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## Peonies and Tree Peonies

— by Larry Hurley, Perennial Plant Specialist

Nearly everyone recognizes peonies. These stalwart plants are “must haves” for every garden. They are generally pest free, and deer prefer to browse on other goodies in your generous “all-you-can-eat-for-a-buck” buffet. Peonies are long-lived, and often outlive the gardener who plants them.

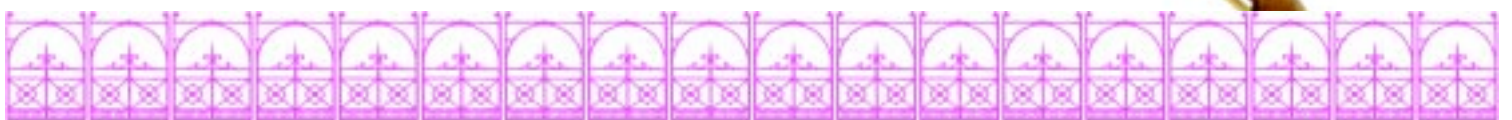
Because Albert Behnke was particularly fond of peonies, the growers at Behnke Nurseries have for many years brought you the best selection of peonies in the area. Our large peony crowns are potted in the fall, overwintered, and appear in our stores in early April when the shoots are about 6 inches high. Most plants will produce a flower or two in the pot, so you can get an idea of what they look like. (Note: Once established, plants in the ground will produce flowers that are larger and more “double” than you will see initially.) With over 50 cultivars, we have one for every taste—white, pink, red, coral; singles, doubles,

“anemone-flowered”; early, mid-season or late bloomers (not that this is that exciting: it is not a long season to start with); short, medium or tall. Some have a delightful fragrance, and they last well as cut flowers.

This year, we will be featuring the cousin of the peony, the tree peony. The flowers are similar to those of regular peonies, but if anything, larger, and frequently fragrant. The scientific name for tree peonies is *Paeonia suffruticosa*. A suffrutescent plant is one that has a woody base but non-woody top; thus it does not die back fully to the ground over the winter like its herbaceous (“dies to the ground in the winter”) relative. It makes a woody stem and branches, and gets taller and more wide-spreading each year. Tree peonies have some bare branches and stems in the winter, with some buds that are either red or dead looking. (In this case, better red than dead.) You ever-so-much want to cut them back to the ground, as you would with a regular peony, because, well, winter character is not their strong suit. Do not succumb to this temptation. In the spring, after new growth has commenced, take out any dead branches that do not produce new growth. Do not be hasty; like ferns, they often look dead until they actually start to grow in the new season. They are fairly slow growing, and it takes up to fifteen years to reach mature size of 4 to 6 feet tall and 4 to 5 feet wide. The last thing you want to do is set yourself back a few years by tidying things up.

This spring we will proudly offer 50 four-year-old Chinese tree peonies from Cricket Hill Garden in Connecticut ([www.treepeony.com](http://www.treepeony.com)). These have really nifty names like ‘Necklace with Precious Pearls’, ‘Cinnabar Ramparts’, ‘Number One Scholar’s Red’ and ‘General Tso’s Chicken’. We

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will offer 6 of the reputed 1000 Chinese cultivars. According to Cricket Hill, the tree peony is the national plant of China, where they have been grown as garden subjects for over 1400 years. Some specimens are reputed to be 200 years old. For those of you who don't mind waiting, we will also offer 7 cultivars of younger Japanese tree peonies imported by Walter's Gardens. These will not bloom for a couple of years, but offer additional color choices such as 'Shimanishiki', with large red-and-white double flowers, and you can afford to buy several plants.

