

Tennessee CONNECTIONS

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Plant Smart, Save Energy

Strategic landscaping for lower utility bills

Spring is the perfect time to plan landscaping projects that will pay dividends on your energy bills for years to come. Strategic tree and plant placement can significantly reduce your home's heating and cooling costs while beautifying your property.

Plant shade trees for summer savings.

Deciduous trees planted on the south and west sides of your home provide natural air conditioning during Tennessee's hot summers. These trees block intense afternoon sun from heating your home, reducing your air conditioning workload by up to 25%. The bonus? They lose their leaves in winter, allowing warming sunlight to reach your home when you need it most.

For maximum benefit, plant trees 15 to 25 feet from your home so mature canopies will shade walls, windows and your roof. Smaller trees and shrubs planted near windows and air conditioning units provide more cooling benefits.

Plant windbreaks for winter comfort.

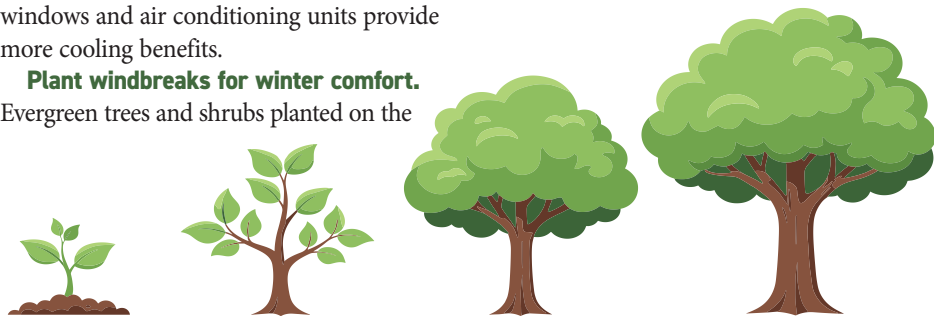
Evergreen trees and shrubs planted on the

north and northwest sides of your property create effective windbreaks, reducing winter heating costs by blocking cold winds.

Call before you dig. Before starting any landscaping project, protect yourself and your community by calling 811 or visiting tn811.com at least three business days before digging. This free service marks underground utility lines, preventing dangerous accidents and costly damage to electric, gas, water and communication lines.

Plan for growth. Remember to research mature tree sizes and keep plantings away from overhead power lines. Trees growing into power lines create safety hazards and can cause outages.

With thoughtful planning and proper safety precautions, your spring landscaping investment will provide comfort and savings for decades to come. ■



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Play energy-saving bingo. Make bingo cards with squares for energy-saving actions like using natural light instead of lamps or ceiling lights, unplugging devices, turning off lights and cooling off the temperature by opening a window. Kids can cross out each square as they complete each task, and the first one to bingo gets a prize.

Have power-free fun. Designate one night a week as power-free time when everyone in the family turns off phones, computers and TVs together. Play a board game, spend time reading your favorite books or enjoy some outdoor activities technology-free. Save on your electric bill, teach the importance of reducing energy use during peak periods and get some valuable family time all at once.

Make an energy-saving scavenger hunt. Make up a list of energy-saving practices, such as updating light fixtures with LED bulbs, turning off lights in empty rooms and unplugging

unused devices. Challenge your kids to search the house and check off an example of each scavenger hunt item. You can celebrate with small prizes or treats for each energy-efficient discovery they make along the way.

Create energy-efficient art. Kids enjoy seeing their artwork displayed, so put those creative skills to work on energy-efficient reminders around the house. Spend arts and crafts time teaching your kids about some of the steps they can take to save energy around the house. Make fun signs to serve as daily reminders to close the fridge quickly, turn off lights and only change the thermostat as a last resort.

Keep “phantom power” waste bottled up. Phantom energy—the electricity devices use even when they are turned off—can be a tricky concept for kids to understand. Illustrate it in a fun way by adding marbles to a glass bottle or jar

every time someone spots an unused device still plugged in. Set a goal and reward yourselves when everyone keeps phantom energy use down.

No matter what you do to keep energy savings fun around the house, the most important part of instilling good habits is reliably reminding your family of the little steps they can take to be more efficient. Consistency is key. ■

ADOBE STOCK
ILLUSTRATION
BY CIRODELIA



Lighting the Way to Organizational Excellence

Erwin Utilities has reached an exciting milestone, earning the 2025 Tennessee Center for Performance Excellence Level 4 Excellence Award, the highest honor presented by TNCPE. This prestigious recognition celebrates organizations that demonstrate superior performance through well-deployed, integrated processes and consistently strong results. It places Erwin Utilities among the top-performing organizations in the state.

For the Erwin community, this award represents far more than a plaque or a title. It reflects the utility's deep commitment to reliable service, responsible stewardship and continuous improvement—all focused on better serving the customers who depend on it every day.

What the TNCPE Excellence Award Means

The Tennessee Center for Performance Excellence is a nonprofit organization grounded in the Baldrige Excellence Framework, a nationally recognized model used across industries to improve performance and achieve sustainable results. Organizations pursuing the TNCPE Excellence Award undergo a rigorous evaluation process that examines leadership, strategy, customer focus, workforce engagement, operations and results.

Receiving the Excellence Award—TNCPE's highest level of recognition—means EU has demonstrated a mature,

RIGHT: Mike McWherter, left, presents the Ned R. McWherter Leadership Award to Erwin Utilities President and CEO Lee Brown.

INSET: Heather Schoch is president and CEO of the Tennessee Center for Performance Excellence.

well-integrated system of processes that are not only effective but consistently produce positive outcomes.

“When an organization leans into improvement at every level, the impact reaches far beyond their walls,” says Heather Schoch, President and CEO of TNCPE. “Erwin Utilities has built a culture where excellence is the expectation, not the exception. We are honored to recognize their remarkable achievements.”

A Culture Built on Continuous Improvement

EU's pursuit of performance excellence began in 2015, when the organization committed to the TNCPE and Baldrige Framework as a guide for strengthening leadership practices, improving operations and better aligning services with community needs.

The utility submitted its first TNCPE application in 2016, marking an

important step in turning improvement principles into measurable action. Continued learning and refinement led to the submission that earned the Level 2 Commitment Award in 2018, recognizing the organization's dedication to building strong, systematic approaches to performance improvement.

Building on that foundation, EU achieved the Level 3 Achievement Award in 2020, reflecting stronger integration across departments and more consistent, data-driven results. Each stage of the process brought valuable feedback that helped refine systems, deepen employee engagement and embed continuous improvement into everyday work.

This culture of excellence has also been shaped by strong leadership. At the previous TNCPE Excellence Conference and Awards Celebration, Erwin Utilities was proud to see President and CEO Lee Brown recognized with the 2025



Ned R. McWherter Leadership Award. This distinguished honor is presented to individuals who exemplify visionary leadership, a commitment to performance excellence, and meaningful contributions to their organization and community.

