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FOR ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE MEMBERS

APRIL 2026



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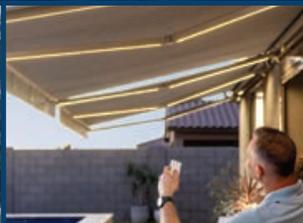
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# April 2026



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### Growing Tradition

Rio Grande Valley volunteers gather each fall to replant a thorn forest, seedling by seedling.

*By Eileen Mattei  
Photos by Larry Ditto*

## 06 Fast and Curious

Nineteen species of hummingbird call Texas home, and these West Texans can help you see many of them.

*By Sheryl Smith-Rodgers*

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#### ON THE COVER

A male ruby-throated hummingbird fuels up on a zinnia bloom.

*Photo by Laurie Lawler*

#### ABOVE

Reforestation volunteers gather at sunrise on a patch of federal land near the Rio Grande.

*Photo by Larry Ditto*



Lori and Gregg Belcher

“To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow.”  
—AUDREY HEPBURN

## FINISH THIS SENTENCE

If I could use only one electronic device, it would be ...

**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 February prompt: **The perfect Valentine's gift is ...**

The love shown by Cicero to Olla [*What Love Looks Like*, February 2026].

MARILYN WERKHEISER  
BLUEBONNET EC  
BASTROP

Giving from the heart and expecting nothing in return.

JIM DUNGAN  
VIA FACEBOOK

To be thought of as special by someone.

KAT CROSS  
HOUSTON COUNTY EC  
CROCKETT

Spending time with the ones you love.

ANITA BURT  
BIG COUNTRY EC  
SNYDER

Having popcorn and Diet Dr Pepper with my husband of 68 years.

SANDRA LEA  
BARTLETT EC  
MILANO

Visit our website to see more responses.

# Mutual Appreciation

**ELECTRIC COOPERATIVES TAKE** time every April to recognize the heroes of the power lines on National Lineworker Appreciation Day—April 13 this year.

For one Central Texas lineworker, appreciation came last summer. Gregg Belcher lay in a Dallas hospital after an electrical injury in June 2025. The foreman at Hamilton County Electric Cooperative had suffered horrific burns on his back and chest and lost his left arm.

Co-workers and friends in Hico and Hamilton and at neighboring co-ops rallied to help with expenses, collecting \$93,000 at a benefit event in August and through other donations.

“We were just blown away by the love that people have shown us,” said Lori Belcher, his wife.

**TCP** Visit our website to read about Gregg Belcher's recovery.

## **TCP** Contests and More

**\$500 RECIPE CONTEST**  
Pancakes and Waffles

**FOCUS ON TEXAS PHOTOS**  
Underwater Life

**RECOMMENDED READING**  
This month's Pancakes and Waffles contest reminds us of *Breakfast in Texas*, our May 2015 feature story. Find it on our website.



ENTER ONLINE



FEBRUARY 2026

“Loved the pics of animals at the rehab center, especially the cross-eyed opossum [Giving a Hoot]. And the artwork by Pete Lloyd was beautiful [What Love Looks Like].”

SANDY KEOGH  
PEDERNALES EC  
CANYON LAKE



TIFFANY HOFELDT

### Noble Deeds

Big thanks to Martha Deeringer and Tiffany Hofeldt for the informative and interesting article on wildlife rehabbers: such noble and generous volunteers [Giving a Hoot, February 2026].

Lee Turner  
MidSouth EC  
Montgomery

### Setting the Record Straight

President Franklin D. Roosevelt did not sign an executive order integrating the armed forces [Currents, February 2026]. While he signed Executive Order 8802 in 1941 to prohibit racial discrimination in the defense industry, he upheld segregation within the military.

The desegregation of the armed forces was achieved later, by President Harry S. Truman via Executive Order 9981 on July 26, 1948.

Don F. Davison  
Central Texas EC  
Fredericksburg



PETE LLOYD

### Floored by Willie

In 1974 I was a young lieutenant in San Antonio. A friend suggested that we go out to John T. Floore's Country Store because a guy named Willie Nelson was playing [Honky-Tonk Heaven, February 2026].

For three hours Willie and his band never left the stage. When the band would take a short break, they would just pass a bottle of whiskey around. I've been a Willie fan for over 50 years.

Joe Kreimborg  
CoServ  
Highland Village

### Road Trip

My old high school boyfriend lived in an old Army house on Fort McIntosh back in the 1960s, and I also took a couple of classes at Laredo Junior College one summer [From Posts to Pillars, February 2026].

An interesting trip would be to visit each of those old Rio Grande forts.

Sheri Sweet  
Bluebonnet EC and Central Texas EC  
Lexington and Fredericksburg

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

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1122 Colorado St., 24th Floor  
Austin, TX 78701

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

 Texas Co-op Power

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# *FAST and CURIOUS*



HUMMINGBIRDS THIS SPREAD: LAURIE LAWLER

ABOVE An interaction between ruby-throated hummingbirds.

LEFT A male Allen's hummingbird at rest.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP A male ruby-throated hummingbird. Since the 1990s, Dan and Cathy Brown have been guardians of a thriving hummingbird habitat near Christoval in West Texas.

## Nineteen species of hummingbird call Texas home, and these West Texans can help you see many of them

BY SHERYL SMITH-RODGERS

**T**housands of black-chinned hummingbirds nest during the summer among the live oak and pecan trees on Dan Brown's family ranch near Christoval in West Texas. And for nearly six decades, Brown has helped feed the tiny birds. Well into his 90s, his hearing has dulled but not his eyesight nor his energy.

One afternoon last June, Dan and his wife, Cathy, take a break from chores and relax in folding chairs in their observation room, an air-conditioned spot for watching the birds zip around sugar water feeders hung beneath roof eaves.

Beyond the room's huge plate-glass windows, a wild bird community is on full display. A painted bunting ruffles his wet feathers on a tiered water feature surrounded by flowering native plants. Black-crested titmice and northern cardinals snatch sunflower seeds and white millet from ball-shaped feeders. From an iron skillet nailed to a live oak, a golden-fronted woodpecker swoops in for a mouthful of suet, then flies off to feed his nestlings.

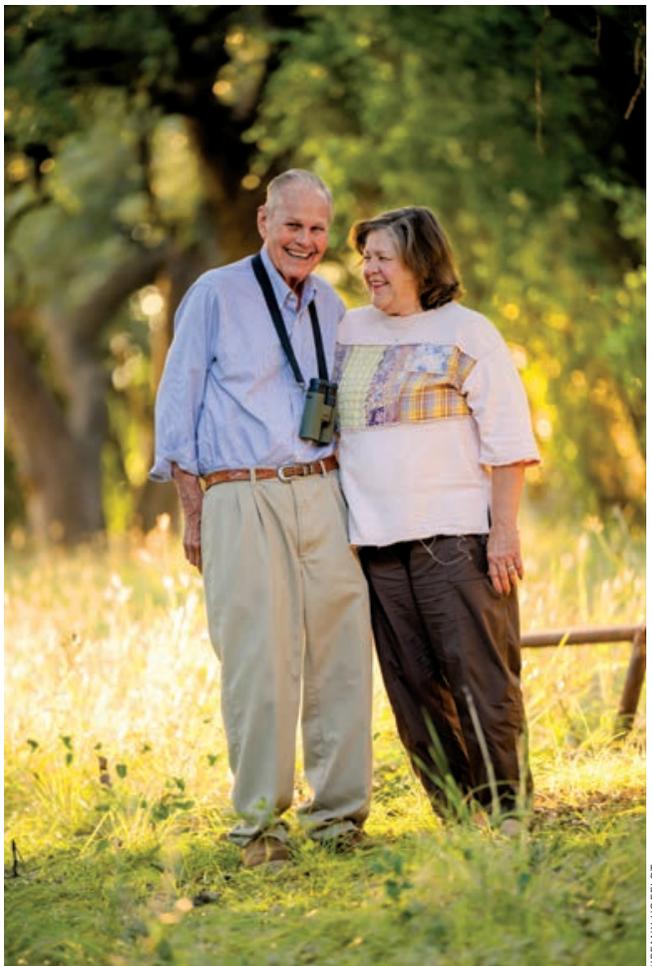
"This has become more than a hobby," muses Dan, focusing his blue eyes on the various birds. "Here it's developed into an enterprise. I couldn't do it without Cathy."

