

THE BIG, BIG BOOK  
ABOUT PLANTS

REAL LIFE MEETS  
'LONESOME DOVE'

SO FAR, SNAKES ARE  
OFF THE HOOK

# Texas Coop Power

FOR CECA MEMBERS

AUGUST 2023

## Pathways to Peace

Finding healing in  
labyrinths across Texas





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# August 2023



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## Make Your Shelf Useful

Scooter Cheatham has dedicated his life to voluminous books that document uses for Texas' plants.

*By Sheryl Smith-Rodgers*

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Labyrinths provide 'a profound sense of renewal and peace.'

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ON THE COVER

Alison Hannah walks the labyrinth at Unity of Wimberley.

*Photo by Laura Jenkins*

ABOVE

Mountain pink is a great plant for rock gardens.

*Photo courtesy Useful Wild Plants*



## FINISH THIS SENTENCE

Back to school means ...

**TCP** Tell us how you would finish that sentence. Email your short responses to [letters@TexasCoopPower.com](mailto:letters@TexasCoopPower.com) or comment on our Facebook post. Include your co-op and town.

Here are some of the responses to our June prompt: **Thanks, Dad, for ...**

Never judging us and always giving us your unconditional love and attention.

ELVIRA PULIDO  
MAGIC VALLEY EC  
MISSION

Making me get back on the horse.

LYNNE SINGHOFF  
DEEP EAST TEXAS EC  
HEMPHILL

Teaching me to use your tools, believing in me and forgiving me when I messed up.

ROSE HOLLY  
PEDERNALES EC  
GEORGETOWN

Teaching me when I was 14 to back a trailer load full of cattle through the gate.

SHIRLEY HAMPTON  
PEDERNALES EC  
HORSESHOE BAY

Visit our website to see more responses.



## Talkin' Texan

Not sure what took them so long, but the folks behind the official Scrabble dictionary finally added a few words to the book that have been heard in these parts for generations: guac, queso and yeehaw.

These potentially high-scoring words are among about 500 new words in the Official Scrabble Players Dictionary, which gets updated every few years.

# Wreck the Record

**CALL 'EM** the first family of Texas Tech.

With 44 alumni in the fold, the Wuensches set a world record for most members of a family to graduate from the same university.

Francis Wuensche, from the small town of Wilson that's about 20 miles south of Lubbock, started the procession with a degree in zoology in 1953. Three generations later, Andrew Simnacher accepted the family's 44th diploma in December 2021.

And the Wuensches, many of whom are members of electric cooperatives around the state, aren't done. Three more members of the extended family enrolled as freshmen last fall.

## **TCP** Contests and More

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## August 3 National Watermelon Day

Texas ranks fourth in the U.S. in watermelon production, growing 11% of the 3.4 billion pounds harvested annually. Together, Florida, Georgia, California and Texas produce three-fourths of the refreshing fruit.

## In a Whole New Light

“My wife and I just visited the Morse Museum in Florida and its large collection of Tiffany works. We can’t wait to visit the Gelman Stained Glass Museum.”

RICHARD SANTAMARIA  
PEDERNALES EC  
DRIPPING SPRINGS



JOHN FAULK

## Tongue-Tied

My maternal grandparents both immigrated to Texas from Germany and Austria in the decades before World War I [*Auf Wiedersehen*, May 2023]. My mother, born in the early 1920s, was their only child, and her first language was German. Neither my sister nor I were ever taught German.

Much later in life, I oft wondered why we were not given the gift of a second language.

John W. Palm Jr.  
Hamilton County EC  
Lampasas

## Just Dew It

I have dewberries growing all around my house [*Crawling With Trouble*, May 2023]. I fought them for years trying to get rid of them, but you can’t. Then after harvesting some, I made a cobbler and just decided to cultivate them instead.

Sherrie Taylor  
Via Facebook



CHANELLE NIBBELINK

## Westward Bound

*Rise Up West* [April 2023] was hauntingly familiar. An ancestor moved to West around the end of the Civil War from an area that became the Czech Republic. An uncle told me they left the old country because it was involved in a civil war of its own. That they left one country due to civil war only to arrive in the U.S. with its own civil war is ironic.

Ken Konvicka  
United Cooperative Services  
Graford

## Mockingbirds Are Mean

I regret that the mockingbird is our state bird [*Roll Out the Red Carpet*, December 2022]. Whoever put the mockingbird up for this prestigious position obviously knew nothing about the mockingbird.

The mockingbird is very aggressive and mean. On several occasions, I have been fortunate enough to intervene and save the lives of bluebirds and cardinals from mockingbirds.

Roberta McLaughlin  
Heart of Texas EC  
Lorena

**TCP WRITE TO US**  
letters@TexasCoopPower.com

Editor, Texas Co-op Power  
1122 Colorado St., 24th Floor  
Austin, TX 78701

**Please include** your electric co-op and town. Letters may be edited for clarity and length.

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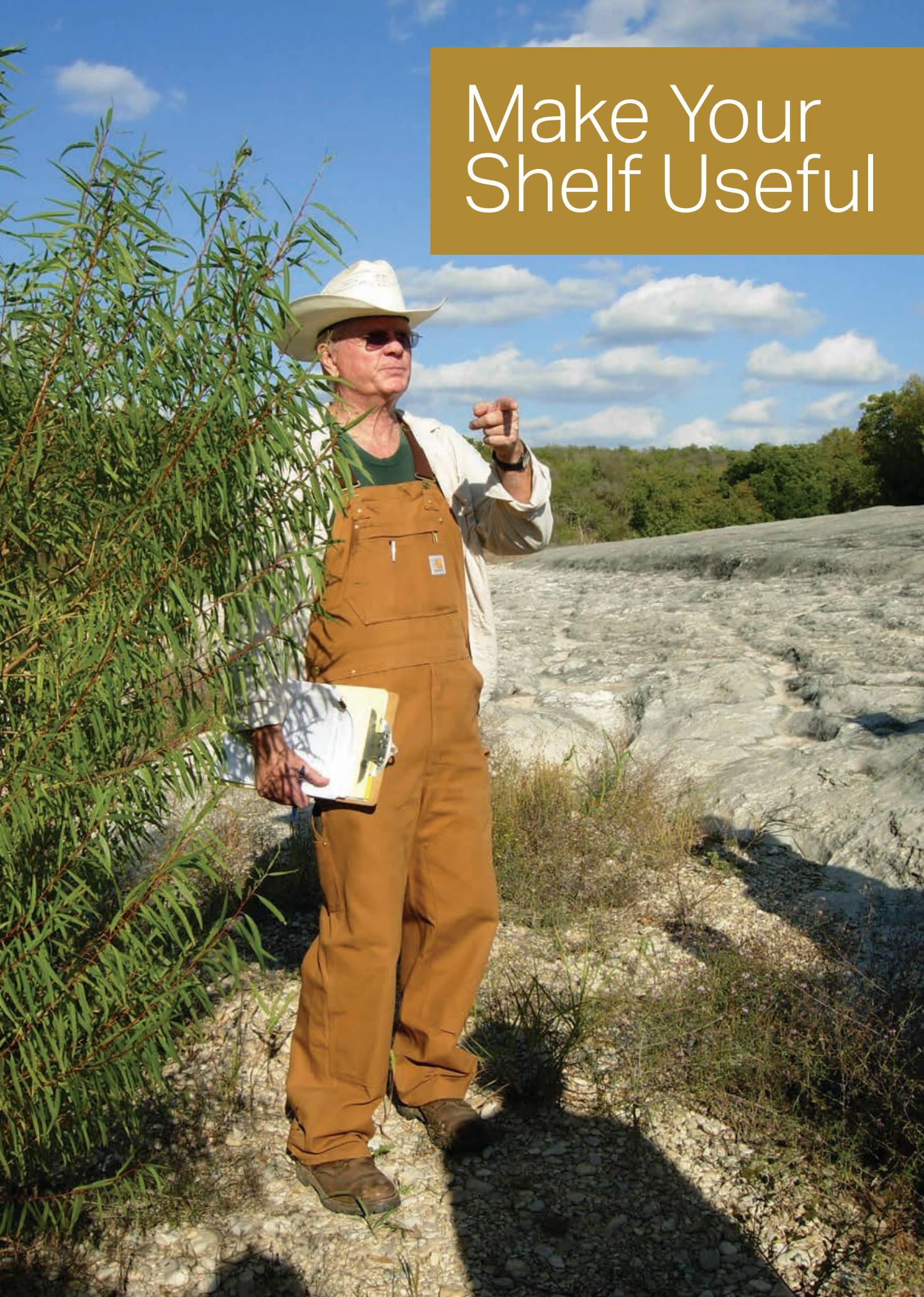
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# Make Your Shelf Useful



BY SHERYL SMITH-RODGERS

## Scooter Cheatham has dedicated his life to voluminous books that document uses for Texas' plants



**Y**EARS AGO Scooter Cheatham asked a classroom of high school sophomores to figure out how plants play a role in everything around them. As an example, he challenged them to connect plants to a pair of scissors. The Austin students, hoping for an easy answer, contacted the manufacturer. “There are no plants in our scissors,” a representative emailed back.