Brown's recognition underscored the importance of leadership in sustaining long-term improvement efforts and advancing Erwin Utilities' mission of providing safe, reliable, and efficient service.

The 2025 TNCPE Level 4 Excellence Award represents the culmination of this sustained effort. It reflects a clear demonstration of growth, resilience, and organizational maturity over time.

Why It Matters to the Community

For customers, the impact of this award

is tangible. Strong organizational systems translate into dependable utility services, thoughtful planning for the future and a focus on customer experience. As a community-owned utility, Erwin Utilities' success directly benefits the people and businesses of Erwin and the surrounding area.

This recognition also highlights the important role public utilities play as leaders in organizational excellence. It demonstrates that a mission-driven organization can achieve world-class performance while remaining firmly rooted in service to its community.

Excellence Celebration

The 2025 TNCPE Excellence Award was formally presented to Erwin Utilities on February 25, 2026, at

the TNCPE Excellence Conference and Awards Celebration in Franklin, Tennessee. This annual event brings together organizations from across the state to share best practices, celebrate achievements, and inspire continued improvement.

Established in 1993 as a public-private partnership, TNCPE has helped more than 2,000 organizations improve performance and strengthen organizational health through its assessment and award programs.

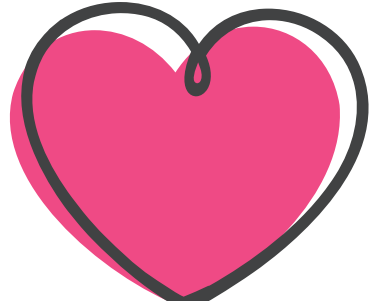
For Erwin Utilities, this achievement is both a celebration of how far the organization has come and a reminder that excellence is an ongoing journey. One that continues to be guided by a commitment to serving the community with integrity, accountability, and pride. ■

The Erwin Utilities senior leadership team celebrates the Performance Excellence Award. Back row, from left, are Kip Lemmon, Joseph Wigington, Jason Foster and John Fredericks. Front row, from left, are Kala Allen, Jo Cole, Lee Brown, James Mumpower and Noel Slagle.



Heart and Hand

Folk art
combines form
and function



By Trish Milburn

Danielle McDaniel is living proof that a single moment of recognition for a job well done can create a path of joy and meaning that lasts a lifetime.

When she was in ninth grade, Danielle won first place in a 4-H art show for a clay baby shoe she made. The memory of being awarded for her artistic talent led her to take a clay class as a young adult.

"I remember my first pottery class with Metro Parks and the experience of taking a failed pot, reworking the clay and having another chance to make a better pot," Danielle says. "This was like magic to me. Having spent the last 43 years making and teaching clay, I can say it still feels like magic."

Known as "The Clay Lady," a name given to her by the children she began teaching in 1982, Danielle now spends

most of her time teaching adults on The Clay Lady campus in Nashville. The campus is an art community of 75 on-site artists with private studios, around 700 pottery and sculpture students, and a variety of workshops and community events held each year.

Though Danielle loves teaching, her favorite part is making pottery.

"Hands in the clay, wheel spinning, releasing the energy of the clay to make a pot that will outlast my lifetime," she

says. "When I teach others to make pots, I watch my students experience this moment and know how important art is to the human spirit."

Danielle is one of hundreds of folk artists across Tennessee creating functional, beautiful handiwork. From the misty ridgelines of the Smoky Mountains to the riverside back roads of West Tennessee, these artists work in many materials, including clay, metal, leather, wood, paper and yarn.



Danielle McDaniel, right, works with a pottery student on The Clay Lady campus in Nashville. PHOTOS COURTESY OF DANIELLE MCDANIEL

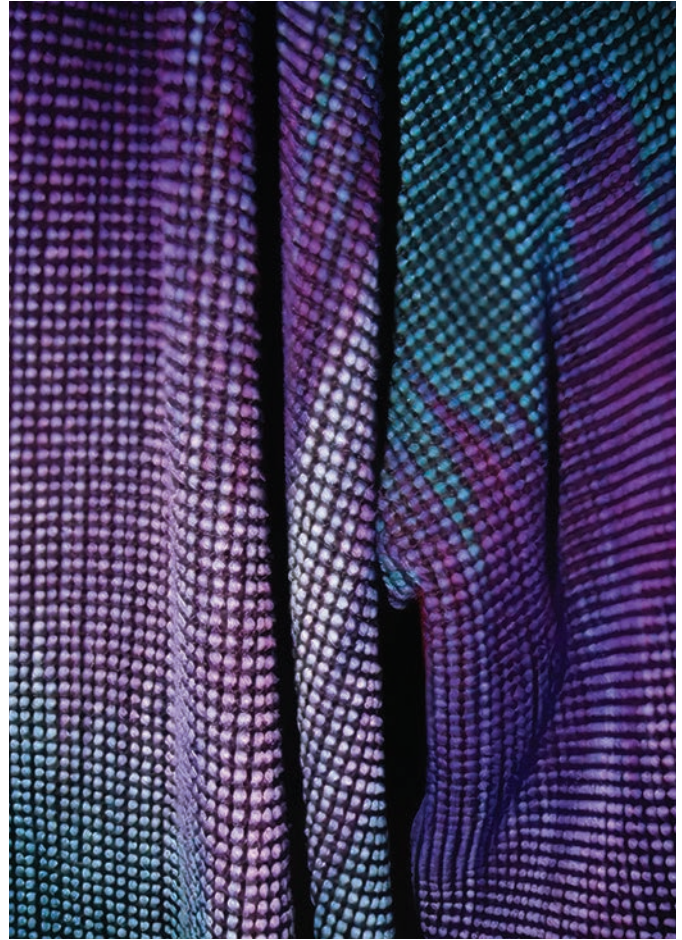


Danielle loves creating beautiful pottery and helping others find joy in folk art.



LEFT: Vickie Viperman demonstrates how weaving is done on a loom. PHOTOS COURTESY OF VICKIE VIPPERMAN

BELOW: Vickie's fabrics are dyed and woven by hand, promoting sustainability.



What is folk art?

Long before “handcrafted” became a marketing term, Tennessee artisans made what they needed out of what they had. The state’s folk art emerged from Appalachian, African American and rural Southern traditions, blending function with creativity.

Today, these art forms remain a vital link between Tennessee’s past and present, preserving cultural memory through the artists’ preferred materials. A handmade patchwork quilt can tell the story of a family while also keeping family members warm on a cold winter night.

As opposed to fine art, which is typically created for its aesthetic value by trained professionals, folk art is often utilitarian and learned informally, expressing shared culture preserved through items such as wrought-iron gates, furniture, woven rugs and handmade tools. The distinction, however, does not mean folk art cannot be equally as beautiful. Beauty and function can coexist, as in the fabrics woven by artist Vickie Viperman.

