

## Inside

3

Meet: Larry Hurley

New Design and  
Installation Division

4-5

Winter  
Gardening Seminar  
Schedule

6-7

Essential Herbs  
for the Garden

8

Experiment  
With Plants:  
Science Fair Help

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## Cyclamen for Winter Cheer

— by Larry Hurley and Melodie Likel

One of the pleasures of the transition from summer to fall to winter is that our greenhouses once again are chock full of blooming plants to make your home more cheerful. Although a lot of attention is lavished on the holiday plants—poinsettias and Easter lilies—there are others that perform equally well yet garner less attention. My favorite is the cyclamen. Easy to grow, colorful, fragrant and long blooming—what more could you ask for? Okay; graceful. You've got it.

There are 20 species of cyclamen. They are found in the wild around (but not in) the Mediterranean Sea. Some species are winter hardy, and Behnke Nurseries carries dormant nursery-grown plants in the fall in our bulb section and occasionally as small potted plants in our perennial area. These species (including *Cyclamen coum* and *C. hederifolium*) are great for naturalizing in well-drained soil under deciduous trees in bright shade in urban settings. At my home, I have several patches of *C. hederifolium* that go dormant in summer, flower in fall, and bear attractive foliage throughout the winter and spring. For more information on the hardy species, visit the website of the English based Cyclamen Society, [www.cyclamen.org](http://www.cyclamen.org).

The "florist hybrids" are primarily from the species *C. persicum*, which is not winter hardy in our area. It is, however used as a bedding or window box plant in the cool seasons of milder climates, similar to how we would use pansies here. Last December, when I was in Rome, I observed that it was planted extensively.

"Florist cyclamen" (hereafter denoted as just "cyclamen") are available in shades of red, pink, lavender, purple and white, with some bicolors, fringed, and double-flowered forms as well. The standard type



Continued on page 2



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Monday - Saturday: 9AM to 6PM

Sunday: 9AM to 5PM

(PLEASE CALL AHEAD,

HOURS SUBJECT TO CHANGE)

### BEHNKE'S AT BELTSVILLE

11300 Baltimore Ave. (U.S.1)

Beltsville, MD 20705

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Exit 25, Capital Beltway)

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Florist: 301-937-4032

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9545 River Road

Potomac, MD 20854

(Two miles north of the  
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301-983-9200

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"Cyclamen", from page 1

is about 12 inches tall in bloom, with 2 to 3 inch flowers borne like butterflies (or fireworks) above the foliage. The dwarf or mini form is about 6 inches tall with 1-inch flowers, and there is an in-between size, the "midi", as well. The leaves usually have a silver overlay with the green that makes them attractive in their own right, resembling a foliage-type begonia. The fragrance seems to vary from plant to plant, so if the lemony scent is important to you, make sure to select a fragrant plant from the start. Fragrance seems to be stronger in the more humid atmosphere of a greenhouse than in the home.

Cyclamen should be in a window in bright light, even a few hours of direct sun in the morning or late afternoon. East windows are ideal. They also do best long-term in a cool room (another reason to go the windowsill route), with day temperatures in the mid-60's and nights around 50 degrees.

The fastest way to kill a cyclamen is by overwatering. Wait until just before the plant starts to wilt before you water the plant—lift the pot and water the plant when it feels light. (If you wait too long and it wilts badly, you will abort many of the small flower buds. It is best to check about every three days.) The plant may flower for up to several months if everything goes well.

Water the soil, not the foliage, and let the pot drain without standing for any length of time in a saucer of water (this is easiest to accomplish by watering it in the sink.) If the pot has foil around it, get rid of the foil and put the plant in a basket or just in a saucer. Foil tends to reduce air circulation around the base of the plant, and encourages rot. If you lift the pot and the plant, or victim, is wilting and heavy, it has been overwatered and in technical horticultural parlance, the plant is now "toast". Yellowing leaves and dried-up buds are signs of underwatering, too-warm temperatures, low humidity, or a combination of these.