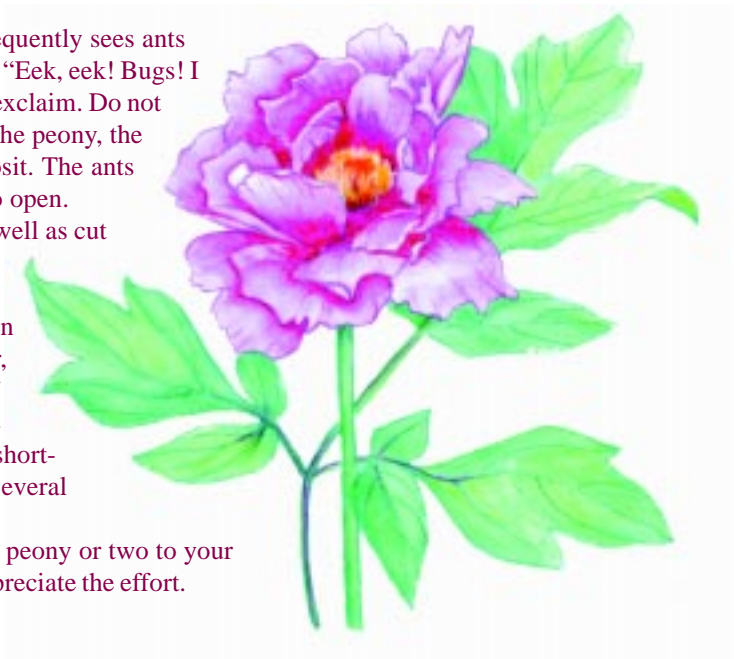
Tree peonies should best be planted where they have direct sunlight in the morning and shade in the afternoon (5 hours of sun, says Cricket Hill). There are some large specimens at Longwood Gardens (about the size of a Volkswagen Beetle) in full sun, and I have some at home in full shade. In sun, you run the risk of sunburned petals, while in the shade you have reduced flowering. I'm happy to get 5 or 6 blooms per plant, but each flower is nearly 8 inches across. At Cricket Hill, they use attractive Chinese parasols, strategically placed over the plants to protect the flowers from sun, rain, and to add an ambiance to the garden. Peonies, in general, need good soil drainage (raised bed or on a slight slope) and good air circulation. It is important that they be planted at the same depth that they were in the container. If planted too deeply, *herbaceous* peonies will grow but not bloom (the overwintering buds need to be about 2 inches below the surface of the soil.) If planted too deeply, *tree* peonies will rot off.

The most annoying problem gardeners encounter with peonies is Botrytis Blight. (Actually, the *really* most annoying problem is that, when it rains, the weight of the flowers pulls the plants down. A staking device called a peony ring helps prevent that.) Botrytis (aka the "Noble Rot" and the "Big Bot") is an airborne fungus that attacks weak or dead plant tissue generally under conditions of rain or high humidity. When it grows on grapes in the fall, Botrytis increases the sugar content, allowing the manufacture of super sweet wines, like German Trockenberenauslese, usually drunk as dessert wines. It is a major pain for greenhouse growers, and a lot of temperature/humidity manipulation and spraying occurs to prevent infection on poinsettias, impatiens, geraniums, etc. Outdoors, peonies, especially young ones, may be attacked. The worst case is that the flower bud turns black and shrivels. It is unlikely to permanently harm the plant, but you lose a season's flowers. I personally have never had a problem at home, and throughout my neighborhood, I see peonies reliably blooming in gardens year after year with no problems and no special care. However, a couple of preventive sprays early in the season may be necessary if you live in a "holler" or we have a particularly wet spring.

Note to the Squeamish: One frequently sees ants walking around on the flower buds. "Eek, eek! Bugs! I have ants in my plants!!" you may exclaim. Do not worry. For reasons known only to the peony, the buds are sealed with a sugary deposit. The ants eat this and help the flower buds to open.

Peonies and tree peonies work well as cut flowers. They may be used in arrangements to give that "Flemish still life" look, or displayed singly, in a bud vase or floating in a bowl. Or, just put five or seven with stems of different lengths into a vase. (Note that the tree peonies are relatively short-stemmed.) The flower should last several days to a week.

So join us this spring and add a peony or two to your garden. Your grandchildren will appreciate the effort.