Vickie is part of a movement called “slow cloth,” which promotes sustainable practices and values high quality over quantity. Using silk, cotton, bamboo and dyed hemp yarns, Vickie creates functional fabrics she uses to construct

clothing and accessories. A perusal of the shawls, scarves, wraps and other wearables she has made is like looking at a rainbow painted by Claude Monet.

Vickie’s interest in fiber arts began early. She sewed her first dress from a bed sheet at age 8.

“Unfortunately, I didn’t understand seams or buttons yet,” she says. “Later, I began weaving potholders and made so many that I went door to door in the neighborhood selling them. In high school, I made clothes for myself, other people and our local hippie shop. But in college, at the University of Georgia art department, I discovered fiber arts as a specialty and began a lifelong passion with weaving, having no idea that it would lead to a career.”

Mixing folk art with fine art, Vickie also creates beautiful contemporary wall art. These pieces include woven landscapes and interesting word weavings that entice viewers to step in close to see all the details.

One such piece—a mixed media depiction of newspaper headlines from the Nashville flood of 2010—is in the permanent collection of the Tennessee State Museum. Another showcases text from seven spiritual faiths.

“The use of our hands to produce functional items goes back to the beginning of time,” Vickie says. “Even computer systems are based on the same binary system as weaving. Preservation of the skills that have led to our modern times must never be forgotten.

“What happens when the electricity goes off? I can still weave. The potter can still manipulate clay. Craft is the essence of creation, the satisfaction of a job well done and the magic of something new made with the human touch.”

Visit vickievippermanweavingstudio.com to see more of Vickie's work. Her handwoven clothing and accessories are also available at Shimai Gallery of Contemporary Craft behind Loveless Cafe in Nashville.

Art for Everyone

One does not have to be a working artist to enjoy learning folk arts. Fun and community are why Fritsl Butler Padgett has traveled from her home in Chattanooga to Cumberland Folk School in Sequatchie to take a number of workshops—from Japanese cooking to candlemaking and kudzu basket weaving.

"It's so important to me to learn to do

basketry, broom-making, woodworking, spoon carving, woodworking, textile design, cooking, baking, breadmaking, butchering, fermentation, food preservation, mushroom foraging, bird-watching, herbal medicine, bookmaking and other farm-based skills.

"It is important to us from so many angles to preserve and teach traditional crafts and skills," Carroll says. "In one way, we are simply fascinated by the variety of aesthetics developed by different groups of people over time. It tells a story of people and places through the unique styles and the natural materials specific to a craft tradition. Our

and goals," she says. "We hear again and again from our students that the classes are a nourishing experience, a refreshing way to connect with others."

That connection was one of the reasons Mary Morrow, of Lookout Mountain, Georgia, started taking classes at Cumberland Folk School. She was going through a difficult time in her life and was looking for a positive, creative way to connect with others. She found it through classes on broom-making, candlemaking, basket weaving, birding by ear, and building wooden Shaker boxes and baskets.

"I love folk art and the enrichment from the classes," says Mary, a self-taught painter specializing in acrylic and watercolor oceanscapes. "I value something that doesn't value perfectionism. Folk art is particularly unique because it's for anyone and everyone."

Carroll points out that in a society where the standard is to purchase mass-produced items, often factory-made at the expense of environmental and social health, the folk school's classes provide an opportunity for individuals to reclaim the slow satisfaction of making something unique with their own hands, while considering the natural resources and knowledge required to make it.

"We hope to provide the skills for individuals to make utilitarian objects, food and other items for themselves, but also to instill an appreciation for the skill and time required by others to create handmade items, encouraging people to support community craftspeople and handmade, ethically produced products," she says. ■

I value something that doesn't value perfectionism. Folk art is particularly unique because it's for anyone and everyone.

—Mary Morrow

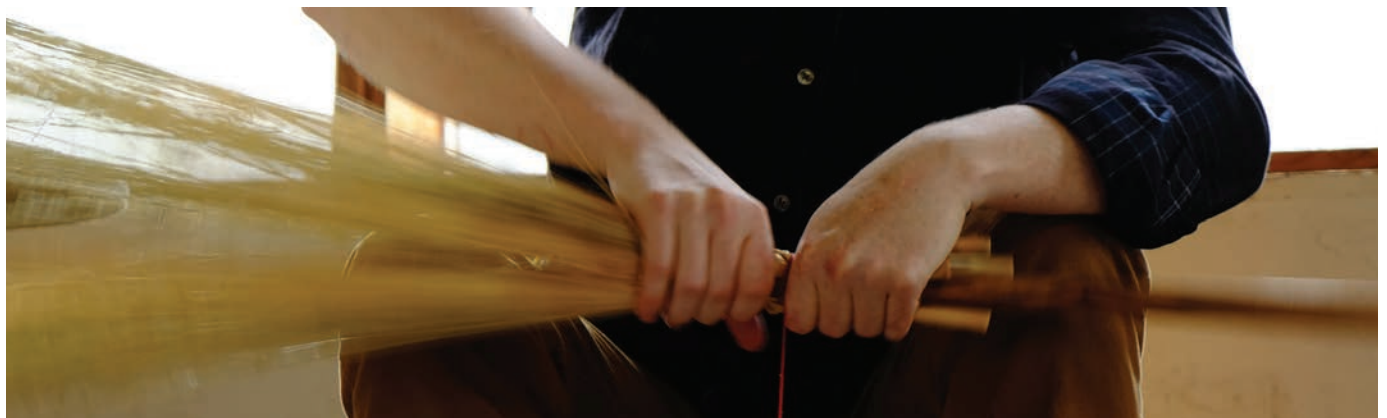
things with my hands," Fritsl says. "These crafts are such important links to our shared culture, and in a time when we can click and tap and have things simply appear in our lives, it's important to me to be reminded that they can be and are created by human hands. They aren't esoteric skills. Anyone can do it, whether you're an accomplished artist or not."

Cumberland Folk School was started in 2021 by friends Carroll Candler and Ashley Keener on Ashley's family farm, Sequatchie Cove Farm. The school focuses on self-reliance with classes in natural dyeing, quilting, mending, sewing,

classes celebrate traditional crafts and practices from all over the world, which demonstrates the diversity and beauty of humankind, which we find so enriching."

From another angle, Carroll says the school exists as a space to engage in the tradition of passing down skills and knowledge in person, from one community member to the next.

"This is an effective way for individuals to gain skills, but it is also a community-strengthening activity—to gather those who have knowledge to share and those who want to learn, and to connect individuals who have common interests



WHERE TO LEARN

If you have ever thought of trying your hand at folk art, there are a lot of options for workshops and schools across the state.

The following are places where you can learn from folk artists, explore various types of art and begin a journey to keeping these art forms alive and well.