It can't hurt to give the plant a little bit of houseplant fertilizer every couple of weeks. As long as the plant continues to make new leaves, it will make new flower buds (one bud per leaf). A little nosh once in a while will help to maintain active growth. We carry a number of excellent brands from which to choose, including Jack's Classic, which is ideal for cyclamen.

When the plant goes out of flower you can compost it or try to nurse it along to rebloom next year. At that point you may withhold water and allow it to die back to the bulb-like tuber. Most houseplant books will give you the routine. From a quality standpoint, a new plant will generally look better than one you have tried to rebloom unless you have a home greenhouse.

I'm not Mr. Artistic. I tried reading Martha, but it didn't do any good. I line cyclamen up along the window sill like little soldiers, alternated with rex begonias, kalanchoes, and other cool-season plants. For short-term displays, New Year's Eve party, birthday, etc. you might tuck several into a basket or a ceramic pot. For a few more suggestions from Behnke Florist, see the box below.

## Cyclamen Decorating Tips

Evelyn Kinville, Florist Shop Division Manager, shares these tips for showcasing your cyclamen plant:

The bright colors of cyclamen blooms chase away the winter blahs. For home display, be sure to protect furniture by placing your plant in a favorite container with a water-tight liner inside. Remove the plant for watering and draining. For an elegant look, cut a few blooms and place them in a slender bud vase or small pitcher. The blooms resemble orchids when displayed in this manner. (In fact, the cyclamen is sometimes referred to as "poor man's orchid.")

Cyclamen can be moved anywhere in your home, like a bouquet of flowers, for a special occasion. Just make sure they are returned to their cool, bright growing environment the next day.

Heart-shaped leaves, and bloom hues in reds, pinks and white make cyclamen a great valentine. Add paper or lace hearts on picks and a couple of tapered candles for the perfect centerpiece for a romantic Valentine's Day dinner.



## Meet: Larry Hurley



Larry, one of our more prolific writers for the *GardeNews*, joined Behnkes in 1984. Larry grew up in Wisconsin, where he earned a BS in Zoology and an MS in horticulture at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. During and following his schooling, he worked as a lab technician in a plant tissue culture lab, and as a house-plant expert at Felly's Flowers.

After a six-year stint in Dallas as inventory controller for Nortex, a large wholesale grower, Larry came to Behnkes at Largo, where he alternated between our retail store and perennial production. He now works in the business office with John Peter Thompson, our CEO, on various projects such as Behnkes Baysafe program, invasive plant issues, and our perennial program.

Larry travels extensively, thanks mostly to the frequent flyer miles earned by his wife, Carolyn, a professor at Georgetown University's Lombardi Cancer Center. His other hobbies include photography, genealogy, and yardwork. Pathologically shy, Larry avoids contact with the public as much as possible, save through the printed media where his inimitable charm and trademark humor shine through.

## New Maintenance for the New Millennium

Behnke Nurseries is pleased to welcome Byrne Kelly, registered landscape architect, as manager of our new and improved **Design and Installation Division**. Byrne brings with him 21 years of experience in all aspects of design, installation and land development. The new division will be headquartered at our Beltsville location and will operate out of both our Beltsville garden center and our Largo growing facility.

Byrne's background has focused on environmentally-friendly and sustainable landscapes, with an emphasis on native plants and low-maintenance plants. Behnke's will be offering both commercial and residential landscape consultation, design, and turn-key installations.

In addition, Byrne has developed a program for the commercial sector called **New Maintenance for the New Millennium**. This program specializes in reducing the use of chemicals, limiting the use of lawn grass as a ground cover, replacing annuals with perennials, and other diverse methodologies, resulting in a reduction of annual maintenance costs for both property owners and management companies.

To learn more about the Design and Installation Division, or the New Maintenance for the New Millennium program, you may reach Byrne at 301 937-1100, voice mail #310.



## Behnke's Educational Program

At Behnke Nurseries, we are proud to be known as a customer-friendly company in which customers can not only purchase high-quality plants, but can also consult with our staff of expert horticulturists. Behnke horticulturists have earned the reputation of being able to correctly diagnose plant problems and to make appropriate control recommendations.