The couple call their business the Hummer House, a wooded wildlife habitat just east of the South Concho River that includes three rentable guest cottages. Since 1996, visitors from across the country and around the world have come to witness the aerial antics.

Altogether, the Browns put out 25 gigantic feeders that each hold 48 or 80 ounces of sugar water. Since one 48-ounce feeder lasts only 24 hours, keeping them filled is a daily job.

Production of the hummingbird fuel starts in a storage room, where Dan measures and pours sugar into 1-gallon plastic jugs, then sets them on shelves. As needed, the jugs are carried via golf cart to the observation room. At a sink, Cathy fills the jugs with water and shakes them well. Then she scours empty feeders with a long-handled brush and refills them with fresh sugar water.

In the 1990s, Dan bought sugar in annual amounts that ranged from 390 to 685 pounds. "Now we average about 1,500 pounds of pure cane sugar each year," Cathy says.



TIFFANY HOFELDT



HUMMINGBIRDS: LAURIE LAWLER

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT A male Anna's hummingbird, with its iridescent pink-red throat; male rufous hummingbird; and male broad-billed hummingbird, with its black-tipped, long red bill.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP A female ruby-throated hummingbird feeds at a red salvia plant. The Browns found this hummingbird nest, built from plant fibers, lichen and spider silk, on their property.

"We're a very large nesting site for black-chinned hummingbirds. Within a quarter-mile radius, we estimate that there are probably about 3,000 hummingbirds."

But they're not just here for the sugar water. "Hummingbirds are insectivores," Cathy explains. "We have thousands of native pecan trees that have aphids. Aphids are like T-bone steaks to hummingbirds. They're very high in protein and very sweet. You could take down every one of these feeders, and we'd still have hummingbirds."

### Fueling Fighter Jets

The next time a hummingbird streaks past, imagine you've been buzzed by a miniature fighter jet. That's how fast nature's smallest bird can fly relative to its size. In flight, a hummingbird beats its wings in a figure eight up to 40 times or more per second. This rapid motion enables it to spin, hover, and fly backward and upside down at speeds of 30 mph or more.

To fuel such a high metabolism, a hummingbird, which can weigh 2–20 grams, slurps up nectar that's at least double its weight every day. One fill-up lasts 20 minutes, then it's off to find more flowers and insects or return to a feeder—dining territory that a hummer will fiercely defend, even remembering which blooms it has already drained (and pollinated).

At night, a hummer may go into torpor to stave off starvation. During this deep sleep, its heart slows from 1,200 beats a minute down to 50.

Nineteen hummingbird species have been recorded across Texas. In summer breeding months, the two most common species are black-chinned hummers in West Texas and ruby-throated hummingbirds in East Texas. Depending on the species, hummingbirds can breed as far away as Alaska and Canada and migrate as far south as Central America.



Since 2010, federally licensed bird bander Charles Floyd and other permitted volunteers have banded more than 10,000 hummingbirds at the Hummer House. Based on his research, about 95% of all the black-chinned hummers there are returning females from prior years.

"It wouldn't make a difference if the Browns hung a thousand feeders," says Floyd, a retired school principal who lives nearby. "What matters most is that the Browns are preserving the trees, the understory and the natural habitat."

Floyd and his banding partner—master bander and retired biologist Kelly Bryan of Rockport—collect banding data for West Texas Avian Research, a nonprofit they founded in 2011 to support bird banding research and bird conservation in West Texas.

"Banding has led me to understand the life cycle and migratory habits of hummingbirds," Floyd says. "Their established pattern of habits and movements has continued for centuries. Certain factors, such as the widespread introduction of feeders, have made some changes in that behavior. But overall patterns have remained the same."

So far, Floyd has banded 162 bird species at the Hummer

House, including half of Texas' hummingbird species. Many are banded Saturday mornings April through July at the ranch. That's when the Browns welcome visitors free of charge to watch Floyd and his wife, Nancy, band hummers and other species. Children and overnight guests are often allowed to release birds after they've been banded.

### Travel Plans

At the Hummer House, male black-chinned hummingbirds arrive first in mid-March and stake out their breeding territories. By April, females show up and begin gathering unbleached cotton the Browns put out for nest building. "They keep pulling it through mid-July," Cathy says. "That's a good indication that they breed twice."

Males woo mates by performing dramatic aerial dives and buzzing their tails. They also flash their iridescent gorget, the colorful throat patch that sets males apart.

Female hummers—drably feathered for camouflage—build nests and tend the young with no help from mates. Their tiny nests are made of plant materials and held together with spiderwebs. Mothers usually lay two white eggs smaller than jelly beans and feed their hatchlings regurgitated insects and nectar.

By late June and into July, males start leaving. "They've proven through banding that they may go out west or to the Hill Country," Cathy says. "They take their time migrating back to southern Mexico for the winter. During that time, we may see male hummingbirds from farther north."

From the second week in May through the end of June, "we have a constant population of hummers," Cathy continues. "But after that, a lot of males have started to migrate. Then ruby-throated males come through. The last to leave are black-chinned females and their young ones. Our population is ever evolving."

In late August, more ruby-throated hummingbirds than black-chinneds show up. "We're on the western edge of ruby-throated migration, so we see a lot of those," Cathy says. "During fall migration, you'll see the biggest variety here, like Allen's and rufous, but not in great numbers."

The Browns get up from their chairs in the observation room and head off to refill sugar water feeders. "It's like having a dairy farm," Cathy says. "You make the circles in the morning and fill what's empty. Then in the evening, you do it all again."

Dan smiles. "If you love to work," he says, "this is the place to fall in love with." ■