The response forced the teens to do their research. Ultimately “they learned that the manufacturing of steel to make scissors requires coal,” Cheatham says. “The orange plastic handles are derived from petrochemicals. The students also realized that the company representative was as ‘plant blind’ as everyone else about the importance of plants in our lives.”

They matter so much, in fact, that Cheatham has made them his lifelong mission. Plants support our food, health and industry—even contributing to the formation of coal and petrochemicals. For more than 50 years, he and his collaborators have worked to compile the ultimate reference encyclopedia: *The Useful Wild Plants of Texas, the Southeastern and Southwestern United States, the Southern Plains, and Northern Mexico*.

Since 1995, Cheatham’s nonprofit Useful Wild Plants has published four volumes, each counting 600 or more pages and collectively weighing nearly 20 pounds. When completed, the set will include at least 20 volumes and document the economic uses of more than 4,000 plant species, both native and naturalized.

“There’s nothing else like our volumes in the world,” says Cheatham, seated at UWP’s office in East Austin. “They’re the most comprehensive, interdisciplinary treatment of plant species ever done, going back to their prehistoric uses and forward to the most recent chemistry.

“People ask if this is our passion,” adds the self-educated botanist. “I say it’s our obligation to the planet. We’ve got to do this, or we won’t be ready when we run out of oil and gas.

OPPOSITE Scooter Cheatham, 77, has been documenting plants since 1971. THIS PAGE, FROM TOP The sweet, slightly tart berries of an agarita, an evergreen shrub with many medicinal uses, can be made into wine and coffee. A honey-scented agarita in bloom.

COURTESY USEFUL WILD PLANTS



The smallest single plant on our planet has more promise for our future than anything we could study in outer space.”

Whenever his time allows, Cheatham, an architect and community and regional planner by profession, returns to Cuero, where he grew up gardening, milking cows and riding horses. As a boy, he explored and hunted on his grandmother’s nearby ranch along the Guadalupe River, a portion of which he owns today. Back then, he didn’t pay much attention to the live oaks, native grasses and other plants.

That was, until 1971, when he and a pal, both students at the University of Texas, embarked on an “experimental” archaeology project. During spring break, they lived off Cheatham’s family land like Indigenous peoples once did, using tools they’d made themselves. The experience profoundly impacted Cheatham.

“For 10 days, all we ate was a possum and an armadillo,” he recalls. “Out there, we were surrounded by plants. But I knew only a few common ones, like pecans and dewberries. That’s when I realized how much we rely on plants.”

The lightbulb moment inspired a yearning to learn more about the value of flora. Back on campus, Cheatham visited botanist Marshall Johnston, who the year before had co-written and published the 1,881-page *Manual of Vascular Plants of Texas*. Cheatham asked the professor if there was a comprehensive resource on the *usefulness* of plants. “No,” Johnston told the younger man. “You should do it.”

So in 1971, at age 26, Cheatham began what would turn into a monumental, decadeslong undertaking.

Alongside the project, Cheatham, an accomplished artist and photographer, taught architecture and watercolor classes at UT for 10 years. He also led classes that taught students how to forage for wild edibles.

## Plants support our food, health and industry—even contributing to the formation of coal and petrochemicals.

In 1977, a recent UT anthropology graduate named Lynn Marshall signed up for the foraging class and agreed to pay for half her course fees by volunteering with UWP. She never left. Like Cheatham, she has dedicated herself to the endeavor.

At the project’s start, compiling just the species list and project parameters took a year and a half. Then Cheatham and Johnston traveled extensively, photographing plants in various stages of life. Filing cabinets in UWP’s office contain their 350,000 slides. More filing cabinets house thousands of manila folders, each labeled by plant genus and packed with notes, printouts and research.

In 1995, Cheatham; Johnston, who has since retired; and Marshall published their first volume. Subsequent volumes followed in 2000, 2009 and 2015. They may be ordered through the UWP website at [usefulwildplants.org](http://usefulwildplants.org).

The tomes are made to last. “We believe people will need them for several hundred years,” Cheatham says. “So we don’t use cheap paper that would turn yellow in 18 months.”

Altogether, the four volumes published so far document 833 species. Organized alphabetically by genus, Volume 1 begins with *Abronia* (sand verbenas) and ends with *Arundo* (giant cane). Volume 4 covers *Cenchrus* (grassburs) through *Convolvulus* (wild morning glories). Still in progress, Volume 5 will begin with *Conyza* (horseweed).

Each genus section includes species descriptions, range maps and color images. Subheadings enable readers to quickly find specific information, such as “Native American food uses,” “chemical components” and “author dye tests.”



OPPOSITE The drought-hardy damianita boasts aromatic blooms in spring and summer. FROM LEFT Prairie paintbrush blossoms attract hummingbirds and bees. A Texas redbud's young seedpods are edible.



Entries run from less than one page to dozens. For example, *Bowlesia* (Bowles parsley) is a scant page, but *Carex* (sedges)—the largest genus in Texas flora—fills 76 pages.

Most people know about grassburs. When stepped on, their spiny seedheads hurt like the blazes to pull out—hence their reputation as a detestable weed. But surprise: “Some members of the genus *Cenchrus* are highly valued as range grasses that increase the lease value of grazing lands,” according to *The Useful Wild Plants of Texas*. “Native Americans of the Southwest and prehistoric people of Texas used *Cenchrus* for food, therapy and utilitarian purposes.”

With more than a dozen volumes and thousands of entries still to publish, Cheatham hopes to recruit and train more staff.

“Lynn and I are spread extremely thin,” he says. “Right now, we’re in a phase to raise consciousness about the importance of plants and publicize what we’re doing so we can raise the funds necessary to build a team that will finish this project. With a full staff, all the volumes could be completed in seven years.

“People need to know about Useful Wild Plants so they’ll carry it on after we’re gone,” he says. “This project belongs to the world.” ■



## Putting Plants To Use

Gleaned from the pages of  
*The Useful Wild Plants of Texas*:

**Beebrush** A thornless shrub with fragrant flowers. Add its fresh or dried leaves to dishes as a spice that tastes similar to oregano.

**Hackberry** A widespread deciduous tree that grows 50–80 feet tall. Make a toothbrush from a pencil-sized stem. Peel the bark from one end, then chew (or pound with a hammer) to spread out the fibers.

**Inland sea oats** A grass with drooping, oatlike seedheads. Seeds can be toasted and milled into a coarse meal. For best results, use a batter bread recipe that calls for boiling the grains before baking.