The ability to diagnose plant problems requires detailed knowledge of a wide range of horticultural subjects. To ensure that our staff maintains its high level of expertise, we offer internal education through our **Career Development Program**. This program includes courses in the principles of horticultural practices, entomology, plant pathology, weed control, pesticides, lawn care, and integrated pest management. As part of our Career Development Program, we also encourage employees to expand their knowledge by sponsoring them at horticultural conferences around the country and classes at local colleges and universities. Employees are also trained to achieve certification as professional horticulturists by the Maryland Nurserymen's Association. This involves meeting strict experience requirements and passing a comprehensive test administered by the Maryland Department of Agriculture. Our current staff consists of more than 20 certified professional horticulturists.

We want our customers to know that they can depend on Behnke Nurseries to not only provide top quality plants in an extensive selection, but also to offer a staff of solid professionals to stand behind those plants and ensure their survival for the long run. We believe in our plants and our employees — a winning combination!





# Behnke's Free Gard

**F**or more than twenty years, Behnke Nurseries has provided a winter program of gardening talks to educate and entertain area gardeners. This year, we offer 19 free seminars and one paid workshop. All these events are held at our Beltsville location in our Assembly Room, which is on the second floor of our Florist Building. We regret that this space is not wheelchair accessible. We will, however, try to accommodate anyone who may be inconvenienced.

## Butterflies, Hummers and Song Birds

*Saturday* *Lynette Scaffidi, Brookside Nature Center*  
*Feb. 9*  
*10 AM*  
Learn which plants will attract these winged beauties of nature to your garden and how to provide the necessary foods and shelter to ensure healthy generations for years to come.

## Maintaining the Perennial Garden

*Saturday* *Martha Pindale, Bluemount Nurseries*  
*Feb. 9*  
*1 PM*  
Deadheading, dividing, pinching and more will be demystified as a local perennial grower provides a season-by-season guide of routine and simple tasks for keeping your perennial beds looking their best all year long.

## Exalting Nature

*Sunday* *Colston Burrell, Native Landscape Design & Restoration*  
*Feb. 10*  
*1 PM*  
Using the native woodland for inspiration, Cole Burrell shows how ecological principles and plant community structure drive good design. A dramatic palette of perennials providing season-long color, foliage, form and texture will be presented and placed in the shade garden context.

## Soil, The Dirty Details

*Saturday* *Jon Traunfeld, Home & Garden Information Center*  
*Feb. 16*  
*10 AM*  
Great gardens grow from great soil, ask any horticulturist. We'll investigate the types of soil that are common in our area and the steps needed to transform them into the great soil that ensures a beautiful garden.

## Gardening in the City

*Saturday* *Dottie Jacobsen, Little Pictures*  
*Feb. 16*  
*1 PM*  
An eye for design and a palette of plants suited for the city garden can be combined to create a restful, urban oasis. An area designer will share her considerable experience with turning small gardens into works of garden art.

## Wildlife Habitat Gardening

*Sunday* *Jim Gallion, Habitat Steward,*  
*Feb. 17* *National Wildlife Federation*  
*1 PM*

Turning your yard into a haven for wildlife is simple and the rewards are legion. National Wildlife Federation volunteer Jim Gallion discusses the four basic elements required by wild creatures to survive and thrive and then how to transform your little part of the landscape into a beneficial environment for humans and wildlife alike.

## What's New at the National Arboretum?

*Saturday* *Mark McGuinness, U.S. National Arboretum*  
*Feb. 23*  
*10 AM*  
Join horticulturist/curator Mark McGuinness as he highlights new Arboretum introductions. We'll see the latest varieties available to gardeners, plants to be released in the near future and some of the most popular introductions from the past.

## Controlling Deer Damage in the Landscape

*Saturday* *Rob Gibbs, Wildlife Ecologist, Montgomery County Parks*  
*Feb. 23*  
*1 PM*  
Deer browsing in area gardens is becoming widespread and frustrated gardeners despair of ever finding solutions to the problem. Rob will discuss a variety of approaches including alternative planting schemes, repellents and fencing and how various methods work to discourage deer.