**TCP** Watch the video on our website and get to know Dan and Cathy Brown and the hummingbirds they love.

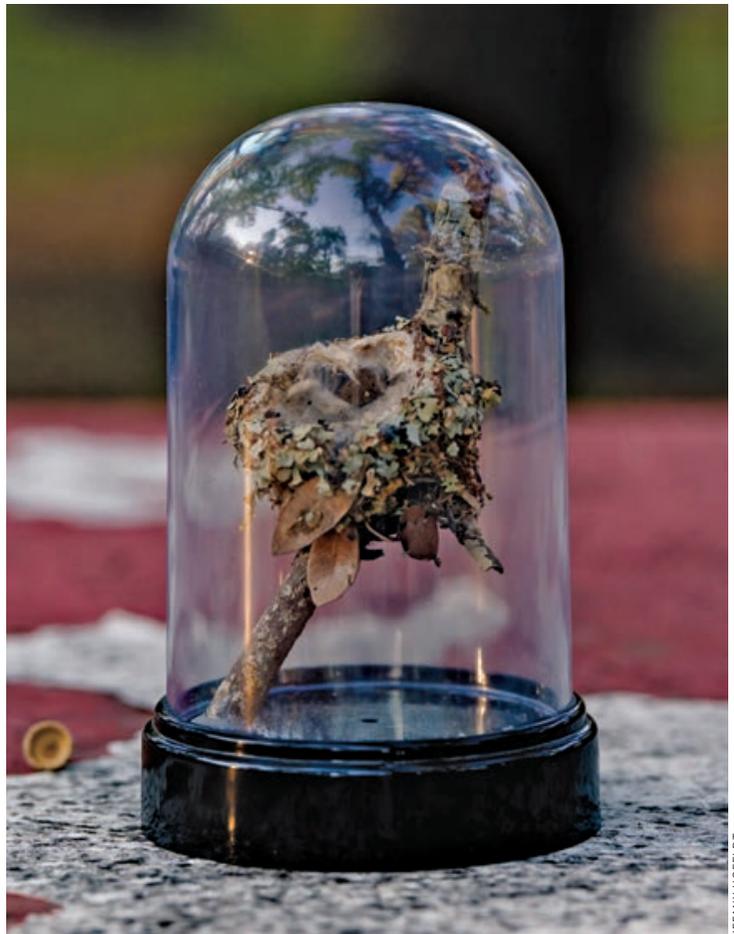


LAURIE LAWLER

## LURING LONG BEAKS

Hummer-friendly gardens provide a variety of nectar sources to meet the birds' high energy needs. They're drawn to red tubular flowers, such as salvias and honeysuckles. The trumpet shape accommodates their long bills and forked tongues. Once they discover nectar sources, hummers will also feed on other shapes, sizes and colors of flowers. Try these Texas natives:

- Autumn sage (salvia)
- Coral honeysuckle
- Flame acanthus
- Trumpet creeper
- Turk's cap



TIFFANY HOFELDT

Valley volunteers gather each fall to replant a thorn forest, seedling by seedling

# Growing Tradition

BY EILEEN MATTEI • PHOTOS BY LARRY DITTO

**David Alvarado remembers** digging holes alongside other volunteers near the Rio Grande when he was in high school, almost 20 years ago. Nowadays he has lots of little helpers.

“I wanted to share this with my family,” says the San Juan resident, plunging his shovel into the earth again—this time with the help of his 14-year-old son, Jeremiah. His daughter, Adalee, 3, uses a trowel and her hands to pat soil around freshly planted seedlings that his wife, Berenize, places in the ground and backfills.



The Alvarados are among some 1,800 volunteers on this October morning who traveled to this 9-acre patch of federal land south of the rusty-red slats of the border wall and less than a mile north of the Rio Grande. They’re here with a lofty goal: plant 10,000 native seedlings.

The 2025 gathering marked the 31st year volunteers have come out to revegetate a piece of the Lower Rio Grande Valley on U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service land. The Tamaulipan thorn forest once covered 1 million acres along the Rio Grande, but just 10% of it remains intact today.

## Green Goals

By reintroducing native seedlings like Texas ebony, wild olive, fiddlewood and snake-eyes to former farm fields, the Rio Reforestation project aims to restore the thorn forest. The plants attract bugs, which bring birds, rabbits, snakes, bobcats, tortoises and javelinas. Extending the wildlife corridor allows plant and animal populations to thrive and avoid genetic isolation.

“Rio Reforestation is the biggest community planting event in the U.S. Nothing else comes close,” says Jon Dale, a senior director for American Forests. The nonprofit collects seeds and grows native plants for the USFWS at Marinoff Nursery in Alamo.

“In the last 30 years, we have restored 18,500 acres of USFWS-owned farmland by planting over 10 million native thornscrub seedlings,” says Imer de la Garza, a USFWS project leader.

Over those years, they discovered best practices that increase seedlings’ chance of survival, now around 90%. One factor is high-density planting: 10,000 plants on 9 acres works out to more than 1,000 per acre.

The native seedlings are drought- and heat-tolerant as well as freeze-, flood- and fire-resistant. Reforestation goes beyond canopy trees like mesquite and Texas persimmon to include understory plants such as allthorn, cenizo and coyotillo, plus ground covers like heliotrope and frogfruit.

LEFT After a selfie, volunteers will get the waiting plants into the ground.

OPPOSITE Three-year-old Adalee Alvarado does her part as a Rio Reforestation volunteer. She says she had a great time “playing with dirt.”





It takes a year of preparation to put crates jammed with an assortment of 35 native species into the field with an army of volunteers. Seeds are collected from the wild and Marinoff's orchard year-round, with ripe seeds intercepted before the wind or animals carry them off.

Many seeds require finicky processing techniques for successful germination. For example, wolfberry fruit must be squeezed to disgorge the seeds. Texas persimmon fruits are rolled on hardware cloth to release their large seeds. Hard ebony seeds are abraded with sandpaper.

**“In the last 30 years, we have restored 18,500 acres of USFWS-owned farmland by planting over 10 million native thornscrub seedlings.”**

Marinoff staff fills biodegradable plant bands with a mixture of vermiculite, local soil, fertilizer and a seed in the spring. Through the summer the plants sit on grow-out benches under shade cloth. Rio Reforestation's fall planting gives seedlings months to establish strong root systems before the next summer's heat.

The nursery contracts with private growers to help it supply this project and the other 185,000 native seedlings USFWS needs to revegetate about 200 acres annually.

### **From Field to Forest**

Last year the 9 acres of the Milagro tract produced a crop of organic cabbage for Rio Fresh, a third-generation produce grower and packer. Before the Reforestation volunteers arrive, a tractor has plowed the soil into east-west rows. A dense thicket of 100-year-old mesquites, ebony trees and understory bushes borders the tract to the west and north.



OPPOSITE, FROM TOP The planting crews use 6-foot ropes to ensure adequate spacing between seedlings. A manzanita fruit is collected at Marinoff Nursery in Alamo, where seeds are prepared for planting.

RIGHT A volunteer plants a Texas ebony seedling.

Volunteers sign in near a banner that reads, “Let’s Restore the Thornforest Together.” It outlines the work ahead: Get your shovel. Go to one of the 200 rows where a leader awaits. Pick up a blue crate. Use a 6-foot rope to measure the distance between seedling holes. Dig a hole as deep as the top of the plant band. Put it in and backfill.

Small groups of family or friends work eastward down each row. Some organize a division of labor: the leads measuring the spacing and wielding shovels or post-hole diggers. Then come the planters with a crate of seedlings. In other rows, two or three dig, then plant and then measure to the next site. Dragonflies flit past while a turkey vulture tilts overhead.

Wearing hats and leather gloves, Mitchell, Michelle, Lindsey and Joaquin Sternberg of Mission show they know about getting down and dirty. “It’s different every year—the people, the location, the weather,” says Mitchell, who has been participating since the 1990s.

School buses of elementary, middle and high school students arrive. Idea Los Encinos of McAllen sends three buses of students. Another school sends nearly 200 students.

Berta Palacios of Pharr oversees 20 Hidalgo County 4-H kids participating as a community service project. She spies high-spirited fifth graders larking and asks them, “Is that safe, the way you’re holding that shovel?”

Low humidity and a constant breeze temper the 85-degree air, which is filled with happy chatter. “It’s really fun, something to do on the weekend with friends. We all like doing it,” says Jennavie Juarez, one of 15 from the Weslaco High School National Honor Society here for their third year.

Girl Scout Troop 269 from La Feria has returned as well. “The girls enjoy it,” says Krystal Cruz, a scout leader and parent of a volunteer. “This is something we hope to continue every year.”

Maria Ortega and her three young children tackle a row themselves. “This is the very first time we have planted anything,” she says. Near them Victor Ostolaza Jr. is digging holes with his father while his wife, Cynthia, and daughter Kiara follow with the seedlings. He explains that Kiara’s school involvement brought them out. “We participated before because of her.”

Row leader Chad Wilmoth, a retired Rio Hondo science teacher and member of Magic Valley Electric Cooperative, grew some of the seedlings Marinoff distributes. Row leaders know not to fuss if seedlings are not planted at the exact spacing or depth. Volunteers familiar with the event under-



stand that engaging and energizing the community is an important part of the work.