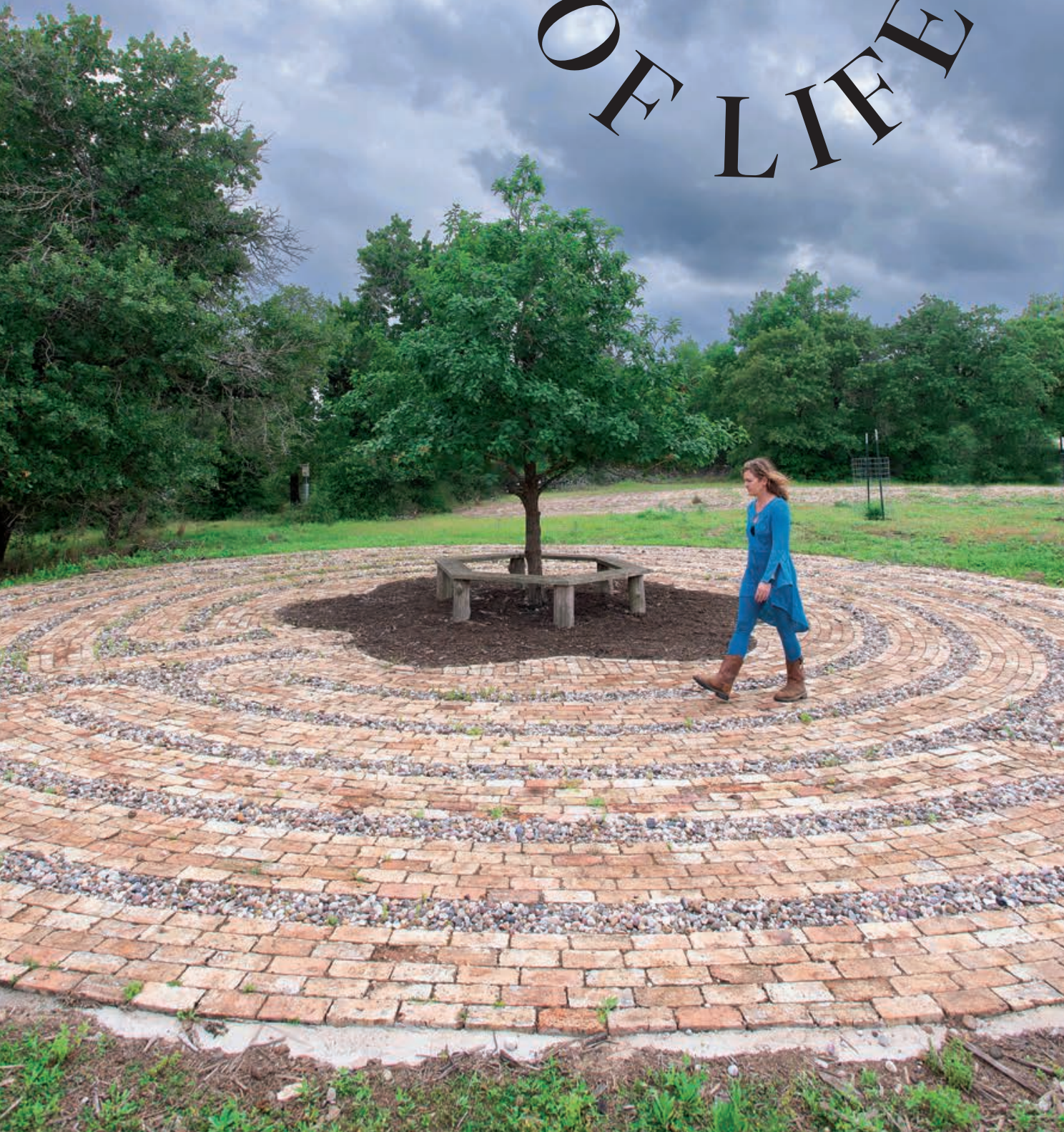
**Ragweed** Flowering plants best known for causing hay fever. A poultice of leaves applied to a poison ivy rash is said to ease the itch.

**Trumpet creeper** A woody vine with reddish-orange flowers. Collect roots to make ropes up to 30 feet long. Peel off the outer layer and boil for two to three hours in lye water, then pound with a wooden mallet to soften. Twist the strands into a half-inch-wide rope.

# CIRCLES

*Labyrinths are providing Texans with 'a profound sense of renewal and peace'*

# OF LIFE



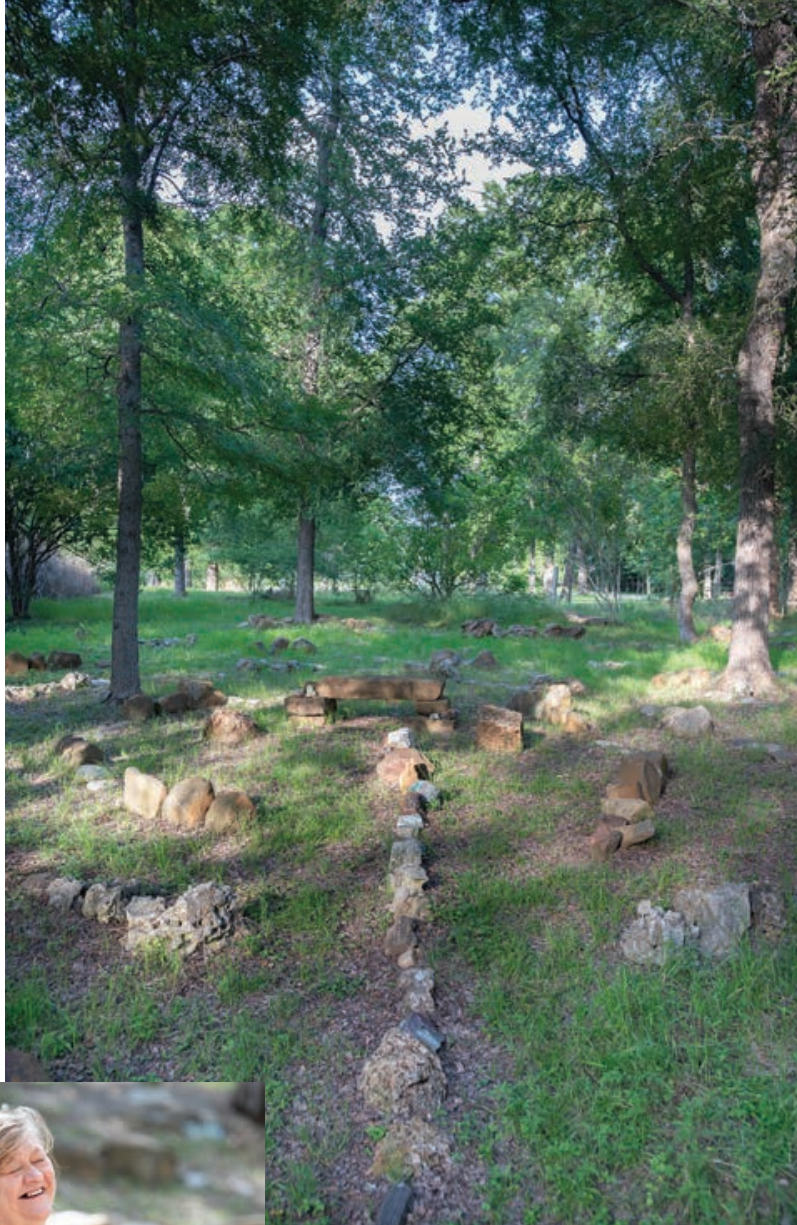
**A**BOUT 20 MINUTES northwest of Bastrop State Park, a labyrinth lies beneath a grove of towering cedar elms. Seven circles of sandstone, Colorado River rock and honeycomb limestone—all native to the area—comprise what’s known as a Cretan, or classical, design at Bastrop Botanical Gardens. A shepherd’s hook, the name of the long, perpendicular row that leads straight to the bench in the center of the labyrinth, is lined with an eclectic array of rocks and stones, gifts that Deena Spellman received for her birthday in 2012.

Each stone has a story. They celebrate friendships, symbolize memories and mark devastating losses. It was loss, in fact, that inspired Spellman to begin constructing the labyrinth she’d been dreaming of building for more than a decade.

“After the Bastrop County Complex Fire destroyed so many of our neighbors’ and customers’ homes in 2011, I wanted to create a space where people could find some peace and maybe a little hope,” says Spellman, the owner of Bastrop Botanical Gardens, a boutique nursery. “Since then, many people who needed a quiet place to heal have walked the labyrinth. The Cretan part gives you time to contemplate what’s on your mind while you’re walking to the center, or source. The shepherd’s hook gives you direct access. Sometimes you just need to get to source.”

Simply put, a labyrinth is a meandering path leading to a center, a geometric framework for walking, meditation and reflection. Many use it as a tool for personal and spiritual transformation. There are more than 4,500 documented labyrinths in the U.S., according to the World-Wide Labyrinth Locator.

OPPOSITE Karen Knight, a certified labyrinth facilitator, walks the labyrinth at her Ardor Wood Farm in Red Rock. ABOVE Deena Spellman created the labyrinth at Bastrop Botanical Gardens so visitors can “find some peace and maybe a little hope.”