## Allergy-Free Gardening

*Sunday* *Tom Ogren, Author*  
*Feb. 24*  
*1 PM*  
An allergy-free garden sounds idyllic but is it possible? Research into connections between landscape plants and allergies lead Tom Ogren to create his unique system of plant-allergy ratings. He will explain how the system can be used to establish healthier home and community environments.

## Designing a Tropical Garden

*Saturday* *Wally Reed, U.S. Botanic Garden*  
*March 2* *Roger Zinn, Behnke Perennial Specialist*  
*10 AM*  
Experts in two fields team up to design a tropical garden with a backbone of perennials. Roger will suggest tropical-looking, hardy plants to form the basis of the garden and Wally will flesh out the design with tropical varieties and overwintering advice.

## Common Pest and Disease Identification

*Saturday* *Tom Jarvis, Behnke Nurseries*  
*March 2*  
*1 PM*  
Recognizing the first signs of a plant pest or disease problem is the best way to minimize damage and eliminate the cause. Our staff expert will discuss the common indicators for a wide variety of plant pests and diseases along with preferred methods of treatment.

# enning Seminars for 2002

## Unusual Small Trees

*Saturday* *Phil Normandy, Brookside Gardens*  
*March 9*  
*10 AM*  
Small trees bring a sense of human scale to large landscapes and provide structure in small gardens. Join us as an avid plantsman talks about the wide variety of less-used yet wonderful trees that belong in our gardens.

## The Shade Garden

*Saturday* *Dave Culp, Sunny Border Nurseries*  
*March 9*  
*1 PM*  
From the first exquisite Christmas rose of late winter to the last exotic toad lily of late fall the shade garden is a constant delight. Join a noted plantsman on an amble through the garden in all glorious seasons of the year.

## Edible Landscaping: Fruits & Berries

*Sunday* *Mike McConkey, Edible Landscaping*  
*March 10*  
*1 PM*  
Picking sweet, fresh berries for your breakfast cereal or crunching on a juicy apple just pulled from the tree can happen in your backyard. New varieties and methods for growing fruit make it easier than ever to enjoy this wholesome and satisfying gardening experience.

## Vegetables & Herbs: A Regional Cuisine Approach

*Saturday* *Cindy Brown, Green Spring Gardens Park*  
*March 16*  
*10 AM*  
Learn how to pair favorite vegetables with herbs from the same region for tasty meals. Love the pungent flavor of oregano? Grow Italian eggplants, squashes and of course, tomatoes. Perfect partners in the vegetable and herb garden are easy to identify if we look at the food we love to eat and its origins.

## Workshop: Bed & Border Design

*Sunday, March 3, 9 AM-4 PM*  
*\$125.00*

A full day, hands-on workshop planned to let you design a bed or border to your unique specifications. Behnke Nurseries staff will explain the process and help at each step as you plan the shape, define the color scheme and finally choose the individual plants to make your garden a reality.

Limited to 30 participants; Preregistration required.  
Please call 301 937-1100 for more information or to register for this workshop.

## Landscaping a Newly-Built Home

*Sunday* *Joel Lerner, Environmental Design*  
*March 17*  
*1 PM*  
Landscaping a newly-built home may leave the homeowner in a dizzying dilemma. Landscape designer, Joel Lerner will outline the step by step method for deciding what to do and how to do it. Soil preparation, foundation plantings as well as choosing plants that have good success rates will be covered. Joel will also be signing his new book, *Anyone Can Landscape!*

## Herb Gardens — Plain and Fancy

*Saturday* *Holly Shimizu, U.S. Botanic Garden*  
*March 23*  
*10 AM*  
A little patch of culinary herbs near the kitchen door can be as artfully laid out as a knot garden of precisely-trimmed, interwoven hedges. Join us as we explore herb garden design from the humble to the grandiose with practical advice on manageable designs for your garden.