A young boy jumps on a shovel his mom holds steady, upright. A teen girl empties her water bottle onto a newly planted Western soapberry. After completing their rows, 23 kids in the Green Club of Idea Mission lean on their shovels, listening to Tejano music from a small speaker.

“It’s controlled chaos,” Dale says as the event winds down. “Survival could be 100% this time since the tract is surrounded by agriculture and its moisture. Tight proximity results in a more diverse habitat.”

### Set Up for Success

Dropped gloves and empty crates litter the field as volunteers head home after picking up a boxed lunch. If they want, workers can take home a pot of chile pequin, crucita or Mexican hat. After all, they now know how to plant them.

Soon after Rio Reforestation, contractors insert a 3-foot-tall durable tree tube around each plant. Besides thwarting plant nibblers, morning moisture collects on the tubes and trickles down to the seedlings. That’s the only moisture the young plants get besides rain.

Over time, wild seedlings will pop up under the taller trees, taking advantage of the shade and moisture. Insects, birds and other creatures will spread out into restored habitat. ■



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## The Many Benefits of Trees

Plant some green to save some green

**MOST OF THE** U.S. observes Arbor Day on the last Friday of April, and one of the most common ways to celebrate is planting a tree. Although the best time to plant a tree in most of Texas is early November—when the state observes its own version of Arbor Day—it's not too early to start thinking about the benefits of trees and planning how to plant one to maximize its life and effects.

The Arbor Day Foundation explains the benefits of trees, some of which are rather unexpected.

**Trees help clean the air.** Forests around the world remove about one-third of fossil fuel emissions while improving air quality by filtering pollution from the atmosphere.

**Trees contribute to health.** Workers with a view of trees report lower stress and greater job satisfaction.

**Trees provide oxygen.** The Amazon rainforest produces more than 20% of the world's oxygen, and a single large tree can create enough oxygen for about four people.

**Trees help clean drinking water.** Forested watersheds can offset the need for water filtration facilities, as the trees naturally filter water.

**Trees benefit wildlife.** Animals rely on trees for habitat. From forests supporting wildlife to trees defining territories, critters around the world depend on trees for their lives.

**Trees increase property values.** Mature trees on properties of homes for sale can significantly boost home sale prices and help homes sell faster.

**Trees are a good investment of public dollars.** Putting one dollar into tree planting in Indianapolis, for example, returned \$5.55 in benefits. Those benefits can include cleaner air, lower energy costs, better water quality, stormwater control and increased property values.

**Trees provide cooling.** Shady surfaces can be 20–45 degrees cooler than sunny ones, and water vapor released through leaves enhances cooling through evaporation.

**Trees help reduce the effects of climate change.** By absorbing carbon dioxide and storing carbon, trees combat climate change. An acre of mature trees can absorb as much CO<sub>2</sub> as a car puts out over 26,000 miles.

**Trees help save energy.** When trees are properly placed around buildings, they can cut air conditioning costs by 30%. The Department of Energy estimates that strategically planted trees can lower a household's overall energy use by up to 25% by providing shade, winter warmth and windbreaks.

If you're ready to reap some of these benefits of trees by planting your own, be sure to:

- ▶ Identify the size of the tree, and choose a location with enough space to grow around structures and power lines.
- ▶ Find a tree that will thrive in your growing zone.
- ▶ Call 811 before you dig any holes.

Proper tree placement is especially critical near power lines. Trees growing into overhead lines create safety hazards, cause power outages, and require costly trimming or removal.

Your electric cooperative works year-round to maintain safe clearance around power lines, but preventing conflicts starts at planting time. Keep trees at least 25 feet away from overhead lines and choose low-growing varieties for areas beneath power lines.

By planning ahead, you can ensure your tree investment delivers decades of benefits without compromising electrical safety or reliability for your community. ■

# How Your Community Can Prevent Wildfires

**MAY 2 IS WILDFIRE** Community Preparedness Day. This annual event is a national campaign organized by the National Fire Protection Association meant to encourage us all to take action to raise awareness and reduce wildfire risks.

Fires can happen at any time, and their consequences can be devastating. But each of us can do our part to mitigate the danger and help protect our community. NFPA offers these tips for making the most of Wildfire Community Preparedness Day.

## Check

Make sure your address number is clearly visible from the street and unobstructed by vegetation in case firefighters need to find you. Map two possible routes to get out of your neighborhood.

Move woodpiles so they are at least 30 feet from your home.

Take an audit of your possessions for insurance purposes. Visit [iii.org](http://iii.org) for tips from the Insurance Information Institute on conducting an inventory of your belongings.

## Clear

Clear dry leaves or brush at least 3–5 feet away from your home's foundation. Over time, expand that radius to 30 feet, if possible. Also clear debris from porches and decks and dispose of it in appropriate trash receptacles.

Remove items stored under decks and porches. Gasoline cans and portable propane tanks should never be stored in or near your house.

## Communicate

Create a family communication plan and assemble a 72-hour evacuation kit for your household and pets.

Register your mobile number with the local office of emergency management to receive text alerts. Work with neighbors to create a phone tree to alert everyone about a fire or evacuation.

Visit [nfpa.org](http://nfpa.org) for more tips and resources. ■



GOLLYKIM | ISTOCK.COM

# Commit to Springtime Energy-Savers

**LATER THIS MONTH**, as we celebrate our commitment to keeping a healthy planet on Earth Day, April 22, it's a good time to adopt energy-saving habits.

Experts say the best way to start a new habit and make it stick is to start small. Here are a handful of simple, small steps you can take to create your new energy efficiency habits.

- ▶ Turn off lights, TVs and other electronics when you're not using them. On your way out of any room, switch everything off.
- ▶ Turn on ceiling fans when you enter a room and turn them off when you leave. Ceiling fans make people in the room feel cooler but do nothing for an empty room.
- ▶ Once it's warm enough to turn on the air conditioner, inch the thermometer up 1 degree each week. As your family gets used to slightly warmer indoor temperatures, you can see some real savings on cooling costs.
- ▶ Use bathroom and stove exhaust fans for only a few minutes at a time, until the smoke or steam has cleared. While exhaust fans expel heat and humidity from a room, they also suck out conditioned air. ■



MATHEW RISLEY | ISTOCK.COM



# DON'T FUEL THE FIRE

**Wildfires can start unexpectedly and move quickly and unpredictably, destroying everything in their path.**

**Learn how to prepare for and react to dangerous fire events.**

## **If fire is reported nearby:**

Place vital records and small items of value in your car and park it facing the direction of escape. Heed evacuation orders.

Clear a firebreak around buildings.

Shut gas off at the meter and turn off propane tanks.

Leave the electricity on, especially if it powers a well.

Turn on sprinklers. Wet down the house and shrubs close to structures.

## **Follow these home fire safety tips:**

Mow grass short. Rake leaves. Clear away debris.

Keep hay bales and firewood away from structures and electric lines.

Make a family evacuation plan. Keep an inventory of home valuables in a fireproof box.

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CHRIS BURROWS | TEC

# IT'S THE LAW: MOVE OVER OR SLOW DOWN

Lineworkers dedicate long hours to ensuring affordable and reliable electric power.

The "move over/slow down" law reminds us to do our part to keep our utility workers safe.

PHOTO: CHRIS BURROWS | TEC

## Look for flashing lights.

When you see a utility vehicle on the side of the road with its amber lights flashing, move over a lane. When you move over, you're giving workers the room they need to safely complete their work.

## Slower is safer.

If you do not have an extra lane to move into, the law requires you to slow down 20 mph below the posted speed limit. A slower-moving vehicle is a safer vehicle. And keep in mind, significant fines give this law teeth.