- ▶ **Appalachian Center for Craft at Tennessee Tech:** This major hub near Center Hill Lake offers academic programs, workshops and exhibitions blending Appalachian and contemporary crafts. tntech.edu/fine-arts/craftcenter/index.php
- ▶ **Appalachian Arts Craft Center in Clinton:** This nonprofit center promotes such traditional crafts as blacksmithing, pottery and weaving through classes, studios and a market. appalachianarts.net
- ▶ **Cumberland Folk School in Sequatchie:** The school is a place to preserve, teach, celebrate and commune around traditional crafts and skills. cumberlandfolkschool.com
- ▶ **Tennessee Folklife Institute, run by the Tennessee Arts Commission:** Students participate in immersive workshops for documenting and preserving Tennessee's diverse cultural traditions, often held in the Upper Cumberland area of the state. tnfolklife.org/programs/tennessee-folklife-institute
- ▶ **Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg:** This national center for craft education offers workshops in a beautiful Smoky Mountain setting. arrowmont.org
- ▶ **The Clay Lady campus in Nashville:** Each week, hundreds of students and artists of all ages and levels enhance their creative endeavors. theclaylady.com
- ▶ **Tennessee Craft:** This network of more than 500 craft artists and craft art communities is dedicated to uplifting the past and present of handmade crafts.
Members practice a variety of art forms, including leatherwork, basketry, jewelry, printmaking, furniture building, woodworking and metalworking. There are seven active chapters across the state. tennesseecraft.org
- ▶ **Tennessee Craft Week:** The first week of October each year is designated Tennessee Craft Week. Events are held across the state to celebrate traditional and contemporary craft arts.
These events provide the opportunity to meet artists and buy their handmade crafts and folk art. Among the events is the popular annual Tennessee Craft Fair, held in Nashville. tennesseecraft.org/tennessee-craft-week



OPPOSITE PAGE AND LEFT: Broom-making and basket weaving are two popular workshops offered at the Cumberland Folk School. PHOTOS COURTESY OF CLOVERLAND FOLK SCHOOL

RIGHT: A view out the window overlooks the tranquil Sequatchie Cove Farm, where Cumberland Folk School's craft workshops take place.





As Sweet as Honey



Spring brings buzzing bees and blooming flowers, making it the perfect season to celebrate nature's golden treasure: honey. This versatile ingredient adds natural sweetness and depth to sweet and savory dishes while offering a touch of wholesome goodness. From breakfast treats to satisfying dinners, honey enhances flavors in unexpected ways. These recipes showcase honey's incredible range—proving this ancient sweetener is as relevant in today's kitchen as ever.

HONEY CINNAMON ROLLUPS

- 2 cups ground walnuts, toasted
- ¼ cup sugar
- 2 teaspoons cinnamon
- 12 sheets frozen phyllo dough, thawed
- ½ cup butter, melted

SYRUP

- ½ cup honey
- ½ cup sugar
- ½ cup water
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice

Heat oven to 350 F. Mix walnuts, sugar and cinnamon. Place one sheet of phyllo dough on a 12-by-15-inch piece of wax paper. Brush dough with butter.

Place another phyllo sheet on top, and brush it with butter. Keep remaining phyllo covered with a damp towel to prevent it from drying out.

Sprinkle dough sheets with ¼ cup of walnut mixture. Using wax paper, roll up tightly jelly-roll style, starting with a long side and removing paper as you roll.

Cut roll into four smaller rolls. Line rolls in a greased 9-by-13-inch baking dish. Repeat with remaining phyllo dough and ¼ cupfuls of walnut mixture.



Bake until golden brown, 14 to 16 minutes. Cool dish on a wire rack.

Meanwhile, in a small saucepan, combine all syrup ingredients. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat, and simmer for 5 minutes. Cool for 10 minutes.

Drizzle cinnamon rollups with syrup. Sprinkle with remaining walnut mixture.



ORANGE, HONEY AND THYME SQUARES

- ¾ cup nonfat buttermilk
- 2 tablespoons clover honey
- 2 teaspoons chopped fresh thyme
- 2 teaspoons grated orange rind
- 10 ounces spelt flour
- 5 teaspoons baking powder
- ¼ teaspoon kosher salt
- 5½ tablespoons chilled butter, cut into small pieces
- Cooking spray

Heat oven to 425 F.

Combine buttermilk, honey, thyme and orange rind in a small bowl, stirring with a whisk. Combine flour, baking powder and salt in a medium bowl. Stir with a whisk.

Cut butter into flour mixture with a pastry cutter or two knives until mixture resembles coarse meal. Add buttermilk mixture to flour mixture, stirring just until moist. Turn dough out onto a lightly floured surface. Pat into a 7½-inch square, and cut into 12 rectangles.

Place dough on a foil-lined baking sheet coated with cooking spray. Bake for 13 minutes or until lightly browned on edges and bottom.



OATS AND HONEY GRANOLA BARS

- 3 cups old-fashioned oats
- 2 cups unsweetened crispy rice cereal
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- ½ cup chopped walnuts
- ½ cup miniature semisweet chocolate chips
- ½ cup raisins
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1 cup honey
- ¼ cup butter, melted
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- Cooking spray

Heat oven to 350 F. In a large mixing bowl, combine first eight ingredients. In a separate bowl, combine honey, butter and vanilla. Pour over oat mixture, and mix well.

Press into a 13-by-9-inch baking pan coated with cooking spray. Bake 14 to 18 minutes or until set and edges are lightly browned. Cool on a wire rack. Cut into bars.



ADOBE STOCK IMAGES BY NATASHA, POLINART, ALESMUNT, MARKRADEMAKER



HONEY LIME CHICKEN KABOBS

- 1 pound skinless, boneless chicken breast, cut into 1-inch cubes
- 2 teaspoons grated lime rind
- 2 teaspoons minced garlic
- 1 teaspoon chili powder, plus extra for sprinkling
- ¼ teaspoon kosher salt
- 2 tablespoons fresh lime juice
- 1 tablespoon honey
- Cooking spray

Heat broiler to high.

Combine first five ingredients, and toss to coat. Thread chicken onto skewers. Place kebabs on a broiler pan coated with cooking spray. Broil 4 minutes on each side or until done.

Mix juice and honey in a small bowl. Arrange kebabs on a platter. Drizzle with honey mixture, and sprinkle with chili powder.





9

Ways to Turn Your Garden Into a Pollinator Paradise

By Jodi Helmer

Sure, asters, salvia, coneflowers and lavender add curb appeal, but a garden full of colorful, nectar-producing flowers also attracts bees, butterflies, hummingbirds and other pollinators.

Pollinators are critical to the ecosystem: More than 85% of flowering plants—including two-thirds of our food crops from almonds and apples to pumpkins and zucchini—depend on pollination to reproduce.

Despite the essential role of pollinators, their populations are at risk—and gardeners are taking action. Increased awareness about the importance of protecting pollinators has led more gardeners to transform their landscapes into pollinator havens.