At last count, 240 were listed in Texas—most open to the public, though a handful are private.

Many Texas labyrinths are situated at houses of worship or spiritual retreat centers, but they’re not just for religious folks. There’s a labyrinth in the meditation garden at the National Vietnam War Museum in Weatherford. The UTHealth Houston nursing school installed one

for students as a means of reducing stress. You can find labyrinths at parks, schools and retirement centers.

They’re by no means new. The oldest documented labyrinth dates to 1200 B.C. It was found in Pylos, Greece.

Many conflate labyrinths and mazes, but there’s one major difference between the two. Mazes may offer numerous possible routes to the center, some of which are dead ends. But labyrinths feature only one nonbranching route to the center. One way in, and one way out. They’re ancient archetypes—multicultural symbols that have been found on every continent except Antarctica.

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT The Rev. Mike Marsh and Brenda Faulkner, director of programs at Children's Bereavement Center of South Texas. The St. Philip's Episcopal Church labyrinth in Uvalde. Labyrinth guru Robert Ferré.



*“Before we begin, I encourage people to start in a place of gratitude and to keep the three Rs in mind: releasing, receiving and returning,” Karen Knight says.*

Robert Ferré, a retired labyrinth builder and author of the book *The Labyrinth Revival: A Personal Account*, says labyrinths went from being archetypal symbols to walkable structures sometime in the Middle Ages.

“Originally labyrinths were small drawings and illustrations in manuscripts,” says Ferré, who lives in San Antonio and has designed more than 1,100 labyrinths worldwide. “At some point somebody decided to build one large enough that they could walk around in. It became a symbol you could embody.

“I think labyrinths reflect a spiritual need in a society that has wandered into living too shallowly, or on the surface of things,” he says. “They signal our need to go deeper.”

Using a labyrinth as a means of self-reflection is something Karen Knight knows a lot about. She’s a certified labyrinth facilitator and co-owner of Ardor Wood Farm in Red Rock. She became interested in labyrinths in 2011 after visiting Chartres Cathedral in France. Her husband, Graham

Pierce, built a labyrinth in the cathedral’s style at their farm for Knight’s 50th birthday, a gift that their camping and retreat guests often utilize.

Knight also offers “labyrinth magic” experiences, wherein she guides people through the labyrinth using the Veriditas method, which she learned from one of the world’s foremost labyrinth authorities, the Rev. Dr. Lauren Artress.

“Before we begin, I encourage people to start in a place of gratitude and to keep the three Rs in mind: releasing, receiving and returning,” Knight says. “You’re releasing on the way in during your walk. Perhaps there’s a specific thing you’re letting go of, or maybe you’re just releasing the busy chatter in your head. You’re receiving and staying open while you’re in the middle, and as you return you’re taking your experience home.

“I feel like it’s a moving meditation,” she says. “People need a pause. We’re often busy, depleted or distressed, and labyrinths can bring a profound sense of renewal and peace.”



A suspended sculpture by Lewis deSoto creates a labyrinth in shadow on the University of Texas at San Antonio's downtown campus.

to cope with trauma and grief. They've committed to a presence of at least five years in the small town. Brenda Faulkner, the director of programs, moved to Uvalde to take the job—not only because her son, daughter-in-law and two grandsons live there but also because she wanted to help the community heal.

She had used labyrinths as a therapeutic tool for years, so using the one at St. Philip's with some of the children came naturally to her.

"I've found that walking the sacred path, which is what Mike calls their labyrinth, serves a couple of purposes," Faulkner says. "One is that it gets us outdoors. We have a lot of beautiful days in Uvalde. At the beginning of the path I say, 'I'm old, so you're going to have to go slower for me so I can keep up with you.' And as we walk, we talk. It's also great

because it's a very physical thing. As they're moving and we're talking, they're often not even aware that the therapeutic process is going on.

"What's interesting about walking a labyrinth," she says, "is that just about the time you think you're done, you're only a quarter done, which kind of correlates with the grief process."

Marsh has observed the same thing.

"There's a metaphor in the walking," he says. "If you follow the path, you're not going to get lost. You may get disoriented because it looks like you're getting almost to the center and then you're way out on the periphery again. But the discipline is to follow the path. Don't overthink it." ■

**T**HE REV. MIKE MARSH was sold on the benefits of labyrinths long before he became the rector of St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Uvalde in 2005. Nine years later, he and Ferré designed and built one for the church. It was a gift to the community, and now it's a place of respite in the aftermath of the 2022 Robb Elementary School shooting.

"I've seen many individuals and families linger there over the years," Marsh says.

San Antonio-based Children's Bereavement Center of South Texas uses a church building that is adjacent to the labyrinth to serve children in the community struggling

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MESSAGE FROM GENERAL MANAGER

ALAN LESLEY

## Back to School

Electric co-ops continually learn to improve service for members

IT'S A NEW SCHOOL YEAR, and students of all ages are getting ready for a fresh year. Kindergarteners and college students—and all students in between—will crack open books to build their skills, widen their perspectives and gain new knowledge.

In much the same way, CECA is continually learning the best ways to implement technology and processes that improve electric service, reliability and safety and, in turn, enhance the quality of life for the members we serve.

CECA is tapped into energy sector trends in an industry that's rapidly changing. Innovations in technology and fuel types are increasing consumer demands and expectations. People are looking for more ways to manage their energy use with smart technologies, and folks expect more convenient payment methods—whether through automatic bill pay, prepay, online or through a smartphone app.

We're always looking into opportunities to make life easier for our members. At the same time, we never lose sight of our top priority—laid out by our

Advanced metering infrastructure takes this tech one step further. This integrated system of smart meters, communications networks and data management systems enables two-way communication between your cooperative and its members' meters. In the event of an outage, AMI helps to distinguish between events that impact a single home and something more widespread.

This distinction is critical because resolving these issues requires very different processes. Two-way communication is integral to AMI because it provides a means to verify that power has been restored after an outage. However, one of the biggest benefits of improved metering technologies, especially for outages caused by extreme weather, is pinpointing the outage location, which helps to reduce risk for crews out on the road during severe weather.

In addition to providing essential information during major outages, CECA analyzes AMI data for anomalies including faults, damaged meters and energy theft. Detecting these problems early helps

our cooperative save money and improves reliability for the community.

### Energy for the Future

Consumer interest in green energy sources and renewables is at an all-time high. Nationwide, the increasing use of solar and wind energy is paving the way for new methods of generating and using electricity. That's why we continue to research how best to adjust our energy mix for reliability and affordability.

For CECA, our "school year" is never over. We'll continue to learn from our members about their priorities, and we'll continue to study and research the issues so that we can better serve you—now and well into the future. ■



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founders more than 75 years ago: providing safe, reliable and affordable electricity to the communities we serve.

### Technology Improves Efficiency

Automated meter reading automatically collects energy consumption data and transfers it from the electric meter to the co-op. Because this information can be collected remotely, it enhances our system's efficiency, helps control costs and improves work processes.





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## Keep Your Cool: How To Stay Safe in the Texas Heat

**THE DOG DAYS** of summer bring the warmest, muggiest temperatures of the year to Texas. Even if you're a summertime enthusiast, it's important to stay cool during extreme heat.

Factors like obesity, age and alcohol intake can affect how a person reacts to the heat. High humidity also contributes to heat-related illness because we don't sweat as quickly—meaning our bodies can't release heat as fast.

Take extra steps to cool off, keep hydrated and stay informed. **Here are some tips for staying cool during extremely warm weather:**

Stay in an air-conditioned home or building as much as possible. Limit outdoor activity, especially midday, when sunlight is the most direct.

If you must be outdoors, wear loose, light-colored clothing and apply sunscreen often.

Drink more water than usual. Don't wait until you're thirsty to drink more.

Take cold showers or baths to cool down.

Avoid using the oven or stove to cook. These appliances add heat to your home. Try using a microwave or slow cooker instead.

Remember to look after those who may need extra help. People 65 or older are at greater risk of heat-related illness, so check on your neighbors and friends. Children younger than 2 and pets are also more susceptible to heatstroke. Never leave a child or pet in a vehicle, even if only for a minute.

If you work outdoors, use a buddy system to monitor your co-workers—and have someone do the same for you.