**Your electric cooperative encourages you to always practice safety.**



## Beachcombing at home.

Texas Co-op Power presents an illustrated *Seashells of Texas* poster by artist Aletha St. Romain, 20x16 inches, suitable for framing.

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This **cookbook** is filled with more than 700 recipes, including more than 300 dessert recipes.

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To order by mail, send a check or money order payable to TEC for \$29.95 to Best of Typically Texas Cookbook, 1122 Colorado St., 24th Floor, Austin, TX 78701.

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From the publishers of **TexasCoopPower**

Please allow 4-6 weeks for delivery.

# Uneasy Riders

Once in a while, the backseat drivers are at least half right

BY CLAY COPPEDGE • ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN KACHIK

**WE WERE CRUISING** into Kansas, me and half a dozen Southwestern University cheerleaders, when the radio broadcast the first of what would be many tornado warnings on March 13, 1990.

I was driving us to Missouri for a men's basketball tournament, which I would be covering for the *Williamson County Sun*. The university had offered to pay my expenses in exchange for me driving the cheerleaders to Kansas City in a rented van. What could go wrong?

If you traced on a map the route from Georgetown to Kansas City up Interstate 35, you would draw a more or less straight line through the heart of Tornado Alley. Not that I gave a second thought to the weather that day.

We cruised through Texas and Oklahoma without incident, but the way I remember it now, the skies turned dark and the wind began to howl the very second we crossed the border into Kansas.

A couple of my passengers expressed alarm over the sudden change in the weather and insisted I turn up the van's AM radio. The static was pretty bad, but we all heard the announcement that a tornado had been spotted in a certain Kansas county. I don't remember the name of the county, only that a road sign had welcomed us to that very county no more than a mile previous.

Somebody asked me what county we were in.

"I have no idea," I lied.

Then somebody in the back of the van shouted, "There it is! *That's the tornado!*"

In the rearview mirror, I saw the cheerleaders leaning toward a window, looking up at the sky, where, yes, a suspicious-looking cloud was hanging low and ominous over the flat farmland.

This was one of nearly 60 tornadoes that would form over the central U.S. that day.

Several of my fellow travelers voiced the opinion that we needed to stop. And do what? Wait for the tornado to come down from the sky and whisk us away to Oz?

"Relax," I said with more confidence than I actually felt. "I'm from Lubbock. I was outrunning tornadoes when y'all weren't even in first grade. It's all going to be OK."

At the instant I stopped talking, this warning came across the radio: "Do not try to outrun a torna-

do. Tornadoes can change direction at any moment. If you're in a vehicle, stop the vehicle and get out. Do not get under your vehicle. Lie down in a flat gully, ditch or low spot on the ground."

A clear majority of the cheerleaders now begged me to stop the van. A couple of them ordered me to. "We ain't stopping," I announced and turned the radio off. Somebody in the back of the van said things about me and my IQ that I'm sure she has always regretted.

It got worse. Minutes later, for reasons I still can't fathom, my uneasy riders pleaded with me to stop at a Hardee's (or maybe it was a Pizza Hut) on the other side of the highway. Otherwise, they said, we would all die, and it would be my fault. (Several archived news stories I recently scrolled through mentioned a Pizza Hut on I-35 that was destroyed by a tornado that day, but I found nothing about a demolished Hardee's.)

At Wichita, we veered northeast and soon put the worst of the violent weather behind us.

The entire Southwestern men's basketball team was lined up outside the hotel in Kansas City, waiting for us, when I wheeled the van to the passenger drop-off point and turned off the engine. The team had just seen TV news footage of an EF5 tornado crossing I-35, right smack dab in the middle of our route, and, well, they sure were relieved to see those cheerleaders!

The front page of the next day's *Kansas City Star* had a picture of the massive twister crossing the highway. Then the tournament began, and it was a welcome distraction.

Any hard feelings that might have lingered between me and the cheerleaders seemed forgotten a few days later when we began our return trip to Central Texas.

The van was full of happy chatter early on, but it got real quiet when we cruised past the spot where I had refused to stop a few days previous. Now, where a fast-food restaurant had once promised false refuge, there was nothing but a pile of bricks and rubble.

I considered giving the cheerleaders a heavy dose of I-told-you-so, but, for once, I restrained myself. Offering thanks, rather than asking for it, seemed like the more proper play here. I stayed quiet and did what had got us that far—I kept driving. ■



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



He bought land, studied soil types and planted test plots. He tinkered endlessly, building equipment that didn't exist and modifying machinery that did. He risked much and slept little. When something failed, he tried again.

He eventually had a gorgeous field of bluebonnets every spring, and he noticed people stopped in droves to photograph them. His entrepreneurial side said, "These folks need a place to get out of the sun and have a Coke and enjoy the view." He created such a place for them.

Over the next decade, Wildseed Farms blossomed—literally and figuratively. In 1993, he moved his operation to Fredericksburg, building what would become the largest working wildflower farm in the U.S.

Visitors who come in March or April see fields so bright they seem backlit by divine intervention. People stroll among the blooms, sip a little Hill Country wine and buy packets of seeds to take a piece of Texas home with them.

Thomas designed the J-Thom 42 Wild-seeder, a contraption that can sow a dozen species or more at once without damaging delicate seeds. He built a vacuum harvester that collects seeds by suction instead of by force, which preserves their fragile husks. Those inventions made large-scale wildflower farming possible.

Today, more than 20 states use Thomas' seeds to color their highways each spring. And Wildseed, which now fills hundreds of Hill Country acres, also grows grapes and sells its own wine.

But for all his business acumen, Thomas remains a farmer at heart. His face still turns upward when he hears thunder. As we sat in his pickup that spring afternoon, he squinted toward the horizon and said, "There's a cloud building out west. Maybe it'll come this way." ■

# Painting by Numbers

His countless big ideas brought dazzling color to hills and highways

BY W.F. STRONG • ILLUSTRATION BY JASON RAISH

**WE WERE SITTING** in John R. Thomas' big pickup overlooking about 60 acres of bluebonnets in bloom when he said something I'll always remember. "If we could get a good rain in the next day or two," he said, "it would be a million-dollar rain."

I asked Thomas just how a rain could be worth \$1 million. He said, "It'll push those bluebonnets up another few inches and double their seed yield."

Thomas owns Wildseed Farms, southeast of Fredericksburg in the Hill Country. He doesn't grow those enormous plots of petals just for their photographic beauty. He grows them for the seeds—bluebonnet, Indian blanket, Texas paintbrush and dozens of other native varieties.

The seeds are harvested with processes he pioneered and machines he invented. They're bagged and sold in his big country store along U.S. Highway 290 then shipped to customers around the world.

Thomas grew up on a ranch near Eagle Lake, west of Houston, where he learned early that the land could break your back and your heart in the same season. He studied business at Sam Houston State University before coming home to start a grass-seeding company that restored eroded land along highways.

People began asking him for wildflower seed—especially bluebonnets—but there was no dependable source. That was all the spark he needed.

In 1981, Thomas began experimenting.

# Five-Ingredient Dinners

Five stars for dishes that minimize ingredients and maximize flavor

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ, FOOD EDITOR

After a long day of editing recipes, there's nothing I crave more than an oven-baked meal. This recipe, which I can pull together in a snap, hits the spot every single time with its spice and citrus notes. Be sure to store the leftover chipotles in the fridge.

## Orange Chipotle Baked Salmon

**1 pound salmon fillet**  
**1 chipotle pepper in adobo sauce, with 4 teaspoons adobo sauce reserved**  
**1 cup orange juice**  
**½ teaspoon salt**  
**Steamed rice, for serving**

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Place salmon on a baking sheet.
2. Finely dice chipotle. In a small bowl, combine chipotle, reserved adobo sauce, orange juice and salt. Spoon sauce over salmon.
3. Bake salmon until it flakes easily with a fork, about 15–20 minutes.
4. Serve over rice.