Here are nine ways to turn your yard into a pollinator paradise.

Choose native plants. Native plants are adapted to certain geographic regions and thrive in those specific climates. Cardinal flower, blazing star, phlox, buttonbush and verbena are among the native pollinator plants recommended for Tennessee gardens.

Unlike non-native species, which might not have enough nectar or pollen to support pollinators, native plants provide the perfect resources for bees, butterflies and other pollinators to thrive. For more information, visit tnyards.utk.edu.

Diversify your landscape. Different pollinators are attracted to different flowers: Bees are attracted to white and blue flowers; hummingbirds prefer orange and red tubular-shaped flowers; and bats like green and purple flowers with a strong fragrance.

Choosing plants with a greater diversity of colors, shapes and scents in your garden will help attract different kinds of pollinators.

Plant patches of flowers. A diversified landscape is important, but it's also a good idea to group several of the same flowers in one area of the garden. It's easier for pollinators to spot nectar-rich blooms when there are larger masses of flowers.

Consider creating several larger clumps of flowers rather than scattering single plants around the landscape to make it easier for pollinators to see your garden as an abundant food source.

Think beyond summer. A lush garden in the spring and summer is great, but pollinators need food all year. Look for species that provide continual blooms during all four seasons.



In Tennessee, sneezeweed, swamp sunflower and wild bergamot bloom through the fall, and the seed heads on plants like black-eyed Susan, purple coneflower and coreopsis provide food for birds. Not a green thumb? Ask your local nursery professional for advice.

Offer water. Pollinators need fresh water. A shallow dish or birdbath are great options—but be sure to place some half-submerged stones in the water to give insect pollinators a place to perch while they quench their thirst; if the water is too deep, pollinators will drown.

Grow less grass. Replacing some of your lawn with a garden or wildflower meadow—or over-seeding with clover—can boost pollinator food supply.

Replacing the lawn with native plants also requires less maintenance because it never needs to be mowed. If your homeowners association or city code requires you to have a manicured lawn, let clover go to flower before mowing; it's one small action that can help pollinators.

Use less mulch. Mulch is ideal for controlling weeds and retaining moisture, but it can prevent certain bee species from finding suitable nesting spots. Several

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Choosing plants with a greater diversity of colors, shapes and scents in your garden will help attract different kinds of pollinators.

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native bee species nest in the ground and need access to bare soil to dig nests and raise their babies. Leaving some “mulch-free” zones in the garden can ensure these bees will call your yard home.

In areas of the garden covered in mulch, skip cedar mulch because it can be toxic to some bees.

Provide nesting spots. Other pollinators, including birds, beetles and wood-nesting bees, prefer to build their nests in dead tree trunks—called snags—or small stacks of twigs. Adding these

features to your garden gives pollinators suitable places to nest and reproduce.

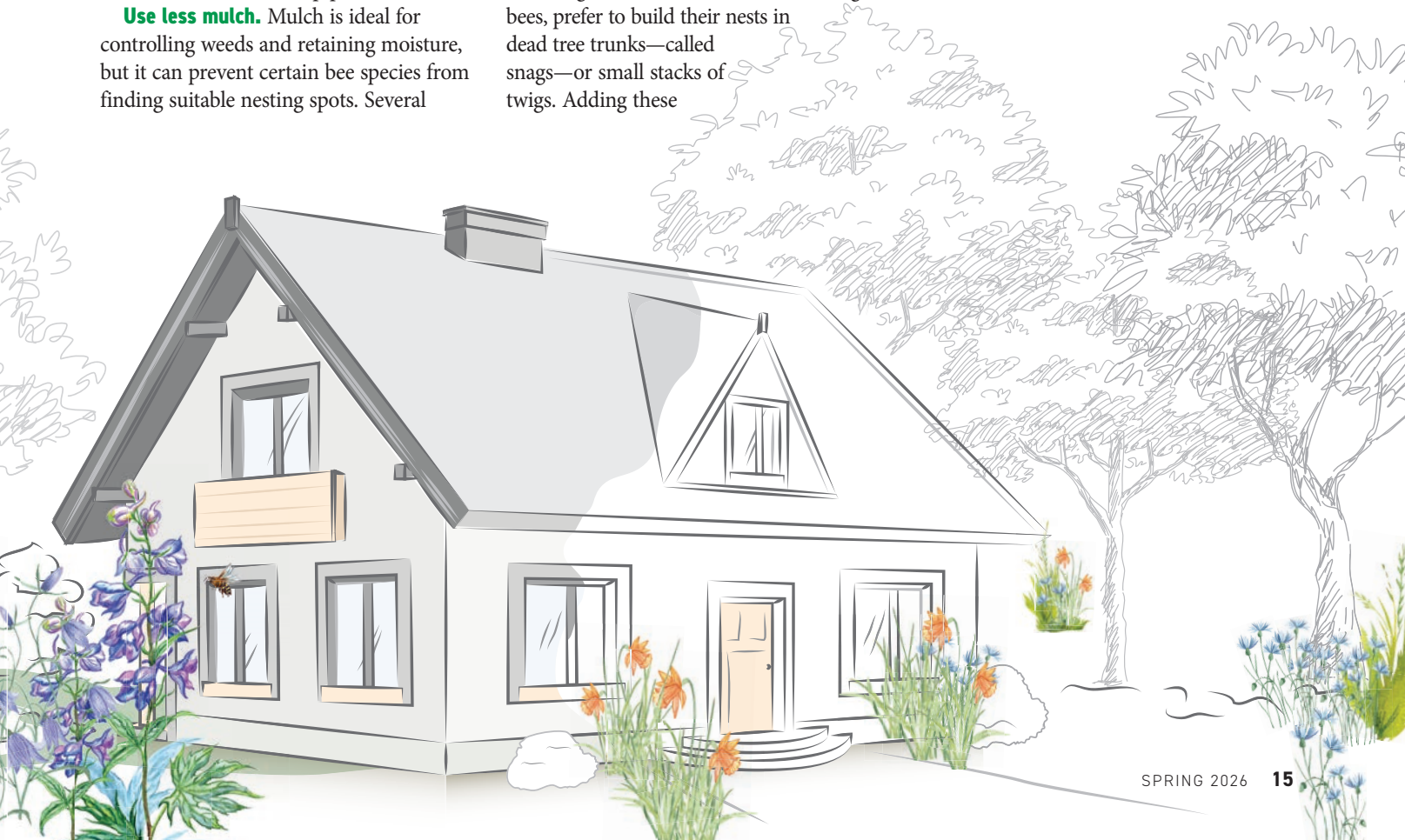
Bee hotels are another option. You can make these small structures, which offer a series of nesting spots, or purchase one online and watch pollinators move in.

Embrace organic pest control.

Insecticides were designed to kill insects—and that includes pollinators. Using beneficial insects or other natural and organic pest-control methods helps keep pollinators safe.