## Beleaguered Ivy: Alternatives for an Invasive Vine

Larry Hurley, Perennial Plant Specialist

We have a little confession to make. Behnke Nurseries exists to sell plants. We do go to a lot of effort to try to sell you the right plant for the right place, but the emphasis is on sell. We thus have conflicting goals when it comes to English ivy. English ivy is a great plant: it's shade tolerant, not particularly disease or insect prone, and easy to propagate. You more-or-less plant it and forget it, that is, until it starts to grow where you don't want it—climbing your trees, climbing up the side of your house, and so on. English ivy is an “easy sell.” Customers come in specifically asking for it; landscape designers specify it in large numbers on their plans; salespeople can recommend it without much fear of anything going wrong. The problem is that, unless maintained, over the years it will escape cultivation and move into parklands. (It flowers and goes to seed when it climbs and becomes mature; birds spread the seed.) In parklands ivy smothers out native forest floor plants, climbs and shades out shrubs, and damages trees with its added weight. So when we sell English ivy, we are like the agonized cartoon character with an angel and a devil on alternate shoulders: (“Sell it!” “Don't sell it!” “Shut up!” “Shut up!”)

We herewith are pleased to list alternative recommendations to ivy for use as a ground cover in the shade, with the hope that you, the consumer who drives the market, will drive a more environmentally friendly plant. So to speak.

For large areas, we recommend Japanese pachysandra (*Pachysandra terminalis*). Short, evergreen and tough, it does not appear to spread beyond its bounds, and pricewise, runs in the same league as English ivy.

Liriope, or lily turf, is taller, and has the advantage of having spikes of small, attractive purple or white flowers. One species, *Liriope spicata*, does seem to spread some by seed and runners, although this seems to be a problem further south of here. Most of the cultivars we carry are “clumpers” and fill in but don't run. For example, ‘Silvery Midget’ is a nice, golden-variegated dwarf, while ‘Monroe's White’ has white flowers.

*Vinca minor*, or periwinkle, is a low-spreading evergreen with blue, purple or white flowers. It shows up on some invasive plant lists, and is even sometimes “wild collected” as a “wildflower.” As a substitute for ivy, however, “it may be invasive, but at least it doesn't climb trees,” to quote an acquaintance from the Maryland Department of Agriculture.

For smaller areas, there are many interesting choices. The Eastern Allegheny pachysandra (*Pachysandra procumbens*), native to the US but not Maryland, has a subtle silvery blaze over gray-green leaves. Although not reliably evergreen, it does have reasonably showy spikes of tiny white flowers borne in early spring before new leaves appear.

Hostas, while not evergreen, certainly are a terrific shady ground cover for folks who don't have deer troubles. Grown primarily for their leaves, hostas make a dense crown that holds

soil well even when the plant is dormant. We carry 100 cultivars, including some inexpensive types in large (2 gallon) pots. Although it has a plain green leaf, the old-fashioned *Hosta lancifolia* makes an effective ground cover or edger for the whole season.

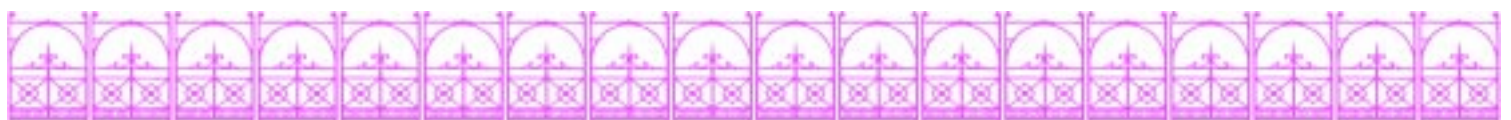
*Epimedium*, or bishop's hat, is a more or less evergreen shade perennial that slowly spreads and forms a dense cover. They have beautiful columbine-like flowers (yellow, pink, red, orange, lavender) in early spring. They're a hard sell, however, being relatively expensive and not “showing well” in a pot. The young plants look a little scrawny and don't flower well. Yet this plant would show up on most horticulturists' favorite plant list.