SERVES 4

**TCP** Follow Vianney Rodriguez as she cooks in Cocina Gris at [sweetlifebake.com](http://sweetlifebake.com), where she features a recipe for Creamy Chipotle Lime Shrimp.





## Pea Salad

GINGER CLARDY  
BANDERA EC

I was skeptical when I first tested this recipe, but little did I know this classic salad is the perfect virtually no-cook dinner. The salad is creamy with crunchy pieces of onion and chunks of cheese. Next time I will definitely double the recipe to enjoy with my family.

- 1 can English peas (15 ounces), drained**
- 2 tablespoons chopped onion**
- ¼ cup diced cheddar cheese**
- ½ boiled egg, diced**
- ¾ cup mayonnaise**

1. In a bowl, mix together peas, onion, cheddar, egg and mayonnaise.
2. Cover and refrigerate. Serve chilled.

**SERVES 2**

CONTINUED ON PAGE 28 >



\$500 WINNER

## Birds

LORI KIRKPATRICK  
GRAYSON-COLLIN EC



This recipe was given to Kirkpatrick 30 years ago by a dear friend and has remained a family favorite. I see why Birds has stood the test of time in her household. Buttery crescents filled with chicken and swimming in a cream sauce hit all the comfort food notes. Kirkpatrick likes to serve the birds over steamed rice.

- 1 can refrigerated crescent rolls (8 ounces)**
- 2 cups cooked chicken, diced**
- 1 can cream of chicken soup (10.5 ounces)**
- 1 can chicken broth (10.5 ounces)**
- 1 cup shredded cheddar cheese**

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease a 9-by-13-inch pan.
2. Unroll the crescent rolls and separate into 8 triangles. Place ¼ cup chicken on the wide end of each triangle, roll up dough and place in pan.
3. In a bowl, whisk together soup and broth. Pour over the prepared crescents. Top each crescent with 2 tablespoons cheddar.
4. Cover with foil and bake 20 minutes. Uncover and bake an additional 20 minutes.

**SERVES 4**

## TCP \$500 Recipe Contest

**PANCAKES AND WAFFLES** DUE APR 10

Never mind which is better doused in syrup—we'll take either! The winning recipe will stack up \$500. We'll share our favorites in the September issue.

**CAMPFIRE FAVORITES** DUE MAY 10



ENTER ONLINE

## Parmesan Ranch Chicken

CINDY HANDY  
GRAYSON-COLLIN EC

Nothing beats oven-baked chicken, especially when it's coated in ranch dressing. I loved the ease of this recipe—no frying and coating the chicken in a plastic bag makes for less cleanup. Handy says this recipe works best with shelf-stable Parmesan that comes in a shaker. Serve with a salad or mashed potatoes for an easy weeknight meal.

- 1/3 cup flour**
- 2 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese**
- 1/3 cup Italian-style breadcrumbs**
- 1/2 cup ranch dressing**
- 5 chicken drumsticks**

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees.
2. Line a rimmed baking sheet with foil and coat with cooking spray.
3. In a large, resealable plastic bag combine flour, Parmesan and bread-



crumbs. In a large bowl, add ranch dressing.

4. Dip a drumstick into ranch dressing and coat well. Seal drumstick in plastic bag.
5. Shake bag to coat drumstick, and place on prepared baking sheet. Repeat with remaining drumsticks.

## Keep Your Cool

A well-stocked freezer keeps me sane through a hectic week. Knowing I have food on hand makes meal planning easier. Here's what you'll find in my freezer.

**PROTEIN:** Chicken thighs and breasts, ground beef and turkey, shrimp, salmon

**VEGGIES:** Corn, peas, asparagus, broccoli, cauliflower

**FRUIT:** Berries, mangoes, peaches

**READY TO BAKE:** Pie crusts, pizza dough, bread, rolls

**CONVENIENCE:** Fries, Tater Tots, steamed rice, burger patties, waffles, meatballs

—Vianney Rodriguez

6. Bake 20 minutes, turn drumsticks over and bake an additional 20 minutes.

**SERVES 2**



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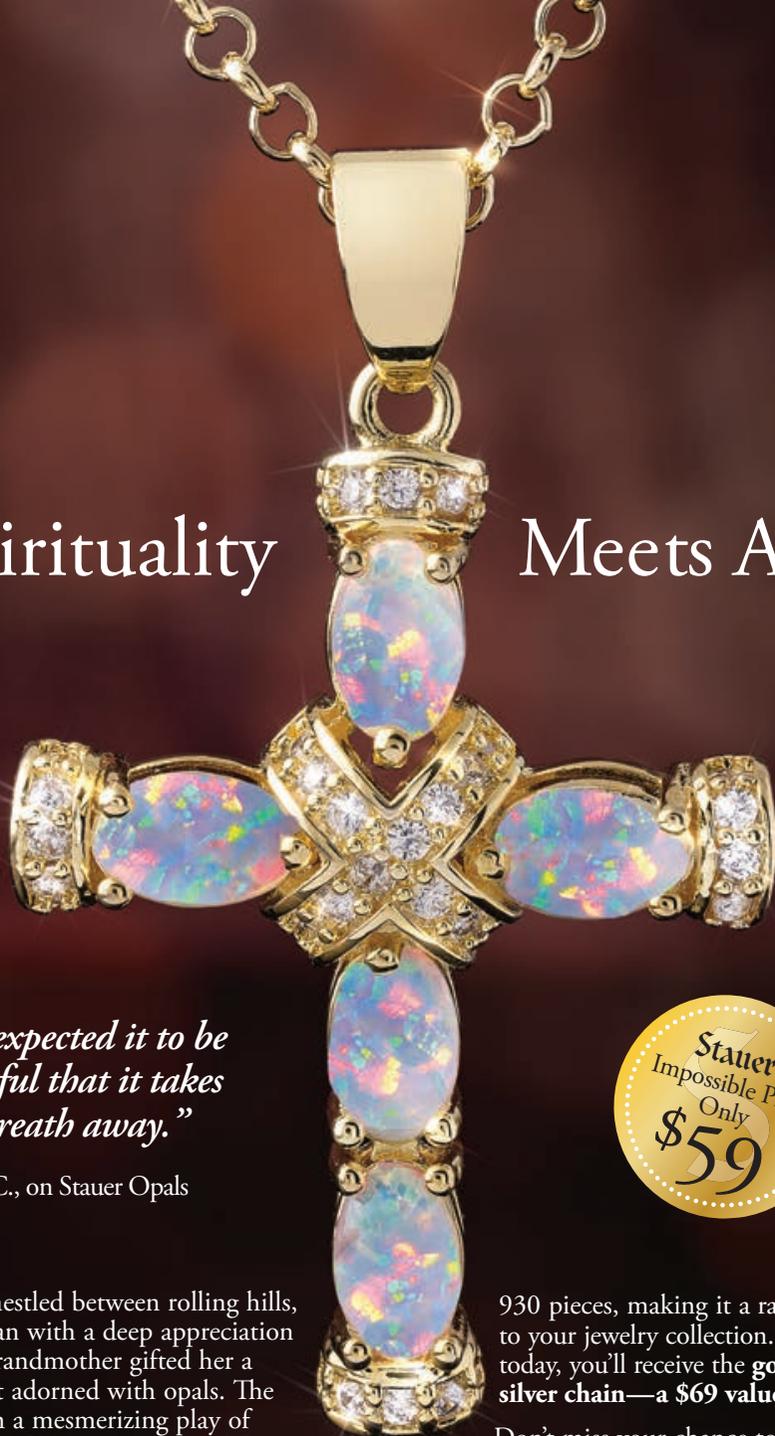
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# Spirituality Meets Artistry



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— Kaya C., on Stauer Opals



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COURTESY CHET GARNER

## Tragedy on the Prairie

Step into the hard life of frontier Texas at Old Fort Parker

BY CHET GARNER

**JUST OUTSIDE THE SMALL TOWN** of Groesbeck, east of Waco, tucked between cow pastures and the Navasota River, stands an old wooden fort that feels less like a destination and more like the stories of Jamestown and Plymouth Rock.