If you must spray, choose an organic product and only apply it to infested plants. Selective spraying—rather than treating the entire garden—helps limit the amount of chemicals used and reduces the impact on pollinators.

Taking a few small steps to make your garden more welcoming for bees, butterflies and birds can greatly impact pollinator populations. ■



TENNESSEE CONNECTIONS

PLANNER

From art-forward music festivals and sweet small-town traditions to smoky barbecue and spring craft fairs, Tennessee's spring calendar is packed with reasons to get outside.



SEVIERVILLE

May 15-16

Bloomin' BBQ

Music & Food Festival

Downtown Sevierville fills with smoky barbecue, live bluegrass, arts and crafts, and kid-friendly fun during this two-day celebration. Enjoy barbecue competitions, toe-tapping music and a lively festival atmosphere. Admission and concerts are free.

bloominbbq.com

PHOTO COURTESY OF BLOOMIN' BBQ MUSIC & FOOD FESTIVAL

MORRISTOWN

March 19

Live at Rose Center Presents: Interval

A free, all-ages concert is from 7-9 p.m. Formed in 2022 by members of the Sequatchie River Band, Interval explores an indie/alt-rock sound rooted in original compositions and early-2000s favorites, with a few classics mixed in for good measure. The band rehearses and records at its off-grid home studio, Vibe HQ, tucked into the Sequatchie Valley mountains. Concertgoers are encouraged to bring their own beverages and settle in for a laid-back evening of live music.

rosecenter.org

MONTEREY

April 4

Fifth Annual Banana Pudding Festival

Downtown Monterey's spring sweet celebration features banana pudding tastings, artisan vendors, pony rides, food trucks and a petting zoo. The public judges its favorite pudding in a friendly competition—a tasty outing for all ages. Admission is free, and banana pudding tastings on the Puddin' Path are \$5.

centerhillevents.com

COLUMBIA

April 9-11

Mule Day

A beloved tradition since the 1840s, Mule Day began as a livestock show and mule market and has grown into a multiday festival drawing thousands each year. Events include square dancing, mule-driving contests, horse shows, crafts, flea markets, and traditional Appalachian food and music. The signature Mule Day Parade steps off at 11 a.m. Saturday.

visitcolumbiatn.com/events/mule-day

MURFREESBORO

April 25

Tennessee Apple Festival

Bring the whole family for a full day of spring fun featuring apple-themed treats, live music, a kids zone and more than 150 vendors from six states. Guests can browse vintage finds, handmade goods, art, clothing and garden decor while enjoying food from more than 15 food trucks.

centerhillevents.com

SHELBY FOREST

April 25-26

Shelby Forest Spring Fest

Shelby Forest State Park welcomes attendees to a free, family-friendly spring celebration. The celebration includes live music, outdoor activities, nature exhibits, a hillbilly costume contest, mechanical bull, face-painting, a hot sauce eating contest and local vendors. Attendees are invited to bring their pups for a dog show.

shelbyforestspringfest.com

SPRINGFIELD

May-October

First Fridays

Springfield's free downtown events return the first Friday of each month starting in May. Expect live music, food trucks, local vendors, a kids' zone and a specialty vehicle cruise-in—all designed to bring families together for relaxed spring and summer evenings.

springfieldtn.gov/703/1st-Fridays

For a complete list of what's happening in Tennessee, visit tnvacation.com/calendar.

NASHVILLE

May 1-3

55th Annual Spring Tennessee Craft Fair

One of the state's premier craft events, this free festival fills Centennial Park's Great Lawn with artisans offering pottery, jewelry, textiles, woodwork and more. Meet the artists, shop one-of-a-kind pieces and enjoy a family-friendly spring tradition. conservancyonline.com/events/tennesseecraftspring

SMITHVILLE

May 16

Sixth Annual Middle TN Cornbread Festival & Car Show

One of Middle Tennessee's favorite spring outings returns with cornbread cook-offs, artisan vendors, classic cars, live music and plenty of free family fun. Held in downtown Smithville, the festival celebrates local food culture and community spirit. centerhillevents.com

MORRISTOWN

May 30

Between the Lakes Blues Festival

The festival returns to the historic Rose Center grounds for an afternoon of live music from noon to 6 p.m. Headliner Wayne Baker Brooks joins regional favorites for a family-friendly outdoor celebration featuring local vendors, food and a welcoming atmosphere. rosecenter.org



FRANKLIN

April 11

Nashville Cherry Blossom Festival

Each spring, Nashville celebrates the blooming of its cherry trees and the long-standing friendship between Japan and the United States. The festival begins with a cherry blossom walk and continues at Public Square Park with Japanese cultural demonstrations, exhibits, children's activities and live entertainment. nashvillecherryblossomfestival.org

PHOTO COURTESY OF NASHVILLE CHERRY BLOSSOM FESTIVAL



ADOBE STOCK IMAGES BY ECCO, ELENAVECTOR44, YARM, DESIGNERTHC



HUMBOLDT

May 3-9

West Tennessee Strawberry Festival

Now in its 88th year, Tennessee's largest and longest-running festival celebrates community, tradition and—of course—strawberries. The weeklong event features parades, carnival rides, pageants, recipe contests, live music, fireworks and plenty of sweet, seasonal treats. strawberryfestivaltn.com

PHOTO COURTESY OF WEST TENNESSEE STRAWBERRY FESTIVAL



Include Your Upcoming Event

Want to share an event with the readers of Tennessee Connections? Please visit tinyurl.com/TennesseeEvents or scan the QR code to submit the details. Thank you.

Drinking Water Week May 3-9

Erwin Utilities proudly celebrates its ongoing commitment to excellence as the recipient of two Awards of Excellence at the 2025 American Water Works Association Kentucky/Tennessee Water Professionals Conference.

The Distribution System Operations and Plant Operations awards underscore our team's dedication to delivering safe, reliable, high-quality drinking water to our customers every day.

From left are Murfreesboro Water Resources Community Affairs Manager Sharon Seibert, Erwin Utilities Director of Water and Wastewater Jason Foster, PE, and Luke Williams, PE, SSR Engineering water and wastewater engineer and 2025 chair of the Kentucky/Tennessee Section of the AWWA.



LINEMAN APPRECIATION DAY APRIL 18

Thank you to our linemen for the hard work you do every day!





Employee Spotlight

KALA ALLEN

Certified Power Supervisor Certificate



Kala Allen was recognized for earning the CPSv designation during the Tennessee Valley Public Power Association's Annual Customer Experience Conference in November 2025. The CPSv program equips utility supervisors with advanced leadership skills, a strong focus on safety, and the technical knowledge needed to manage utility operations and support organizational excellence effectively.