## Basic Landscape Design

*Saturday* *Cindy Brown, Green Spring Gardens Park*  
*March 23*  
*1 PM*  
Learn the sequence of steps in creating a personalized landscape design. From evaluating existing features to making a list of wants and needs and finally to using the principles of design to produce a unified landscape plan.

## Perennials: Everything You Ever Wanted to Know

*Sunday* *Andre Viette, Andre Viette Farm & Nursery*  
*March 24*  
*1 PM*  
Andre carries on a tradition of eighty years in the growing of perennials. Three generations have built one of the most renowned gardening businesses in America. With those years of experience comes an unparalleled understanding of design and culture in the perennial garden. Join Andre as he shares his wealth of knowledge.



## Essential Herbs for the Garden

— by Melodie Likel, Perennial Plant Specialist

**D**eciding which culinary herbs to include in your home garden can be a daunting task, due to the incredible number of species and cultivars available. To simplify your selection process, we've put together a list of 6 herbs we consider to be essential for the garden. These herbs, which provide the flavoring themes for many cuisines, are parsley, basil, chives, rosemary, oregano and sage. The first three were featured in our Summer 01 issue\*, the remaining three are discussed here. (Please note: medicinal references are given for historical nontext only.)



### Oregano

European oregano, in the form of poultices

for spider and scorpion bites, was mentioned by the Roman scholar Pliny. In 1 AD, the Greek physician Dioscorides recommended the use of various oreganos for their healing qualities. Even after making its way to North America with colonists in the 16th century, the herb remained primarily a medicament. Its essential oil was dabbed on aching teeth and massaged into balding pates with great anticipation.

Nearly two more centuries would go by before oregano began to appear in North American cooking. Some say that servicemen returning from Europe in World War II brought with them a taste for the Mediterranean flavors, including oregano, they had encountered in Italy. Pizza was quickly adopted as an American food and with it oregano was permanently added to our lexicon of culinary herbs.

The culinary oreganos most often used in cooking in Mediterranean cuisines are *Origanum vulgare subspecies hirtum*, Greek mountain oregano, and *Origanum x majoricum*, Italian oregano. These have the strong aroma and hot, peppery flavor that is found in many pasta sauces, meat marinades and soups of the region.

### Culture

Knowing and understanding the native habitat of a plant helps enormously when growing it in our gardens. Oregano is native to arid mountain sides of the eastern Mediterranean — its name actually means “joy of the mountains”— and grows best and develops the strongest flavor in full, blazing sun, at least six hours after 9 AM. It also requires excellent drainage and a soil with good organic

content that is slightly alkaline. Add crushed stone, chicken grit, or gravel to soil to improve drainage and space plants 1-2 feet apart. Greek oregano is a spreading variety while Italian forms a large clump. No fertilizer is necessary if soil requirements are met. Water sparingly, remember those arid mountains. Keep weed-free and pinch back to increase stem strength and promote branching. Cut plants back in late spring to encourage fresh growth. Use fresh or hang bunches of foliage in paper bags to dry for later use. Both Greek and Italian oregano are hardy perennials in this area.

### Rosemary

Native to the seaside cliffs of France, Spain, Italy, and Greece, it is no wonder that this fragrant, evergreen herb is found in so many of the wonderful dishes of that region. Its genus name, *Rosmarinus*, from the Latin for “dew of the sea” only enhances its intrigue.

Rosemary delights the eye as well as the palate. There are tall, formal rosemary plants with wide, bright green leaves and recumbent plants for the rockgarden with thin, pine-scented leaves. Some varieties have white, blue, lavender, purple or pink flowers and others have golden foliage. Since ancient times, rosemary has been a favored tonic of herbalists, a fragrant beauty treatment, a talisman against demons, a symbol of remembrance

and friendship, a focus of religious lore, an incense to dispel odors and disease as well as a culinary herb.

Greek scholars believed that rosemary would stimulate memory and so wreathed themselves with it while studying. While rosemary may not be the panacea once believed, its oil has been shown to have some antibacterial qualities. It increases blood circulation and an extract of rosemary is an effective food preservative.

