

# Eva Cassidy's Day Job

by Larry Hurley, *Perennial Specialist*

Many of you are familiar with the music of Eva Cassidy, who died of cancer in November of 1996. At the time she died, she was just making a name for herself in the Washington area, having completed a CD with Chuck Brown, and a concert CD, "Live at Blues Alley." Her music has grown in popularity. Listeners of the BBC included her version of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" among the 100 best songs of the 20th century, and Amazon.com recently reported that Eva's CD's are their overall number 5 best seller in music for the last 10 years.

Few of you know that Eva Cassidy worked full or part-time at Behnke Nurseries for fourteen years at our Largo, Maryland nursery, between 1981 and 1995. With the sale of the Largo property and the move of the greenhouses to Lothian this year, it seems like a good time to recollect Eva's years at Largo.

When I started at Largo in 1984, Eva worked for the "Growing" department, as a transplanter. She performed general greenhouse work; watering, transplanting seedlings; pinching and tying poinsettias, and all of the other various things that greenhouse staff do. My recollection is that she was a petite blonde, very quiet and shy, and very hard working. Eva's sister Anette, was also working part-time at the nursery while she completed a nursing degree, and her mother Barbara divided her time between transplanting at Largo and working in the Christmas Shop at Beltsville.

Eventually, Eva transferred to the Woody Plants production department (the first woman on the crew), which gave her a chance to work outside and get more exercise. In those days, our peat moss came in 6 cubic foot bales, loose on a semi. They were unloaded by hand, and stacked in a warehouse. We looked like a bunch of ants. Including Ant One, me, muttering to myself and dragging a bale, and Ant Two, Eva, with a bale of peat as big as she, balanced on her shoulder, climbing up a mountain of bales. She was only 5' 2", but loaded truckloads of trees right alongside the guys.

In addition to toughening up physically, I think being the only woman on a crew of nurserymen toughened her up mentally as well, and perhaps gave her more confidence to perform. (How much worse could an audience be?) Nursery work is hard and dirty, and not particularly glamorous. It



includes a lot of potting, watering, weeding, and moving heavy plants around, in all weather. An excellent incentive to further develop talents like singing!

Her supervisor, Dave Nizinski, gave her some additional duties, including woody plant propagation. She made a lot of cuttings, especially leyland cypress. Many of you have plants in your gardens that were originally produced by Eva.

After her initial cancer surgery, she made an effort to stay covered up while in the sun, and did more indoor work. She did some data entry (computers were definitely not her first love) and I remember many a conversation with Eva that included the question: "Did you remember to log in?" She also used her artistic talents to make some of the signs we had around the nursery.

As she became busier as a musician, she moved to a part-time position at the nursery, and eventually, she left to devote herself full-time to her career. It was only a few months before the cancer reappeared, and she died just as she was becoming a "name" in the Washington music scene. There are still a few of us "old timers" here who worked with Eva Cassidy. Whenever I hear one of her songs, I think of the young woman transplanting in the greenhouse, and I feel so very sad.