Heat-induced illness can happen to anyone, including those who are perfectly healthy. If you're outdoors during extremely warm weather, monitor your body, stay hydrated and keep an eye on those around you. ■



### MARK YOUR CALENDAR

**Book Lovers Day**  
Wednesday,  
August 9

**National 811 Day**  
Friday, August 11

**Labor Day**  
Monday,  
September 4  
Our offices will be closed in observance of the holiday.

**CECA Annual Meeting**  
Saturday,  
October 14



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1. A ground-mount solar panel array installed by CECA.  
2. A roof-mount solar panel array installed by CECA.  
3. A CECA-installed roof-mount meter.

## CECA Now Offers Residential Solar Solutions

**DID YOU KNOW THAT** CECA now installs and sells new solar power arrays? We have trained professionals who can evaluate your electricity use and property to provide the perfect fit for your home or business based on your monthly usage patterns. So we encourage members to include CECA in their solar array installation plans from start to finish.

CECA offers various options, from backup generators and battery systems to roof-mount and ground-mount arrays. Energy efficiency has progressed with new technologies, allowing members to take a more active role in optimizing their energy consumption. We've evolved beyond the days of just turning off the lights or adjusting the thermostat when leaving the house.

If you're interested in optimizing your household's energy consumption, please call Riley Hilliard at 1-800-915-2533 to set up a free energy audit and solar power analysis. Solar power may not be a good fit for everyone, but under the right circumstances, it can save members money on their monthly bills.

There are many companies out there marketing the installation of solar panel arrays in every county CECA serves, and this has created confusion around solar buyback plans and raised concerns about fair pricing in a new and changing industry.

We're here to help our members navigate this confusion, and if they feel solar may be a good option for them, we're able to handle the sale and installation as well.

CECA is proud to be your trusted energy partner, and if you have any interest in a solar power project for your property, that falls right in line with our aim to provide safe and reliable energy at an affordable cost to all our member-owners. For us, solar power is another avenue to continue to do just that for our members.

CECA does require that an application process be completed before interconnection with our system, to ensure proper safety, liability and metering standards are met. Regardless of the solar power vendor you choose, please contact us before you start your project to be sure that your plans are compliant and that your project goes smoothly.

You can always discuss your solar project plans with CECA staff for general information or specific needs. Solar power can be a great energy efficiency tool, and we applaud our members who are working to conserve power. Call us at 1-800-915-2533 to learn more about how we can help. ■



**“CECA has the unique ability to analyze your energy consumption and utilize these new technologies to optimize efficiency for our members.” -Riley Hilliard**



## **We Specialize In**

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- **Roof Mount Arrays**
- **Ground Mount Arrays**

**GET YOUR FREE SOLAR ANALYSIS -  
CONTACT RILEY TODAY**

**(800)-915-2533  
RHilliard@CECA.COOP**



## Explore Expanded Tax Credits for Energy Efficiency

**IF THIS IS** the year you make energy efficiency changes in your life—such as completing certain improvements to your home or purchasing an electric vehicle—you could qualify for tax credits through the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, which was signed into law last August.

The legislation offers funding, programs and incentives to accelerate the transition to a clean energy economy, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Some of the benefits apply to individuals, including tax credits from the IRS for myriad categories of improvements, as long as certain qualifications are met.

**New electric vehicles:** If you purchase an EV or electric fuel cell vehicle between 2023 and 2032, you could qualify for a tax credit up to \$7,500. The amount varies depending on factors such as battery capacity, date put into service and use, and qualifications like buyer income and vehicle specifications.

**New clean vehicles:** If you bought a new EV in 2022 or before, you may be eligible for a tax credit up to \$7,500. Many of the same qualifications apply, plus the vehicles in this category must have been assembled in North America.

**Used clean vehicles:** If you buy a used EV or fuel cell vehicle from a licensed dealer for \$25,000 or less starting in January 2023, you may be eligible for a used clean vehicle tax credit. The credit equals 30% of the sale price up to a maximum credit of \$4,000.

**Home energy:** Tax credits have been available for residential home energy improvements, and the Inflation Reduction

Act of 2022 expanded those options. Variable credits may apply to expenses related to exterior doors, windows, skylights and insulation materials; central air conditioners, water heaters, furnaces, boilers and heat pumps; biomass stoves and boilers; and home energy audits. Residential clean energy credits may apply to solar, wind and geothermal power generation; solar water heaters; fuel cells; and battery storage beginning in 2023.

**Energy-efficient home improvements:** If you make qualified efficiency improvements to your home in 2023, you may qualify for a tax credit up to \$3,200. The credit equals 30% of certain qualified expenses, including improvements installed during the year, residential energy property expenses and home energy audits.

**Residential clean energy:** If you invest in renewable energy for your main home—such as solar, wind, geothermal, fuel cells or battery storage technology—you may qualify for an annual residential clean energy tax credit. The credit equals 30% of the costs of new, qualified clean energy property for your home installed anytime from 2022 through 2033.

For each category, you must file specific forms with your tax return to claim the credit. Visit [irs.gov](https://www.irs.gov) to find the forms and for more information about the specific credits. ■

# Prevent Power Line Problems

**NEARLY EVERYONE KNOWS** not to touch a downed power line, but you might not know that you don't have to touch a power line to be in danger. High-voltage electricity can jump to anyone who gets too close.

Anytime you're working or playing outside, stay at least 10 feet away from power lines and their connections. If you come across a downed line, keep these tips in mind.

If you see a downed power line, move away from it and anything touching it. The ground around fallen power lines—up to 35 feet away in all directions—may be energized.

You cannot tell whether a power line is energized just by looking at it. Assume that all downed lines are live.

The proper way to move away from a fallen power line is to shuffle away with small steps, keeping your feet together and on the ground at all times. This will minimize the potential for a strong electric shock.

If you see someone who's in direct or indirect contact with a downed line, do not touch the person. You could become the next victim. Call 911 for help.

Do not attempt to move a downed power line or anything in contact with it. Even less conductive materials like wood or cloth can conduct electricity if even slightly wet.

Be careful not to touch or step in water near a downed power line.

Do not drive over downed power lines.

If your vehicle comes into contact with a downed power line while you are inside, stay in the vehicle. Honk your horn to summon help, but direct others to stay away. Call 911.

If you must leave your vehicle because it's on fire, jump out of it with both feet together and try not to make contact with the vehicle and the ground at the same time. Then shuffle away from the vehicle. ■



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STEVEN HEAP | ISTOCK.COM

## A Simple Way To Save on AC

**AUGUST IS PEAK** air conditioning season for a lot of us, and that means your energy bills might be higher now than during any other month.

If you do only one thing to try to lower your energy use during the hot months, clean or replace your air filters.

This might just be the easiest and most important thing you can do to keep your air conditioning bills low.

Dirty filters can hinder the air that flows through them, which makes your system work harder than it needs to. Replacing the filter regularly can also reduce wear and tear on your AC system, extending its life. As air filters become older and deteriorate, they can release fibers and debris directly into the moving parts of your system, which can lead to mechanical breakdowns. A clean filter also screens out pollutants, particulates and dust to improve the quality of indoor air.

Replacing a dirty filter with a clean one could lower the amount of energy your AC uses by up to 15%. ■

# Charming the Alamo

179 years after the battle, help finally arrives—with four legs, fur and friendliness

BY LORI GROSSMAN • ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHANIE DALTON COWAN

**HER FULL NAME** is Miss Isabella Francisca Vera-mendi de Valero, but visitors to the Alamo just call her Bella. She's the Texas shrine's official meeter/greeter and is quite the local celebrity with her own Twitter and Instagram accounts, plus her own Fiesta San Antonio medal.

Want to meet her? Go to the Alamo and look for a large calico cat. *That's* Bella.

The Alamo feline's story begins in Goliad on the grounds of Presidio La Bahía, the Spanish fort about 90 miles southeast of San Antonio. Josephine McMahon, the young daughter of Presidio director Scott McMahon, found a kitten there in early 2015.

"Bella was found in the middle room of the museum," recalls Josephine's mom, Monica McMahon. "I posted on Facebook asking if anyone wanted to adopt her. Sherri Driscoll from the [Daughters of the Republic of Texas] library contacted me. She said they were interested because their previous cat had recently passed away."