RANDY ARROWOOD

Grade III Wastewater Treatment Certification



Randy Arrowood has earned his Grade III Wastewater Treatment Certification, required by the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, which ensures operators have the skills and knowledge to manage wastewater systems. Over the past 18 months, Randy dedicated himself to studying and preparing for the achievement—even while supporting recovery efforts following Hurricane Helene. His commitment to learning and professional growth strengthens his team, Erwin Utilities and the service we provide to the community—reflecting his dedication to excellence and the protection of our water resources.

AUSTIN FINCH

Young Professional of the Year



Austin Finch was recognized as Young Professional of the Year at the Tennessee Economic Development Council Fall Conference for his outstanding leadership,

dedication and service during the community's recovery following Hurricane Helene. His efforts played a meaningful role in supporting coordination, resilience and progress during a critical time, reflecting a strong commitment to public service and economic development.

DAWSON GAMBRELL

Journeyman Lineman Achievement



Erwin Utilities is proud to recognize Dawson Gambrell for completing the Lineman Apprenticeship Program and earning the title of Journeyman Lineman.

This achievement reflects Dawson's dedication, strong work ethic, and commitment to safety, efficiency and reliable service. His hard work and perseverance exemplify the skilled professionals who help keep our community powered every day.

NOE'L SLAGLE

40 Under Forty



Noe'l Slagle was recognized among the 33rd class of 40 Under Forty honorees on Nov. 8. As Executive Assistant at Erwin Utilities, she plays a key role in supporting executive leadership and coordinating critical projects. Through her professionalism, service and integrity, Noe'l exemplifies the next generation of leadership in Unicoi County.



WELCOME
to our team!

Erwin Fiber | Erwin Utilities

Kelse Watts
Water | Wastewater Laborer

ADVENTURE AWAITS

Find Southern charm
and big thrills at

Dollywood

What Is It?

Dollywood is a 165-acre theme park in Pigeon Forge that blends high-energy rides with Appalachian culture, live music and Southern foodways. Co-owned by country music legend Dolly Parton, the park is known for world-class roller coasters alongside crafts, storytelling and seasonal festivals celebrating the Smoky Mountains. Spring brings fresh blooms and a packed entertainment lineup.

A Bit of Background

The park opened in 1986 on the site of the former Silver Dollar City Tennessee and was renamed Dollywood when Dolly became a partner. Since then, it has grown into one of the most awarded theme parks in the world, often recognized for customer service, cleanliness and food. Dollywood's mission is rooted in honoring the people, traditions and music of the Southern Appalachians.

What to Do

Thrill-seekers can tackle headline coasters like Lightning Rod, Wild Eagle and Big Bear Mountain, while younger riders gravitate to family-friendly attractions in Wildwood Grove. Live shows run throughout the day, featuring gospel, bluegrass and country music performed by award-winning musicians. Craftsman's Valley is a must-stop, where blacksmiths, glassblowers and woodworkers demonstrate traditional skills. In spring, the Festival of Flowers fills the park with thousands of blooms and larger-than-life floral sculptures—perfect for photos.

Beyond the Park

Just a few minutes from Dollywood, families can start the day with a classic Smoky Mountain breakfast at The Old Mill Restaurant, known for hearty Southern staples. Nearby, The Pancake Pantry in Gatlinburg is a longtime favorite for made-from-scratch breakfasts. For a slower-paced break, a drive through Great Smoky Mountains National Park offers scenic overlooks and short hikes. Back in town, The Island in Pigeon Forge provides shopping, dining and evening entertainment.

PHOTO COURTESY
OF DOLLYWOOD

More Info

Dollywood opens for the season Friday, March 13, and operates 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. for most of spring. Ticket prices vary by date and demand, with discounts available for multiday passes and children ages 4–9. Parking is available on-site for a daily fee, with complimentary tram service to the entrance. For current hours, festival dates, ticket options and accessibility information, visit dollywood.com or call 800-DOLLYWOOD.

SCOUTING for Pests

ADOBE STOCK PHOTOS BY ROMAN TIRASPOLSKY, SVETLANA GLAZKOVA, SERGIU

For gardeners, few things are more exciting than the onset of spring. The warm weather brings a flurry of activity to gardens across Tennessee. From trees leaving their winter slumber to vegetable transplants going in the ground, the wonder is seemingly endless.

Unfortunately, spring also brings a lot of unwanted visitors, as well. From insects to fungal pathogens, pests begin their activity almost in unison with your plants. When it comes to garden pests, though, there is one strategy that can, and should, be constantly used—scouting.

Scouting is the process of a gardener going into their garden to look for and evaluate potential problems. Good scouting helps catch problems early and ensures they are properly identified before spending time, money and energy correcting them. Here are some tips to get you started:

Symptoms & Signs

Before you start scouting, it's important to understand symptoms and signs. While symptoms and signs often go hand in hand, they are two very different things.

Put very simply, a symptom is the effect that a pest has on a plant's growth or appearance. A few examples of symptoms include leaf yellowing, or chlorosis, abnormal leaf drop and wilting. In contrast to a symptom, a sign is the physical presence of a pest. Some examples of signs include powdery mildew, honeydew, egg masses and larvae.

Now that symptoms and signs have been defined, it's time to talk about scouting for them. When scouting for symptoms and signs, it helps to be slow, methodical and thorough. Look at plant stems, under leaves, in the soil and even in areas outside your garden. It is also a good idea to look under eaves, rocks, lumber and firewood, as these areas can provide ideal habitats for pests. Some problems, such as feeding damage, may be pretty obvious,

but others, such as a bacterial or viral infection, can be a little tougher to identify.

Take Pictures

There are many great tools for scouting in the garden, but perhaps the best is a high-quality camera. While it does take some practice, a clear, detailed and high-quality picture will go a long way. As you are out and about in your garden, you may see several new pests, and having a good photo will provide a reference on what was seen. Additionally, many phone apps, such as Google Lens and iNaturalist, can search and compare images. These apps are a wonderful resource, though they can be finicky at times. The clearer the image, the better chances that the apps will be able to identify the pest.

Take Samples

If a picture is worth 1,000 words, an actual insect or disease sample may be worth 10,000. If you find a problem in the garden, remember that both the University of Tennessee and Tennessee State University have extension agents and specialists across the state who are available to assist the community.

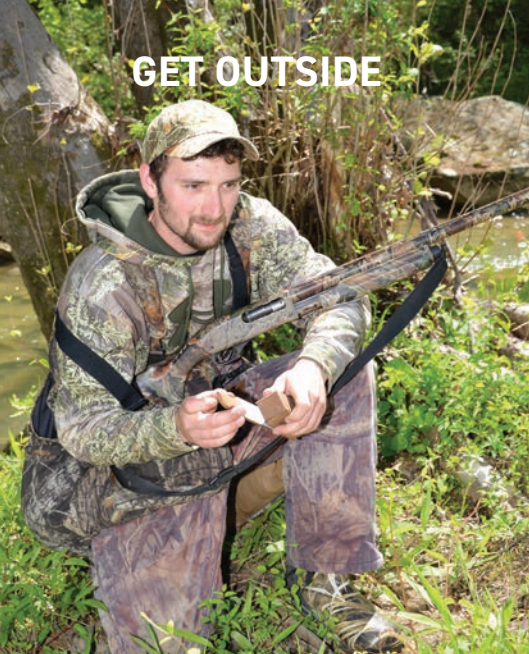
Stop by any extension office with your photos and a few samples of the pest or disease. These offices are equipped with the resources to identify a number of plant issues. Additionally, the UT Soil, Plant and Pest Center will process plant submissions for minimal cost. ■

Visit tinyurl.com/ControlGardenInsects for more information.