One of the hardy geraniums, *Geranium macrorrhizum*, has been in my garden for almost 20 years. It is in an area of deep, dry shade (but good soil). It is evergreen, six to eight inches tall, has pink or white flowers in spring, and strongly herbal-scented foliage. It spreads with above-ground stems, and is easy to control (just cut it back once a season).

Foamflower (*Tiarella* species and hybrids) offers some great evergreen plants, both clumpers and spreaders. They bear white (or light pink) flowers in spring, tolerate shade, and prefer moist soil. *Tiarella cordifolia*, an evergreen native, self-seeds at the edge of my yard in a drainage swale and has made a dense patch.

Many ferns make nice covers, especially the Christmas fern, *Polystichum acrostichoides*, which has dark, graceful leaves, looking much like the houseplant, the Boston fern. It is evergreen and deer are not frond of them (hee hee hee). Another good one is the evergreen wood fern, *Dryopteris marginalis*.

These are just some of the possibilities for ivy substitutions. For more information regarding the problems caused by invasive species start at the following websites: [www.nature.org/invasives](http://www.nature.org/invasives), [www.invasive.org](http://www.invasive.org), or [www.ma-eppc.org](http://www.ma-eppc.org).





# Free Gardening Seminars

## February 8th through March 23, 2003

### LANDSCAPE LIGHTING ESSENTIALS

*Saturday, Feb. 8, 10AM* *Mark Oxley, Outdoor Illumination*  
Lighting professional Mark Oxley introduces you to the principles of effective lighting for dramatic effect in outdoor spaces. Tips, tricks, and pitfalls to avoid will be discussed.

*Saturday, Feb. 22, 10AM*

Effective pruning is invisible — only the result is perceived: beautiful plants that look completely natural. Discover the different types of pruning employed by professionals. And learn about ergonomics, the science of matching tools and tasks to the human body, and how and why you should prune ergonomically.

### COLLAGE OF CONTAINERS

*Saturday, Feb. 8, 1PM* *Janet Draper, Smithsonian Horticulturist*  
Learn to create attractive outdoor containers to expand growing space, accent garden areas and provide floral interest in empty corners. Discussion will include pots, plant selection, soil, fertilizer, watering, and design principles.

### UNUSUAL SMALL TREES

*Saturday, Feb. 22, 1PM* *Phil Normandy, Brookside Gardens*  
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.

### PUT A SPLASH IN YOUR GARDEN

*Sunday, Feb. 9, 1PM* *John Gordon, Owner, www.Garden-Reflections.com*  
A landscape designer and water garden specialist uses slides from many parts of the world to illustrate design possibilities, construction, ecology and maintenance of a garden pond. Learn about filtration, fish and pond plants, too.

### INTRODUCING NATIVE PLANTS TO THE HOME GARDEN

*Sunday, Feb. 9, 1PM* *Brenda Skarphol, Horticulturist, Green Spring Gardens*  
Native plants celebrate the beauty of our local flora, preserve our environment and help foster diversity. Learn which native plants perform reliably in the garden.

### CONTAIN YOURSELF AND SMELL THE FLOWERS

*Saturday, Feb. 15, 10AM* *Jim Wilson, Garden Writer, Lecturer, and former host of PBS's The Victory Garden*  
Visit beautiful garden spots in North America and abroad via slideshow and see examples of beautifully designed and maintained container gardens. Learn about the latest in plant varieties, planting mixes, container choices, and fertilizers.

### INTRODUCED PEST MANAGEMENT AND NATURAL PEST CONTROL

*Saturday, March 1, 10AM* *Tom Jarvis, Behnke Nurseries*  
Avoid the use of hazardous chemicals by employing a program which controls common pests using the least toxic management techniques with emphasis on biological control methods.

### LANDSCAPING WITH HERBS

*Saturday, Feb. 15, 1PM* *Jim Wilson, Garden Writer, Lecturer, and former host of PBS's The Victory Garden*  
Jim operated an herb farm for several years, supplying fine restaurants with freshly-cut herbs. In the process, he evaluated many herbs for culinary and ornamental value. View slides of some of the most beautiful herb gardens in North America to gather ideas on design and maintenance.