The previous Alamo cat was Clara Carmack—aka Miss C.C. She was named in honor of Alamo preservationist Clara Driscoll and Alamo committee Chair Mary Carmack, and Miss C.C. reigned (roamed?) from 1996 to 2014. Her predecessor, Ruby LeGato, was the first official Alamo cat in the 1980s. She was immortalized in a children's book, *The Alamo Cat*, by San Antonio author Rita Kerr.

Ruby and Miss C.C. had captured the hearts of Alamo staff and visitors. Bella had big paw prints to fill. But the McMahons had brought her to the Alamo on an auspicious day.

"March 6, 2015—that day was the 179th anniversary of the fall of the Alamo," says Ernesto Rodriguez, the Alamo's senior curator and historian (and Bella's caretaker). "It was one of those interesting coincidences because she was the only 'aid' to come to the Alamo—but many, many years later."

The Texas General Land Office is the Alamo's custodian. It gave permission for Bella to stay if Alamo staff would provide for her. She succeeded Miss C.C. as the Alamo cat and moved—with her food bowl, water dish and litter box—into Rodriguez's office.

Bella quickly adapted to her new home. "She's been around crowds since she was 6 weeks old," Rodriguez says. "At first, she was part indoors and part outdoors. We'd bring her in for the night.

Right now, she's indoors because of ongoing construction here."

Rodriguez laughingly calls Bella a "cat-dog" because she's so good with young children and because she occasionally goes for walks on a harness. Yes—a harness. "When we first got her, we took her out on a harness so she could get accustomed to the property," he says. "She's used to wearing it because she has since she was a kitten."

With construction temporarily curtailing her movements, what's a typical day like for the Alamo cat? She eats. She checks on other Alamo staffers. She takes a nap. She plays with her toys then takes another nap. Rodriguez reports that she likes to sit in on meetings, too. "She likes to be involved with meetings and phone calls," he says. "When I'm in a meeting, she'll sit and stare at me. Sometimes, she'll climb up on the table and stay until she gets bored."

Bella loves people, and they love her. Like Ruby and Miss C.C., she has become well-known in San Antonio, so her fan base worried when she had a health scare in 2021.

"She was overheated and either jumped or fell into a dumpster one day," Rodriguez says. "Her vet suggested that we take her to the emergency vet. They kept her for several days. She was mostly dehydrated and had to take antibiotics."

Her Alamo friends set up a GoFundMe campaign to pay her vet bills. Her adoring public came through and paid her bills in full, raising more than \$3,500.

It's no surprise that Bella merchandise is popular. And every April during the Alamo City's 10-day Fiesta celebration, when collecting and trading medals is part of the fun, Bella's medal sells out. The proceeds go toward her medical care and other expenses.

The Alamo kitty probably misses greeting visitors as much as they miss seeing her. But she's around, caring for the caretakers of this state treasure when she's not posting on social media. ■



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**2023 American Silver Eagle:** The Silver Eagle is the most popular coin in the world, with its iconic Adolph Weinman Walking Liberty obverse backed by Emily Damstra's Eagle Landing reverse. Struck in 99.9% fine silver at the U.S. Mint.

**2023 Canada Maple Leaf:** A highly sought-after bullion coin since 1988, this 2023 issue includes the **FIRST** and likely only use of a transitional portrait, of the late Queen Elizabeth II. These are also expected to be the **LAST** Maple Leafs to bear Her Majesty's effigy. Struck in high-purity 99.99% fine silver at the Royal Canadian Mint.

**2023 South African Krugerrand:** The Krugerrand continues to be the best-known, most respected numismatic coin brand in the world. 2023 is the Silver Krugerrand's 6th year of issue. Struck in 99.9% fine silver at the South African Mint.

**2023 China Silver Panda:** 2023 is the 40th anniversary of the first silver Panda coin, issued in 1983. China Pandas are noted for their heart-warming one-year-only designs. Struck in 99.9% fine silver at the China Mint.

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**2023 British Silver Britannia:** One of the Royal Mint's flagship coins, this 2023 issue is the **FIRST** in the Silver Britannia series to carry the portrait of King Charles III, following the passing of Queen Elizabeth II. Struck in 99.9% fine silver.



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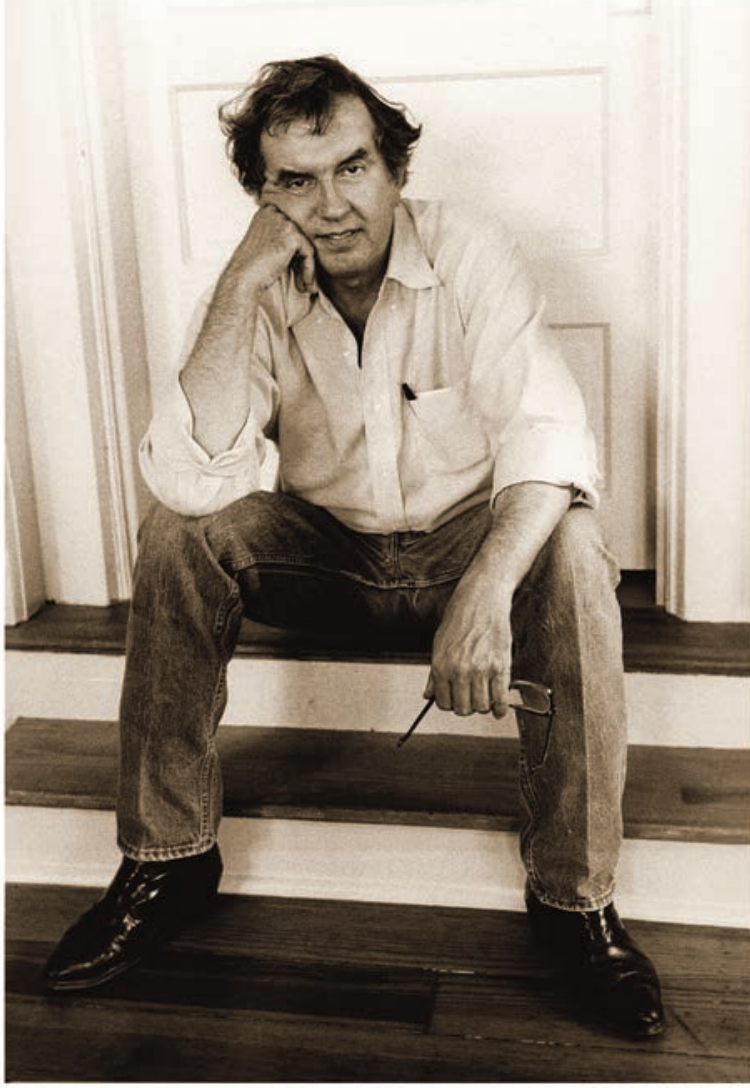
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# A Page of the Past

Traces of real-life Texans ride through McMurtry's 'Lonesome Dove'

BY W.F. STRONG

**MILLIONS OF COPIES** of Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove* have sold since the novel was published in 1985. The miniseries that followed in 1989 was likewise immensely popular. McMurtry himself called it the *Gone With the Wind* of the West, but he never loved the book as much as his fans. "You know most writers come to dislike their most popular books," he once told journalist John Spong. "Henry James hated *Daisy Miller*, which is what he is known by. He's probably written 35 other books. I feel a little that way about *Lonesome Dove*."

McMurtry said he never saw the miniseries. Maybe if he had, he would have better understood how endearingly Robert Duvall, Tommy Lee Jones and

Diane Lane brought their characters to life. I can't help but wonder if those characters were modeled after real-life Texans.

But McMurtry said that that wasn't his aim. Though Woodrow Call has some attributes of Charles Goodnight, and Gus McCrae has some attributes of Oliver Loving, the novel's main characters were not modeled after actual historical figures. McMurtry said the book is not meant to be a faithful history of the era but rather one that has echoes of those times.

In fact, he sought to authentically demythologize the life of the cowboy and show how brutally difficult their lives were. "The whole book is permeated with criticism of the Old West from start to finish," he said.

**TCP** Listen as W.F. Strong narrates this story on our website.



Nonetheless, McMurtry acknowledged that somehow Call and McCrae became celebrated heroes. He said a lot of people "were nostalgic for the culture of the Old West, though it was a terrible culture."

Bits of history did however make it into the book.