The spiked, wooden palisades of Old Fort Parker rise from the prairie grass like a movie set, but this isn't Hollywood—it's the site of a pivotal and tragic moment. You can almost hear the creak of the gate and the echo of gunfire that changed the course of a family and history.

In 1833, the fort was strategically built beside a natural spring with fertile soil in every direction. The settlers, led by brothers James and Silas Parker, had come to claim a piece of the frontier and begin a new life. However, in May 1836 their dream became a nightmare when a coalition of Native American warriors attacked the fort, killing several settlers and abducting 9-year-old Cynthia Ann Parker, her younger brother and three others.

The fort was abandoned, but over the next 24 years Cynthia assimilated into the Comanche tribe and married Chief Peta Nocona, becoming the mother of famed Chief Quanah Parker—the last great Comanche war leader.

Today, the replica fort, built in the 1930s and renovated in 1967, stands as a stark reminder of life nearly 200 years ago. It feels like a living time capsule, especially on special weekends when it's full of reenactors showing visitors how to do everything from blacksmithing to shucking corn.

You can wander through the cabins, peek through the rifle lookouts and imagine the fort bustling with frontier life. There's even a small museum detailing the Parker family saga, complete with artifacts and old maps. Here, among the oak trees and whispering prairie wind, history feels close enough to touch. ■

ABOVE Chet pulls guard duty, at least for this photo, at Old Fort Parker outside Groesbeck.

**TCP** Watch the video on our website as Chet visits the replica of Fort Parker. And find all of 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.

## APRIL

9

**Fort Worth [9–12] Late Nite Catechism**, (817) 212-4280, [www.basshall.com](http://www.basshall.com)

10

**Richardson The Boho Market**, [info@thebohomarket.com](mailto:info@thebohomarket.com), [thebohomarket.com](http://thebohomarket.com)

**Canton [10–11] Tractor Show & Swap Meet**, (214) 837-8861, [lonestarihc25.org/canton](http://lonestarihc25.org/canton)

11

**Comfort Why Old Places Matter Tour**, (830) 995-2641, [comfortheritagefoundation.com](http://comfortheritagefoundation.com)

**Jacksonville Flamin' J BBQ Fest**, [jvillecpaaa@gmail.com](mailto:jvillecpaaa@gmail.com), [facebook.com/jvillecpaaa](https://facebook.com/jvillecpaaa)

**Levelland Centennial Celebration**, (806) 894-0113, [bit.ly/levellandcentennial](http://bit.ly/levellandcentennial)

**Schulenburg Sausagefest**, (979) 743-4514, [schulenburgsausagefest.com](http://schulenburgsausagefest.com)

**Spicewood Asleep at the Wheel**, (512) 264-2820, [spicewoodarts.org](http://spicewoodarts.org)

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**Fredericksburg Friends of Gillespie County Country Schools BBQ Meal and Raffle**, (830) 685-3321, [historicschools.org](http://historicschools.org)

17

**Granbury [17–19] North Texas Gourd Festival**, [texasgourdsociety@hotmail.com](mailto:texasgourdsociety@hotmail.com), [texasgourdsociety.org](http://texasgourdsociety.org)

18

**Burton Cotton Gin Festival**, (979) 289-3378, [cottonginmuseum.org](http://cottonginmuseum.org)



## Pick of the Month

**Art, Herb & Wine Festival**  
**Bertram, April 25-26**  
 (512) 882-2992  
 bertramchamber.com

At this festival northwest of Austin, attendees can enjoy artisan and herbal vendors, free seminars and demonstrations, Texas wine, food trucks, craft beer, an artist showcase, a 5K run, and live music throughout the week-end. Children can participate in the art zone.

**Fort Worth Bubble Run,**  
 (602) 926-0995, bubblerun.com

**McKinney [18-19] Spring Native Plant Sale,**  
 (972) 562-5566,  
 heardmuseum.org

19 **Lufkin Dr. Seuss' Cat in the Hat,** (936) 633-5454,  
 angelinaarts.org

22 **Corsicana [22-25] Derrick Days,** (903) 654-4850,  
 derrickdays.com

23 **Levelland [23-25] Caprock Region South Plains College Rodeo,** (254) 396-1341,  
 caprockregionrodeo.com

MORE EVENTS >

### **Submit Your Event**

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



**42<sup>ND</sup> ANNUAL**  
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[WWW.HISTORICSCHOOLS.ORG](http://WWW.HISTORICSCHOOLS.ORG) 

All schools listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Member of Country School Association of America.

### APRIL EVENTS CONTINUED

24

**Kerrville [24–June 6]** Roundup Exhibition and Sale, (830) 896-2553, [museumofwesternart.com](http://museumofwesternart.com)

25

**Avinger Wildflower Trails**, (903) 562-2222, [avingertxchamber.org](http://avingertxchamber.org)

**Huntsville Gen. Sam Houston Day**, (936) 294-1832, [samhoustonmemorialmuseum.com](http://samhoustonmemorialmuseum.com)

**Lakehills Medina Lake Volunteer Fire Department BBQ**, (830) 751-2525, [facebook.com/medinalakevfd](http://facebook.com/medinalakevfd)

**Temple [25–26] Texas State Button Society Spring Show and Sale**, (325) 247-4955, [texasstatebuttonssociety.com](http://texasstatebuttonssociety.com)

MAY

1

**Gun Barrel City [1–2] Gun Barrel Quilters Guild Quilt Show**, (817) 896-7891, [gunbarrelquiltersguild.org](http://gunbarrelquiltersguild.org)

**Sargent [1–2] Volunteer Fire & Rescue BBQ Cookoff**, (281) 794-4933, [facebook.com/sargentvolunteerfiredept](http://facebook.com/sargentvolunteerfiredept)

2

**Vernon Doan's May Picnic**, (214) 244-1883, [doansmaypicnic.com](http://doansmaypicnic.com)

**Willow City Volunteer Fire & Rescue Department Benefit**, (830) 685-3376, [willowcityfd.com](http://willowcityfd.com)

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# Gates

It's been said that the creaking gate hangs the longest, and these readers made themselves heard. Whether they're keeping someone in or out, Texas gates are as unique as the folks behind them. So take a detour with us this month and, as the dust settles, let's see what awaits us at the gates.

CURATED BY GRACE FULTZ



1

1 JODY SEDGWICK  
PEDERNALES EC

"Springtime at a Hill Country gate. Flowers, deer and a kitty."

2 DEANNE LAUMER  
PEDERNALES EC

"Bluebonnets on a back road."