### CREATING A HABITAT FOR BIRDS AND BUTTERFLIES

*Sunday, Feb. 16, 1PM* *Lynette Scaffidi, Brookside Gardens*  
Lynette, a naturalist at Brookside Nature Center, will show you how to create a habitat for birds and butterflies that is also a wonderful garden for you to enjoy. Learn about water sources, feeders, nesting boxes and native plants to create an oasis for birds and butterflies in your own backyard.

### BASIC PRUNING PRINCIPLES

*Dr. Bonnie Appleton, Virginia Tech*



# Free Gardening Seminars at Behnke's, continued

## EVERGREENS FOR THE COMPLETE GARDEN

*Saturday, March 1, 1PM*  
*Diane Lewis, Brookside Gardens Staff*  
When leaves of deciduous plants have dropped, take time to assess the bones of your garden: the evergreens or lack of them. Discover the wide array of plant material available to round out your landscape, including shapes, texture, color, flowers, berries and cones.

## CHOICE PLANTS FOR YOUR CUTTING GARDEN

*Sunday, March 2, 1PM*  
*Suzy McIntire, Local Garden Writer*  
Whether you garden in sun or shade, Suzanne will introduce you to the best annuals, biennials, perennials, and bulbs for cutting in our area. Find out what you can be doing now to have flowers for cutting this year. Afterwards, Susan McIntyre will sign copies of her new book *An American Cutting Garden*.

## ASPARAGUS TO ZUCCHINI: BASIC VEGETABLE GARDENING

*Saturday, March 8, 10AM*  
*Cindy Brown, Interpretive Horticulturist, Green Spring Gardens*  
Here in the metropolitan DC area we enjoy a long growing season. Fresh vegetables can be harvested nearly year round. Lecture and slide show will include planting schedules, cultivar selection, maintenance tips and suggestions to help make your vegetable garden beautiful enough for the front yard.

## INCREDIBLE, EDIBLE BORDERS

*Saturday, March 8, 1PM*  
*Cindy Brown, Interpretive Horticulturist, Green Spring Gardens*  
Imagine walking from your car to your front door collecting ingredients for the evening meal. Or dashing outside to cut fresh basil to make a batch of pesto for your pizza. Discover ways to plant your borders with ornamentals that are also edible. Plant introductions and design suggestions will help you create incredible, edible borders!

## FREE LANDSCAPE PLANNING AND DESIGN WORKSHOP

*Sunday, March 9, 1pm*  
*Behnke Nurseries' Landscape Architects and Horticulturists*  
Join our talented staff for a FREE session on planning your landscape design. Bring in unfinished plans, location survey, or home photos—we'll provide thumbnail sketches and design suggestions. Limited to the first 20 registrants. Please call 301-440-8514.

## LANDSCAPE RESTORATION AND RENOVATION

*Saturday, March 15, 10AM*  
*Thornton W. Burnet, Jr., Landscape Architect: Contours and Concepts*  
View a variety of before and after photos that illustrate landscape facelifts of older homes and the transformation of unusable space into landscaped gardens. This informative lecture and slide show will illustrate the importance of having a master plan that will let you do your renovations in planned stages.

## ARCHITECTURE IN THE GARDEN

*James van Sweden, noted landscape architect and author*  
Learn how the elements of garden architecture—paths, walls,

*Saturday, March 15, 1PM*  
gates, fences, terraces, sheds, lighting, furniture, waterworks, and art—form the backbone of any well-designed garden. James van Sweden will sign copies of his new book, *Architecture in the Garden*, after his lecture.

## IDENTIFICATION AND CONTROL OF INSECT AND DISEASE PESTS

*Tom Jarvis, Behnke Staff*  
Learn how to identify and control many of the most common insect and disease pests that attack plants in our area, and avoid destroying beneficial insects in our gardens.