One event in the actual lives of Goodnight and Loving that's enlarged within the book is Loving's death. Goodnight returned his body from Fort Sumner, New Mexico, to Weatherford. In the novel, Call takes McCrae's body all the way from Montana to Texas, a much longer journey with far more drama.

Antagonist Blue Duck was a real Native American chief, but McMurtry said that was coincidental. He chose the name without realizing that, and that's where the similarity stops. But the character's death is without question similar to that of the Kiowa Chief Satanta, who killed himself while imprisoned.

The character Joshua Deets was inspired by Bose Ickard, a longtime friend of Goodnight. When Ickard died, Goodnight carved a fervent epitaph for him. McMurtry used quite similar words—and some of the exact ones—when Call carves an epitaph for Deets.

As we read on, we do encounter genuine historical figures, though their biographies are massaged—people like Judge Roy Bean, John Wesley Hardin and the ubiquitous Goodnight, who's never very chatty and always on the move.

Near the end of the book, a reporter exclaims to Call that people are saying he's a man of vision. He responds, "Yes, a hell of a vision." The real Goodnight actually said this line in a similar circumstance, referring to all the tough times and horror he had seen as a Texas Ranger and frontier rancher. ■

# Sheet Pan Meals

All-in-one dishes make serving and cleanup a snap

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ, FOOD EDITOR

If you're looking for the perfect less-mess sheet pan meal, try this flavorful and balanced steak dinner. This recipe, adapted from our friends at Beef Loving Texans, is so easy you'll want to make it all summer.

## Cumin-Dusted Steak Sheet Pan Dinner

**1¼ teaspoons ground cumin, divided use**  
**1¼ teaspoons salt, divided use**  
**¼ teaspoon ground black pepper**  
**1¼ pounds well-trimmed boneless top sirloin or flat iron steak (cut 1-inch thick)**  
**1 pound unpeeled sweet potatoes, cut into 1-inch cubes or wedges (about 3 cups)**  
**2 tablespoons olive oil, divided use**  
**¼ teaspoon chili powder**  
**1 bag trimmed fresh green beans (12 ounces)**  
**1 teaspoon garlic powder**

1. Preheat oven to 450 degrees.
2. Combine 1 teaspoon cumin,  $\frac{3}{4}$  teaspoon salt and pepper in a small bowl. Apply the spice rub to both sides of the steak. Set aside.
3. In a large bowl, toss sweet potato cubes with  $\frac{1}{2}$  tablespoons olive oil, remaining  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon cumin,  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon salt and chili powder. Spread potatoes across a baking sheet lined with foil or parchment. Bake 15 minutes. Turn potatoes and move them to one side of the baking sheet.
4. Increase oven temperature to high broiler setting. Toss green beans with remaining  $\frac{1}{2}$  tablespoon olive oil, remaining  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon salt and garlic powder. Place green beans next to potatoes on the baking sheet. Place steak on an uncoated wire rack on top of the sheet pan, positioning the steak so that it's over the green beans.
5. Broil steak on lower rack of oven for about 7 minutes. Turn steak and broil an additional 4–5 minutes for medium-rare to medium doneness (145–160 degrees). Remove steak from wire rack and let it sit for about 3 minutes before slicing and serving. Toss green beans with pan juices.

**SERVES 5**

Reprinted with permission from Beef Loving Texans.

**TCP** Follow along with Vianney Rodriguez while she cooks in Cocina Gris at [sweetlifebake.com](http://sweetlifebake.com), where she features a recipe for Spicy Sheet Pan Hash Browns.





## No-Mess Shrimp Boil

HELENA WALLACE  
BRYAN TEXAS UTILITIES

If you've been craving a shrimp boil without all the hassle, we've got you covered with this delicious no-mess preparation.

- 2 pounds whole, unpeeled small Yukon potatoes**
- 6 ears fresh corn, cut into 2–3 sections**
- 1 large onion, peeled and quartered**
- 2 pounds shrimp, peeled and deveined**
- 2 packages smoked andouille sausage (12 ounces each), sliced**
- ½ cup (1 stick) unsalted butter**
- 2 cloves garlic, minced**
- 2 tablespoons Old Bay seasoning**
- 4 tablespoons Italian seasoning**
- 2 lemons, cut into wedges**

1. Preheat oven 400 degrees. Lightly oil 2 baking sheets.
2. Add potatoes to a large pot of boiling, salted water and cook 10 minutes or until tender. Add corn and onion in the last 5 minutes of the potatoes boiling. Drain.
3. Spread potatoes, corn and onion onto baking sheets. Add the shrimp and sliced sausage.
4. In a small saucepan over low heat, combine the butter, garlic and Old Bay seasoning and heat until melted. Remove from heat and stir in Italian seasoning.
5. Pour butter mixture over prepared baking sheets, turning to coat all ingredients.
6. Bake 12–15 minutes or until shrimp is fully cooked. Serve with lemon wedges.

SERVES 6–8

[MORE RECIPES >](#)



\$500 WINNER

## Aunt Glo's Brandied Peach Chicken

BARBARA LOYD  
UNITED COOPERATIVE  
SERVICES



A tasty tribute to Loyd's Aunt Glo, this dish takes baked chicken to the next level.

SERVES 8

- ½ cup peach nectar**
- ½ cup brandy**
- ¼ cup olive oil**
- 2 medium shallots, minced**
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar**
- 1 teaspoon salt**
- ¼ teaspoon ground black pepper**
- 4 pounds chicken breasts, skin on**
- 1 jar peach preserves (12 ounces)**
- 4 plums, sliced**
- 1 cup halved seedless green grapes**

1. In a large bowl, combine nectar, brandy, olive oil, shallots, brown sugar, salt and pepper.
2. Place chicken in mixture and turn to coat. Cover and refrigerate for several hours or overnight. Reserve marinade.
3. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Place chicken in a roasting pan, skin side down. Bake 15 minutes.
4. Turn chicken, baste with reserved marinade and bake 30–40 minutes more or until chicken is cooked through.
5. While the chicken bakes, heat the preserves in a saucepan and bring to a boil. Add sliced plums and grapes and simmer until softened. Serve warm chicken topped with the fruit sauce.

## TCP \$500 Recipe Contest

TEXAS CITRUS DUE AUGUST 10

How do you incorporate our state's wonderful grapefruit, oranges, lemons and limes in your recipes? Submit your best online by August 10 for a chance to win \$500.





## Apple Sheet Pan Pancakes

CAROLYN BESSELMAN  
PEDERNALES EC

If you're looking to feed a crowd at brunch, these sheet pan pancakes are the ultimate treat. Apples, pecans, applesauce and brown sugar create a sinfully sweet topping.

- 2 apples, cored and diced
- 1 cup chopped pecans
- ½ cup dark brown sugar
- ¼ cup applesauce
- 1 tablespoon ground cinnamon
- 2 eggs
- 2½ cups buttermilk
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2½ cups flour
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 tablespoon melted unsalted butter

1. Preheat oven to 425 degrees.
2. In a bowl, combine apples, pecans, brown sugar, applesauce and cinnamon and stir to mix. Set aside.
3. In another bowl, whisk together eggs, buttermilk and vanilla. In a large third bowl, whisk together flour, baking powder, sugar and baking soda.
4. Pour the egg mixture into the dry ingredients and stir gently until just combined. Do not overmix.

5. Brush the bottom and sides of a 13-by-18-inch rimmed baking sheet with butter.
6. Add the batter to the baking sheet, smoothing it evenly with the back of a spoon.
7. Dollop apple mixture by spoonfuls evenly over the batter. With a spoon, gently swirl the mixture into batter.
8. Bake 20–22 minutes, until golden brown and the top springs back when touched.
9. Remove from oven and serve with butter and syrup.

SERVES 10–14

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COURTESY CHET GARNER

## Extracurricular Activities

A small-town schoolhouse is now a community-focused brewhouse

BY CHET GARNER

FOR MOST PEOPLE—including me—the idea of going back to school sends shivers down their spine. But what if the curriculum consisted of craft beer, live music and scratch-made food? That sort of school would have a wait-list the length of the Rio Grande. Lucky for all of us, this sort of continuing education actually exists near San Angelo at Farm Ale Brewing Co., inside an old schoolhouse in Eola. Class is in session!