Rylan Thompson is a University of Tennessee Agriculture & Natural Resources agent in Franklin County. His responsibilities include Production Agriculture, Nursery Production and the Master Gardener program.

GET OUTSIDE



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: Jake Mardis uses a box call to bring in turkeys while hunting near LaFollette. Bob Hodge sets a decoy for a turkey hunt. Former world champion turkey caller Eddie Salter serves as emcee at a turkey-calling contest. PHOTOS BY JOHN N. FELSHER

Tomfoolery

Bring in the wily birds with these turkey-calling tips

Many sportsmen turn to turkey hunting in spring. Tennessee sportsmen ages 6 to 16 can hunt turkeys April 4-5. For everyone else, the season runs April 11 through May 24. Regulations and season dates may vary across some public hunting areas, so always check the rules.

To hunt turkeys, most sportsmen pretend to be a turkey to call real birds into range. In the spring, a tom turkey, or gobbler, booms out his signature call to summon his harem of hens or warn other gobblers to keep away from his territory.

Toms might also gobble as they go to roost at sunset, telling everyone goodnight. Turkeys also gobble reactively when startled by loud sounds, such as a crow or owl calling.

In turkey hunting, more doesn't always mean better. Many novice hunters think if they call more, they will bring in more gobblers. That's seldom true.

"I think many turkey hunters call too much," says Eddie "The Turkey Man" Salter, a legendary turkey hunter and former world champion turkey caller. "When the turkey is coming to the call, shut up to avoid making a mistake. One sour note and that bird is gone."

Because toms always want to breed with as many hens as possible, imitate a hen he hasn't met yet. Just after first light, make three or four soft yelps. If a gobbler answers, play hard to get. Answer with a single yelp. Then, stay silent and still. That gobbler won't know exactly where the sound originated, but it might arouse his curiosity enough to investigate.

"I use two different calls at the same time," Eddie says. "I use a slate call and a mouth call or a box call and a mouth call to make

two different tones to sound like two different hens. With one mouth call, I can make a clear call and then make a really raspy call. I might mix in a box call or a slate call. I want that wily old gobbler to think he has four or five girlfriends waiting for him."

Sometimes gobblers come running to calls, but typically one cautiously approaches to determine where the sound originated. It might "hang up," staying some distance away, watching and listening intently to locate the hen and check for danger.

"When a gobbler hangs up, I'll run the mouth call and a slate call to sound like two different turkeys," Eddie says. "Then, I'll pop my hat on my leg to sound like turkeys fighting. When I've done that, I've had gobblers hung up 75 or 100 yards away break and come in running. If that turkey hangs up in thick cover or behind a hill, which is common in Tennessee, people can get away with a little movement."

Sportsmen can learn to call turkeys by watching videos from master callers. Eddie suggests attending calling competitions. Most competitors enjoy talking about turkey calling after the contest ends. ■

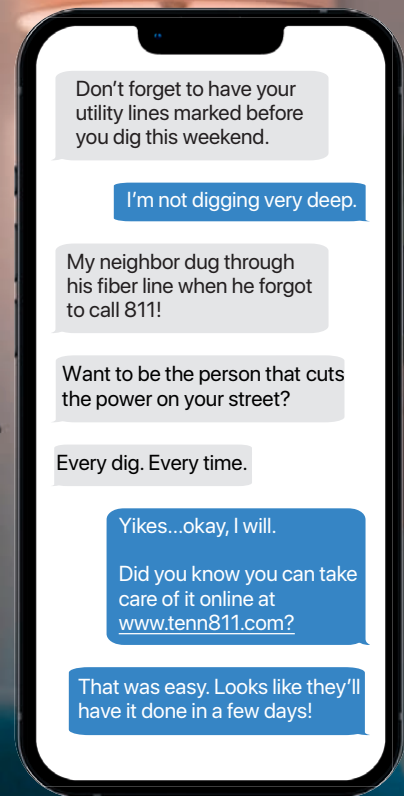
For more about the Turkey Man, see theturkeyman.com.



John N. Felsler is a professional freelance writer, broadcaster, photographer, editor and consultant. An avid sportsman, he's written more than 3,600 articles for more than 170 different magazines on a wide variety of outdoors topics. He also hosts an outdoors tips show for WAVH-FM Talk 106.5 radio station in Mobile, Alabama. Contact him at j.felsler@hotmail.com or through Facebook.



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Memorial Day: May 25

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Lee Brown Receives 40 Under Forty Lifetime Achievement Award

At the conclusion of the recent 40 Under Forty ceremony, Business Journal of Tri-Cities Publisher Bill Derby recognized Erwin Utilities President and CEO Lee Brown for his long-standing support of the program and commitment to nominating young professionals from his community each year.

“40 Under Forty has always been a passion of mine,” Brown said. “It’s about shining a light on the rising stars in our community—those who work hard professionally and give of themselves to make our community a better place.”

Known for his leadership across Northeast Tennessee and the state, Brown’s influence extends beyond Erwin Utilities into the broader utility industry and regional development efforts. He has played an active role in community and industry organizations, including the Joint Economic Development Board, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and the Tennessee Center for Performance Excellence, and was a visible leader during Hurricane Helene recovery efforts in Erwin and Unicoi County.

Brown is widely respected for a leadership style focused on empowering others. By mentoring and encouraging young leaders, he helps cultivate confidence, creativity and a commitment to service. Employees describe him as a leader who listens, leads by example, and fosters a culture of respect, teamwork, and continuous improvement.

Reflecting on the recognition, Brown shared, “it reminded me how vital it is that we carry that forward-investing in the growth, development, and recognition of the young leaders coming behind us. You can’t put a price on the gift of a mentor. And there’s no greater privilege than becoming that steady hand, that voice of guidance, for the rising stars in our community and bringing recognition to their accomplishments.” ■



Business Journal of Tri-Cities Publisher Bill Derby, right, presents Erwin Utilities President and CEO Lee Brown with the 40 Under Forty Lifetime Achievement Award. PHOTO BY NEIKIRK IMAGE PHOTOGRAPHY

ARTICLE COURTESY OF THE BUSINESS JOURNAL OF TRI-CITIES TN/VA