If you are not familiar with Longwood Gardens, then fall is the perfect time to go. Less than two hours away, near Kennett Square, PA, this former DuPont estate is perhaps the premier garden in the United States. The Chrysanthemum Show in the four-acre Conservatory runs from October 21 to November 19. From their web site: "More than 15,000 magnificent chrysanthemums are featured in a variety of forms, and special performances, demonstrations, and children's activities fill the late autumn celebration." Of course, there is plenty to see in the other 1,050 acres at Longwood, and...they have a terrific restaurant on the grounds. Check the web site ([www.longwoodgardens.org](http://www.longwoodgardens.org)) for admission charges, as well as times, directions, and photos from last year's festival. Phone: 610-388-1000.

Furthest afield is the show at the 250-acre New York Botanical Garden. Featured this year: *Chrysanthemums and Fall Foliage Color in the Garden* (mid-October through mid-November). Quoting their web site ([www.nybg.org](http://www.nybg.org)): "Thousands of hardy chrysanthemums bloom throughout the display gardens and borders, a stunning show of color amidst the Garden's spectacular fall foliage. With 40 acres of historic forest bursting with autumn hues, it's a breathtaking scene." Featured are the "Korean mums" which are very hardy, fragrant late-bloomers. (Yes! Behnke's does carry some of the under-appreciated Korean mums in our perennial department.)

Featured in the conservatory: *Japanese Chrysanthemums* (late October-mid-November). "The Conservatory courtyards are full of the rich color and stately forms of beautiful Japanese chrysanthemums, one of the true delights at the Garden."

The New York Botanical Garden is located at 200<sup>th</sup> Street and Kazimiroff Boulevard, in the Bronx. Contact them at 718-817-8700. ☞



## Belgian Mums

— Marian Parsley

Several years ago, Behnke Seasonal Plant Buyer, Randy Best, and I visited a local chrysanthemum grower in search of traditional garden mums to supplement our own Behnke-grown crop for the fall. As we looked over the acres of mums, something unusual caught our attention. We saw a type of mum so unique that we just had to have some. They were called Belgian mums and were the brainchild of European grower, Dirk Peters. Peters had decided that the traditional mum varieties were not up to his standards. He had encountered difficulty shipping his crops due to the brittleness of the plants and their tall, upright shape. He immediately went to work to develop his own varieties. His focus was on plant quality and endurance, as well as increased flower production. His plants had to be flexible enough to resist damage during shipment and have an attractive shape. He wanted the flower count to be exceptionally high, so the blooms would completely cover the entire plant. What resulted was an attractive, ball-shaped plant that had a spectacular flower display and was durable enough to hold up in shipping.

When we first saw these mums, we could hardly resist touching them, they were so darn cute! Compact and almost "pettable," the foliage was totally engulfed in blossoms. We purchased a number for our stores, and the response was overwhelming — customers were purchasing these plants even before the flowers opened!

Last year, we selected a few varieties to grow ourselves at our Largo nursery. Again, as soon as they reached the stores, they sold. One customer purchased over three hundred! This year we have increased production of our Belgian mums to more than fifteen different varieties, in a wide range of flower colors. Stop by for a visit; once you see them, we know that you'll have to add several to your own fall garden. They are just so darn cute....! ☞



# Mole Whistles — A Creative Solution to a Pesky Problem

— Karen Schott

*Editor's note: This article was sent to us by a longtime friend and customer who has recently moved to Maryland's Eastern Shore. She relayed the story, and swears it is true — so we asked her to tell it to our GardeNews readers. If you want to try this old British remedy, please be certain that you "plant" your bottles lower than the lowest cut your lawn mower will make. We certainly don't want any glass bottle necks being propelled into the air by your lawn mower. Also, Karen suggests that you invest in a dedicated food baster to remove any water that might collect in the buried bottles. Happy gardening!*

When someone told me they had an acre of swamp land for sale, I bit. After my home was completed, and my lawn planted, I noticed a visitor...a mole. He kept pretty much to himself, confining his travels to my property line, with only occasional forays into my lawn. "He was here first," I told myself. And that was that.

One day I planted some ornamental grasses. I spent a whole day at it, rejoicing in the dirt, enjoying the labor, basking in the sun! I was earth mother. This was *my* home. I went to bed early, filled with the flush of the novice gardener...and Tylenol.

The next morning I rose (sort of) with the sun, and ran outside to view my work. The mole seemed to have the same idea. You could clearly see his tunnel veering off

directly toward a clump of maiden grass.

This was war! But, ugly as moles are, I *did not* want to kill the critter, nor trap it and not be there to release it before it died. I panicked. I needed to leave to return to Baltimore. But leave *my* grasses to the ravages of the mole....never!

I called the local plant store and told my problem to a gentleman with a British accent. "Mole whistles," he said.

Huh?

The short of this old British remedy is...gather together empty glass bottles, the kind individual iced tea and fruit drinks come in. The mouth opening needs to be about 1.5 inches across. Soda bottles will not do. Bury the empty bottles so that the neck is exposed to about the height of the lawn. Tie some bright plastic ribbon around the neck so you do not decapitate them during mowing.

The wind blowing across the open mouths of the bottles creates a sound that seems to give moles a ripping headache — and sends them away. No kidding. I planted my bottles on a Sunday and the *very next* week there was no new activity from my mole. Nothing. Nada. Zip. Now, several months later, still nothing. Best of all, I did not have to kill, trap or dispose of any living thing. Only time will tell if the remedy

will "stick" but those who know moles seem to feel the job is done.

My neighbors laughed when I planted my bottles. (What *is* she up to?) This past weekend they stopped by to find out just what *kind* of bottles they needed to plant. And they've stopped laughing. *sn*

*Karen lives in Baltimore, where she writes, weaves...and has been known to walk in a straight line on occasion. —Editor*



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