3 LISA WOODS  
UNITED COOPERATIVE SERVICES

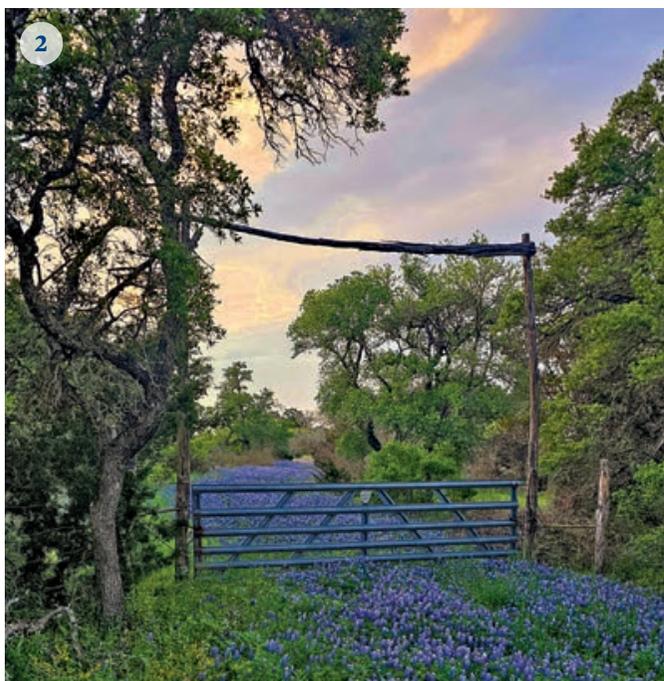
"Next to the Steel Bender off-road trail in Moab, Utah."

4 GAYLEE WATSON  
FARMERS EC

"Two paints and a mule waiting at the gate for treats."



3



2



4

## Upcoming Contests

UNDERWATER LIFE DUE APR 10

RODEO DUE MAY 10

TAILGATING DUE JUN 10



ENTER ONLINE

**TCP** See Focus on Texas on our website for many more Gates photos from readers.



## Kickin' Ashe

The perfect spring workout awaits in the Hill Country

BY BOB MCCULLOUGH  
ILLUSTRATION BY DAVE URBAN

A RANGE OF CELEBRITIES market workout routines that promise to burn calories and slow the aging process—for a price.

I'm certainly no celebrity, but as a ranch resident of the Hill Country with its ubiquitous, evergreen Ashe juniper (or mountain cedar), I myself have developed a workout that delivers heart-pumpin', muscle-buildin', weight-sheddin' results at no charge.

Cedar is an easy enemy. The prolific pollen producer native to the Edwards Plateau punishes seasonal allergy sufferers with "cedar fever." It's also incredibly thirsty, soaking up scarce rainfall to the detriment of other vegetation.

Cutting it back is like peeling an onion. You keep removing the trees' relatively soft wooden outgrowths—or layers, if you will—until you achieve the desired

clearance for trails, pathways and roads. Hand-to-branch combat fosters fitness as well as fulfillment. To take advantage of the Ashe-Kickin' Workout, I have some field-tested recommendations.

**Check, please!** Cedar-slaying can be strenuous, so check with your doctor and get the OK before beginning any exercise regimen.

**Rags to britches:** Attire yourself in the oldest, toughest, raggediest clothing in your closet because this workout surely will damage whatever you're wearing.

**Covering all the spaces:** Speaking of attire, opt for long sleeves and heavy pants or jeans to minimize cuts and scratches. And wear sunscreen and a wide-brimmed hat to prevent sunburns. Thick leather gloves complete the ensemble.

**Make no mis-snake:** Cedar survives in rugged territory where snakes also thrive, so boots should be worn for extra protection.

**Bug off:** Likewise, bugs and other creepy crawlers could cross your path. Spraying repellent on pants, gloves or tops of boots helps.

**The cutting edges:** The workout requires relatively inexpensive tools—21-inch bow saws for cuts up to 5 inches and 31-inch lopping shears for overhead branches. Chain saws are strictly prohibited in the interest of maximizing fitness!

**Bind the wounds:** Now and then, an oak tree will get in the way, and oak trimming should be followed immediately with pruning paint to prevent the spread of deadly oak wilt.

**Muscles in knead:** After a vigorous session with cedar, the ultimate reward is an appointment with a massage therapist or a sympathetic spouse who can soothe away any soreness.

Through sawing, stretching, stooping and bending, the Ashe-Kickin' Workout offers an inexpensive way to stay fit throughout the calendar year. So if you're looking for me, chances are, I'm just cuttin' up in the great outdoors. ■



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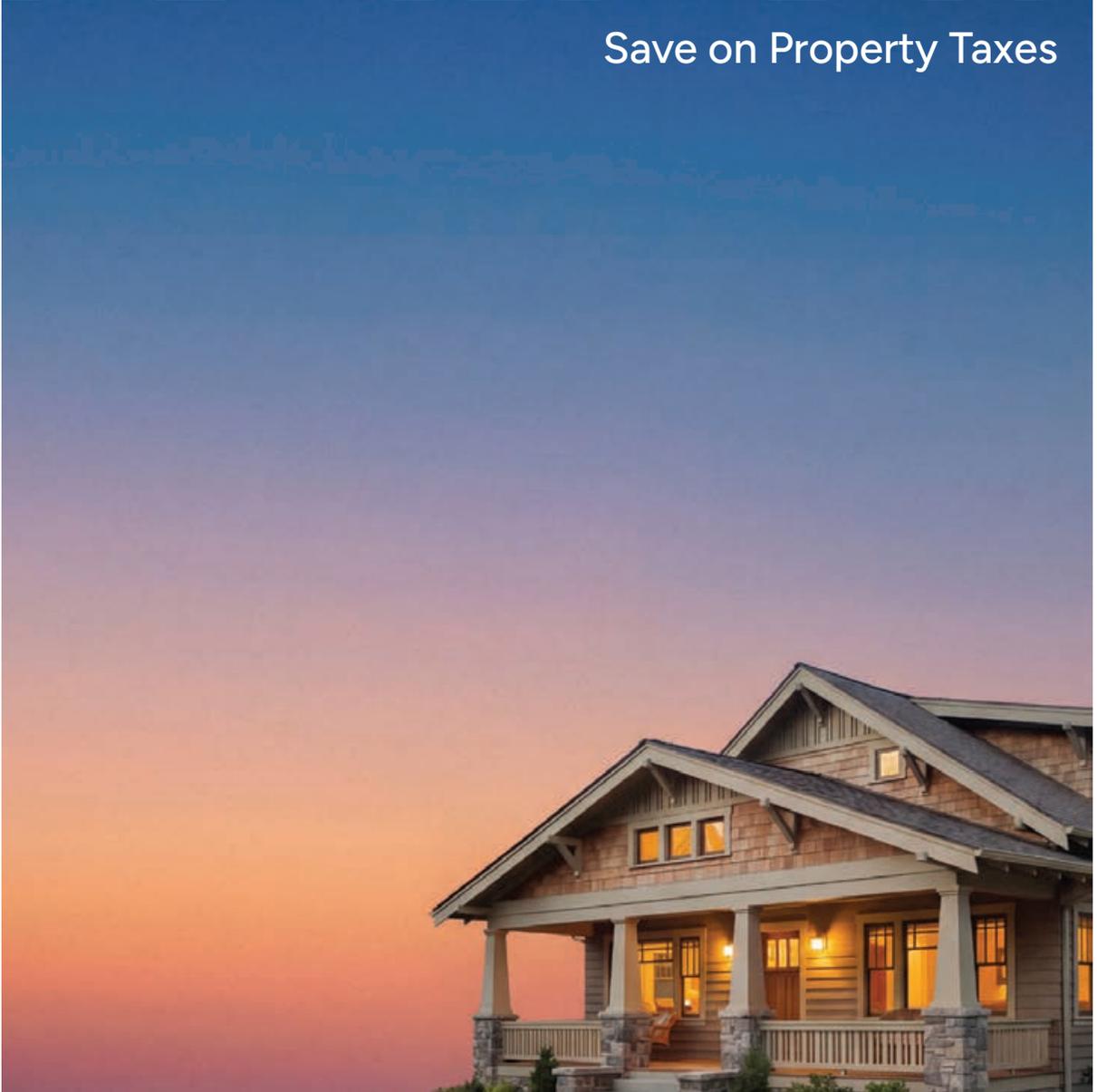
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