Eola is a rural community surrounded by cotton fields as far as the eye can see. Its downtown consists of a few blocks, three churches and a single school building that for decades housed every grade in the public system—kindergarten through 12th. The school closed in the 1980s and sat vacant until 2006, when a group of thirsty Texans decided to turn it into a craft brewery. After all, turning grains into beer is a very scientific process.

I stepped inside and was immediately hit with a wave of nostalgia that was even stronger than the smell of fermenting grains. The bones of the old school are still intact. The classrooms are now dining rooms with chalkboards and flags. The wood-floored gymnasium is now full of family-friendly games, and the auditorium houses the entire production process, from brewing to canning. Farm Ale Brewing Co. brews its beer with as many local ingredients as possible and even gives a percentage of profits back to local farmers.

The biggest upgrade came to the school cafeteria, which now serves up incredible pizza, smash burgers and rotating specials such as meat-loaf. Just like in my school days, I polished off my plate in record time and then headed to the schoolyard for recess—with the added bonus of live music. ■

ABOVE Chet does his homework at Farm Ale Brewing Co. in Eola, outside San Angelo.

**TCP** Raise your hand if you want to see a video of Chet's visit to Farm Ale on our website. And see all his Texplorations on *The Daytripper* on PBS.



## Know Before You Go

Call ahead or check an event's website for scheduling details, and check our website for many more upcoming events.

## AUGUST

11

**Alpine [11–12] Big Bend Ranch Rodeo,** (432) 837-2326, bigbendranchrodeo.com

**Junction [11–12] Rodeo & Dance,** (254) 212-9160, junctiontexas.com

12

**Chappell Hill Wine and Cheese Stroll,** (979) 337-9910, chappellhilltx.com

**Denton North Texas Book Festival,** ntbf.org

**Grand Prairie Hatch Chile Fest,** (972) 237-8084, grandfungp.com

**Vanderpool Maples and Meteors Night Sky Fest,** (830) 966-3413, tpwd.texas.gov

16

**Brady [16–19] Heart of Texas Honky Tonk Fest,** (325) 597-1895, heartoftexascountry.com

17

**Corsicana Jimmy Fortune: God and Country,** (903) 874-7792, corsicanapalace.com

**Johnson City [17–19] Blanco County Fair and Rodeo,** bcfra.org

18

**Palestine Wine in the Pines,** 1-855-632-7729, texasstaterailroad.net

**Bastrop [18–20, 25–26, Sept. 1–3] Steel Magnolias,** (512) 200-3826, bastropoperahouse.org

19

**Bowie Outdoor Expo,**  
(940) 872-6246,  
959theranch.com

**Chappell Hill Farmers Market,** (832) 720-5685,  
chappellhillrv.com

**Castroville [19-20] St. Louis Day Celebration,**  
(830) 931-2826,  
saintlouisday.com

24

**Fredericksburg [24-27] Gillespie County Fair,**  
(830) 997-2359,  
gillespiefair.com

26

**Crosby Kids Kicking Cancer,** (281) 785-4098,  
addisfaithfoundation.org

**Kerrville River Roadster Show,** (830) 257-7300,  
kerrvillex.gov

**Lakeway [26-27] Cool Arts Show and Studio Tour,**  
(512) 261-1010,  
lakewayartsdistrict.com

27

**Stonewall LBJ's 115th Birthday,** (830) 644-2252,  
tpwd.texas.gov

## SEPTEMBER

01

**Bandera [1-3] Western Heritage Music Festival,**  
(830) 796-4849,  
banderacowboycapital.com

02

**Brenham Seth James,**  
(979) 337-7240,  
thebarnhillcenter.com

**Kerrville Kerr County Market Days and Hill Country Swap Meet,** (830) 459-6198,  
kerrmarketdays.org

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We pick events for the magazine directly from TexasCoopPower.com. Submit your November event by September 1, and it just might be featured in this calendar.



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# Hoof and Horn

What a barnburner! This month readers answered the cattle call, and these prizewinning beasts moo-ved into first place. Now that the dust has settled, don't be baa-shful. Let's see who's best in show and who's just horsing around.

CURATED BY GRACE FULTZ

**1** JEFFREY BENSON  
PEDERNALES EC

"The big boy from Study Butte down by Big Bend."

**2** NICK GROSSMAN  
PEDERNALES EC

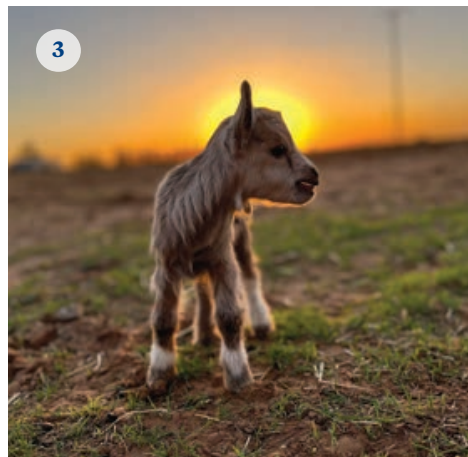
"Two wranglers heel and toe a calf in the arena."

**3** CRYSTAL VALDEZ  
LYNTEGAR EC

"Muffin was born smaller than her two brothers, but she held on to fight against all odds."

**4** MARIA CASTILLO  
COSERV

"This beauty was captured roaming the fields at my daughter's wedding venue in Terrell."



## Upcoming Contests

- DUE AUG 10** Mailboxes
- DUE SEP 10** Local Landmarks
- DUE OCT 10** Vibrant Color



Enter online at [TexasCoopPower.com/contests](https://TexasCoopPower.com/contests).

**TCP** See Focus on Texas on our website for more Hoof and Horn photos from readers.



## Off the Hook?

The perfect tool, unused but ready, awaits the arrival of snakes

BY PATTY MOYNAHAN  
ILLUSTRATION BY  
TAYLOR CALLERY

MANY A NATIVE TEXAN, beholding an expanse of ranchland, will sooner or later think: snakes. A few years ago, my husband and I bought a house in southwest Austin. Our backyard abuts a cattle ranch, and the two properties are demarcated by a wrought iron fence. The fence is by no means a shield. Its spires—a hand’s width apart—offer space enough for critters to wriggle or slither through.

Before moving into the house, we’d heard about sightings in the area: rat snakes, ribbon snakes and garter snakes. Also rattlers, coral snakes and copperheads. I wasn’t entirely sanguine about these reports. But I wasn’t terrified either. When I was growing up in Bryan, my family often visited friends on a nearby ranch, where I’d learned to identify and avoid venomous snakes.

Soon after settling into our new house, a tall, narrow box arrived on our doorstep, a birthday present from my husband. As I unwrapped the gift, I saw a rubber grip and metal shaft and thought, ungratefully, that my husband had bought me a golf club. But it proved to be a tool far more useful to me than a 2-iron: a snake hook—a 43-inch stainless steel beauty, elegant in its simplicity.

The term “snake hook” can be misleading. No flesh is pierced. You ease the U-shaped hook under a snake and lift it. The snake dangles at the shaft’s end, out of striking distance, while you figure out what to do next.

For a sublime moment, as I regarded the gift, I was as excited as *A Christmas Story*’s Ralphie with his BB gun. I imagined myself deftly hoisting a 2-pound rattler and ... and what? Flinging it over the fence? Passing it between the spires and dropping it onto the ranchland? The affronted snake could be back in my yard before I was in the house. The phrase “fool’s errand” came to mind.

Alas, in four years, we’ve seen only one snake: a baby rattler, mortally wounded, perhaps dropped from a hawk’s talons.

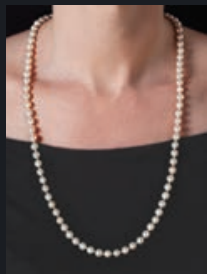
The snakes are out there, I am certain, but they’ve not been in evidence—so far.

My snake hook stands at the ready, on the back porch. I feel both relief and disappointment that I’ve not had to employ it for snake removal.

But we’ve discovered its myriad other uses. Before trimming bottom branches of lantana plants, I wave the hook under the plants to flush out any creatures. My husband uses the hook’s pointy tip to pulverize abandoned mud dauber nests. And a snake hook is the perfect tool for retrieving a grandchild’s stray crayons, puzzle pieces and grapes from beneath the living room sofa. ■

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