The Romans had a taste for the pungent, piney flavor of rosemary and used it with lamb and shellfish. As their dominion spread to encompass much of Europe as well as England, rosemary went along as a treasured remembrance and flavor of home.

Surely the most appealing use of rosemary is as a symbol of remembrance, love and fidelity. Bridal bouquets often included a sprig of rosemary, and Victorians put their fondest feelings into nosegays of flowers and herbs, including rosemary. It

was long used in funeral ceremonies to promise remembrance of the departed.

Today, rosemary is found in dishes of all kinds — providing a bold, aromatic flavor; a piquant addition to a rich, roasted meat, or a spicy tang that lifts potatoes out of the doldrums to something irresistibly delicious.

### Culture

When buying rosemary plants be sure to choose hardy varieties for outdoor beds. In our region *Rosmarinus officinalis* ‘Arp’ and *R. o.* ‘Hill Hardy’ will survive all but the sever-



## Grilled Eggplant

1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil  
 1/4 cup soy or tamari sauce  
 1/4 cup fresh rosemary leaves  
 1-3 cloves garlic  
 1 medium eggplant or  
 4-5 Japanese eggplants

Put the first four ingredients in a blender and puree for 1 minute.

Cut small eggplants in halves or larger eggplant into wedges. Dip briefly in rosemary puree and grill over hot coals until brown and soft.

## Sage Potatoes

1 lb. small, new potatoes or red potatoes  
 2 Tbsp extra virgin olive oil  
 3 Tbsp fresh sage leaves, julienned  
 1-2 cloves garlic, pressed or minced  
 Freshly ground pepper and  
 kosher salt to taste

Scrub potatoes and peel, if desired. Boil or steam potatoes until just tender. Drain well (if boiled) and toss with the remaining ingredients while still hot.



est winter weather and are both readily available at garden centers. Tender cultivars should be grown in pots and overwintered indoors.

Rosemary thrives in full sun and moderately fertile, neutral or slightly alkaline soil. Little fertilization is required if grown in the garden. Excellent drainage is the most important cultural factor for rosemary grown in the garden or in containers. Root rot, caused by poor drainage or overwatering, is frequently the killing blow. Protective wraps for outdoor, hardy rosemaries should be put on in early winter. Using plastic sheeting, wrap entire plant leaving the top open and tie just tightly enough to support branches. This prevents dehydration from winter winds and breakage from snow and ice.

Plant a hardy rosemary near the door where its invigorating fragrance will welcome all who enter and where a snipped sprig can accompany friends who depart.

### Growing rosemary in containers

Many varieties of rosemary are not winter hardy in this region and growing them in containers makes enjoying these tender types possible. Pot rosemary in late spring and place in a sunny spot in the garden or on the patio or porch for the summer. This ensures that the plant will have a well-developed root system by fall when the plant is moved indoors. Choose a good-quality, disease-free potting medium that contains perlite or vermiculite. Place pots in a very sunny window, four hours a

day or more is best.

Good air circulation will help to keep plants healthy.

Water potted rosemary plants only when medium is dry.

Water well and allow all excess water to drain away. Fertilize with slow-release, encapsulated fertilizer once a season or with 20-20-20 every 4-5 waterings. And of course, in late spring move the plants outdoors to a sunny spot for the summer.

### Sage

*Salvia*, from the Latin *slavus* for safe, was believed by the ancient Arabians to keep a person safe from aging and even from dying as well as fortifying the brain. The Greeks and Romans used sage to treat snake bites. An old proverb asks "Why should a man die who has sage in his garden?"

Once introduced to China, sage became a most valued trade commodity prized for making tea, while American Indians used it in healing salves and the leafy stems as fragrant disposable toothbrushes.

Sage, as medicine, has been purported to cure all manner of maladies from epilepsy to warts and worms. Modern science has shown that sage oil has astringent, antiseptic, and estrogenic properties. Researchers have found that it can lower blood sugar in diabetics.