## THE VERSATILE, PROBLEM-SOLVING PERENNIALS

*Sunday, March 10, 1PM*  
*Sandy McDougal, Sandy's Plants*  
Discover how perennials can beautify challenging areas in your landscape. Sandy will discuss problems—deer, drought, wet areas, erosion—and demonstrate, through slides and lecture, perennial solutions.

## SHADE GARDENING — EXCITING COLORS, TEXTURES AND FOLIAGE

*Saturday, March 13, 1PM*  
*Sandy McDougal, Sandy's Plants*  
In this presentation, Sandy shows you how to breathe new life into hum drum shade gardens. Using perennials and shrubs with bold foliage, bright blossoms, and interesting textures, you will learn to turn boring spaces into favorite places.

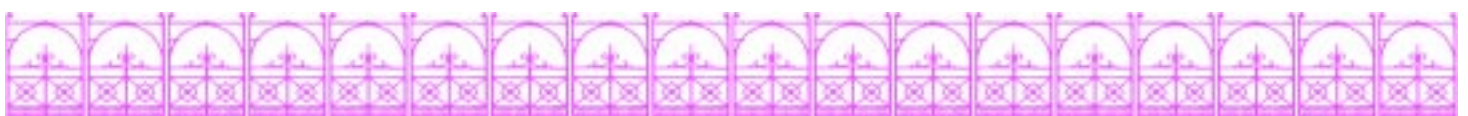
## THE ABCS OF LANDSCAPE DESIGN

*Saturday, March 22, 1PM*  
*Joel Lerner, Garden and Landscape Columnist, for the Washington Post*  
Through slides and lecture, you'll learn basic design principles to renovate established gardens or start from scratch with a brand new home. Joel Lerner is the author of the upcoming book, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Landscaping, Illustrated*.

*Sunday, March 23, 1PM*



Please note: Seminars are held at our Beltsville location, in our Assembly Room on the second floor. We regret that this room is not accessible to handicapped persons. We will, however, try to accommodate anyone who may be inconvenienced. Space is limited, please register by phone: 301-937-1100.





# Sonja Passes the President's Trowel to the Next Generation

— by Judith Conway, Managing Editor

Sonja Behnke Festerling, Albert and Rose Behnke's only daughter, retired this past September, and has "passed the trowel" to the third generation of Behnkens as the Nursery moves toward its 75<sup>th</sup> year of bringing plants and people together.

Mark Behnke, Sonja's nephew and Roland's son, has taken over as President; John Peter Thompson, Sonja's son, has assumed the responsibility of Chairman of the Board; and another cousin, Michael Behnke, has joined the Nursery as Manager of our Potomac location.

Sonja and her brothers grew up along with Behnke Nurseries. Since 1959, she has worked in every imaginable corner of the Nursery, including propagation, retail sales, bookkeeping and advertising. In recent years, she occupied the offices of Treasurer and Vice President, before assuming the responsibilities of the President when her brother Roland retired in 1995.

It was Sonja who designed the now-familiar Behnke Nurseries logo, at her father's request, when she was in high school. He immediately loved it, took it to a sign company, where it was enlarged and made into the main Nursery sign. It has appeared on all Nursery letterhead and advertisements ever since. And Sonja, with her sister-in-law, Ele Behnke, started the Behnke Christmas Shop in 1966. In the early years, Sonja was also instrumental in convincing her father to expand his merchandise to include peripheral items such as fertilizers, pots, houseplants and small foliage plants. And it was Sonja who brought the idea of African violets, a major crop for the fledgling nursery, to her father's attention. She had received a "Blue

Boy" African violet from a neighbor, tended it, and started rooting the leaves. When her father Albert saw that this plant seemed to bloom constantly, he saw the value of it as a houseplant. He and his wife Rose started collecting specimen plants and they began hybridizing the plants, developing a 'Behnke Boy' and a 'Washington Star' and several others. The African violet part of the business really took off in the post WWII years, and the income generated helped the family to continue to expand the business.

Although Sonja will no longer be at the nursery on a daily basis, she will keep tabs on the third generation, helping them to steer the nursery in the future. And she will continue in her very active role in the Beltsville Rotary.



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