### Culture

Sage, a hardy perennial herb, is easy to grow in moderately fertile, slightly acid soil in full sun. Like rosemary, sage will suffer if overwatered. Set seedlings or nursery-grown transplants out in early spring. After one or two years sage will send up tall spikes of lavender-blue flowers in spring. Cut some for the kitchen windowsill or table. After flowering cut the plant back by half to encourage fresh growth for continued harvesting. Since sage is evergreen it can be harvested even in the midst of our normally mild winters. To dry sage, pick the leaves just before the flowers open and spread them on paper to dry slowly in the shade. Store in airtight containers. Dried sage has a stronger flavor and a slightly different taste than fresh sage. The plants tend to get very woody after 4-5 years and are no longer very productive and should be replaced.

The most common culinary sage is *Salvia officinalis*. Other sages are used in cooking and still many more are ornamental plants of all shapes and sizes.

The flavor of common or cooking sage has several predominant notes of lemon, camphor, pepper and bitterness. Sage is often cooked with rich, fatty meats where its properties as a digestive aid are put to the test. A not-so-fatty pork loin is indeed flavorful when roasted with a covering layer of fresh sage leaves. Probably our most familiar use of sage is as poultry seasoning used in bread stuffing for the Thanksgiving turkey. Cheeses and sausages may be flavored with sage and a traditional Italian dish combines white beans, garlic and sage baked to aromatic perfection. And sage, like rosemary can take the ordinary potato to new heights of delectability. Add sage leaves when roasting potatoes or simply stir chopped sage, olive oil and salt and pepper into drained, boiled potatoes. Sage leaves deep fried just until crisp make an unusual and delicious accompaniment to roasts or tasty snacks for the chef before dinner.

\*The article can be found on our web site, in "the library" ([www.behnkes.com](http://www.behnkes.com)).



# Plants Make Perfect Science Fair Experiment Subjects

— by Larry Hurley, Perennial Plant Specialist

Plants are wonderful subjects for science experiments and science fair projects. They are alive and growing, and can respond dramatically to a variety of stimuli. For more information, including specific instructions for growing new plants from seed, look for our free brochure, *Experiment with Plants! Science Fair Help for Budding Researchers*, at any Behnke Nurseries location. Here are some hints on how to make your science project a success.

- Don't wait until the last minute. The longer you can run your experiment, the more dramatic your results will be.
- Start with a **theory**. This will be the basis of your experiment. A theory might be that different rates of fertilizing plants will result in different heights of plants at the end of the experiment period.
- When you set up your experiment, remember to only vary one condition. This is called the "**variable**". Hold all other conditions the same, or "**constant**". This is because if you have two or more things that are changing at the same time, you will not know which one is changing your results. For example: if you are testing the effects of different rates of plant food (the variable is the rate of feeding), then everything else should be kept as similar as possible. The amount of water, the amount of light, temperature, the type of plant, and the size of the plants you started with must be the same for all of the plants in the test.
- You must have something that you are testing against as a benchmark or standard: this is called a "**control**". For instance: if you are testing effects of changing the rate of fertilizer, you could have any of various items as the control. You could say that the control is the group of plants with no fertilizer. Another experimenter might say that the group of plants fertilized at the rate listed on the package is the control. When you finish your experiment, all plants are compared to the control to look for differences.
- To reduce effects due to random chance, each test group and the control should have several (or more) plants. When you evaluate your experiment, you take the average of the several plants in each group as the result. In the fertilizer test, you might find that the heights of bean plants fed at a certain rate were 10 centimeters (cm), 8 cm, 12 cm, 12 cm and 14 cm. The average is 11.2 cm, which is different than any of your individual results.
- When you select your plants or seedlings to start your experiment, each individual should be as similar to the next as possible.

This is again to reduce the effects of random chance. You should record an initial evaluation of your test groups—color, height, number of leaves...this will give you a starting point with which to compare changes. Photos as you go along are also helpful for your report.

- Be honest. Sometimes an experiment just doesn't show anything, or some catastrophe strikes and everything dies. A scientist reports what she sees, not what she thinks should happen.



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