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MAY 2023

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ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE LIVING



**Nominate an outstanding
community volunteer**

**Tips for growing
delicious tomatoes**

Best beef recipes

Win a \$100 gift card to a local garden center ▶ See Page 3

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ON THE COVER

Special thanks to Kate Hindin, a Franklin Rural Electric Cooperative member-consumer, for supplying this month's cover image. Submit high-resolution photos for consideration to editor@ieclmagazine.com. You could receive \$100!

STAY SAFE DURING THE SPRING SEASON

BY SCOTT MEINECKE



May is Electrical Safety Month, and it's a great opportunity to share some safety tips as many Iowans spend more time outdoors planting

crops, doing yardwork or enjoying the springtime weather. Take a few moments to review the following safety precautions with your family this month.

Safety in the field

As you head into the fields this season, always keep a 10-foot clearance between equipment and power lines. Take time to study where all overhead power lines, poles and guy wires are located on your property and make sure any workers are also aware.

Plan your route between fields and on public roads to avoid low-hanging power lines; never attempt to raise or move a power line to clear a path. When moving large equipment or high loads near a power line, always use a spotter to avoid contact with a line.

If equipment comes into contact with a power line, assume the line is energized and deadly. The operator should NOT get off the machinery unless in immediate danger. If the operator touches the ground and the equipment at the same time, they will become a channel for electricity.

Instead, the operator should stay on the equipment and immediately contact the local electric utility or 911 to report the incident so electricity can be shut off safely before exiting.

When thunder roars, go indoors

There is no safe place from lightning when you're outside. It's important to be aware of weather forecasts and watch for developing thunderstorms, as lightning can strike many miles ahead of a storm front. If you hear thunder, seek shelter immediately



because it indicates lightning is within 10 miles. Authorities warn against outdoor activity until 30 minutes after the last clap of thunder is heard. Sign up for free county emergency notifications at www.alert.iowa.gov.

Call before you dig

Spring is prime time for landscaping projects and home improvement projects. Remember to contact Iowa One Call at least two business days before you dig so underground utilities can be properly located and marked. It's the law, and it could just save your life! Buried utility lines are everywhere, and an underground utility line is damaged every few

minutes in the U.S. because someone decided to dig without calling 811 first.

Move over or slow down

We need your help keeping our lineworkers, engineers and maintenance workers safe on Iowa's roadways. If you see any vehicle stopped on the side of the road with flashing lights activated, you are required by law to move over or slow down, preferably both. Please give our employees room on the road to work safely; their families thank you!

Scott Meinecke is the director of safety and loss control for the Iowa Association of Electric Cooperatives.

EDITOR'S CHOICE CONTEST

Win a \$100 gift card to a local garden center!



It's gardening season! Whether you are planting a vegetable garden or a pollinator habitat, it's rewarding to create the perfect backyard oasis. To help your garden grow or add plants for the beneficial pollinators, we're giving away a \$100 gift card from a local nursery!

Visit our website and win!

Enter this month's contest by visiting www.ieclmagazine.com no later than May 31, 2023. You must be a member of one of Iowa's electric cooperatives to win. There's no obligation associated with entering, we don't share entrant information with anyone and multiple entries from the same account will be disqualified. The winner of the Kitchen Aid Cold Brew Maker from the March issue was Philip Orndorff from Chariton Valley Electric Cooperative.

ENTER ONLINE BY MAY 31!

NOMINATE A COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER IN JUNE

Your nominee could win \$2,500 for their local charity

Iowa's electric cooperatives are excited to announce the return of a statewide contest, which celebrates our cooperative commitment to community. Called **Shine the Light**, the contest will accept nominations in June and award three winners with a \$2,500 check to their local charity or community organization.

"We're excited to once again provide this cooperative effort to shine the light on local volunteers," says Erin Campbell, director of communications for the Iowa Association of Electric Cooperatives.

Sponsored by the Touchstone Energy Cooperatives of Iowa, the Shine the Light contest will accept contest entries online during the month of June. In addition to receiving a \$2,500 donation for their charity or nonprofit of choice, the winners will also be featured in the September issue of *Iowa Electric Cooperative Living* magazine.

How to nominate

Member-consumers, employees and retirees of Iowa's electric cooperatives are eligible to nominate local volunteers. If you receive electricity from an electric cooperative in Iowa, you're a co-op member-consumer and invited to nominate someone who is making a positive impact in the community. The volunteer being nominated does not need to be a co-op member-consumer. Minors may be nominated with consent from their parents or legal guardians.



Step 1:

Go to www.IowaShineTheLight.com from June 1-30 to make a nomination and to review the contest rules.

Step 2:

As a nominator, provide your contact information and answer the following question in 500 words or less.

How has your nominee made a difference in the community, and how might their local charity/nonprofit use the \$2,500 donation?



ENTER TO WIN

WIN \$100 FOR A PUBLISHED COVER PHOTO

We're always looking for stunning images for the cover of *Iowa Electric Cooperative Living* magazine. If we select your photo for a cover, we'll award you with \$100. The photos must be clear, of an Iowa place served by an electric cooperative and in high resolution. To be considered, email photos to editor@ieclmagazine.com with "Cover Submission" in the subject line.



HAMBLLEN WINS MAGAZINE CONTEST FOR YOUTH TOUR



This year, *Iowa Electric Cooperative Living* magazine once again sponsored a Youth Tour essay contest. Of the entries received, one winner is chosen to join the Iowa Youth Tour group to attend

the electric cooperative Youth Tour in Washington, D.C., in June.

The contest was open to high school sophomores, juniors and seniors whose families are served by Iowa electric cooperatives. Students who attended all three of the Iowa Association of Electric Cooperatives' 2022 Iowa Youth Leadership Academy sessions in October were also eligible to enter.

We're pleased to announce that **Shay Hamblen** has won this year's essay contest! She attended our Iowa Youth Leadership Academy sessions in October. Her parents are members of Western Iowa Power Cooperative and her older sister Danielle attended Youth Tour in 2014, sponsored by Harrison County Rural Electric Cooperative. In fact, it was Danielle's experience that inspired Shay to enter the essay contest.

To enter the contest, eligible participants were asked to tell us about an issue that impacts the quality of life in their community (in 250 words or less).

Hamblen wrote, "The issue I believe affects the quality of life in my community the most is the detachment we feel from each other due to being addicted to our cell phones. We are able to talk to people from almost anywhere thanks to the technology advancements since the 20th century including computers, emailing and cell phones.

Almost everyone I know owns a cell phone that they use on a daily basis. Every day we wake up and the first thing we do is check our phones. Throughout the day we check it out of habit, when you sit down for lunch instead of having a conversation with a peer or coworker you pull out your phone and mindlessly scroll. It's like a pacifier for us, whenever we are uncomfortable or are not being stimulated enough, out comes the phone. We lose touch with those in our lives the more time we spend on our devices.

Whether for better or worse, the cell phone has changed the way our communities function. Most have a sense of anxiety when they have lost their phones; it controls us even if we wish it didn't. Some studies even show the link between the overuse of cell phones and depression. I can't help but wonder what the consequences for spending so much time glued to a screen might be or how much the constant dopamine hit we get from checking the notifications changes our brain chemistry and how damaging it could be for our personal relationships."

SIGN UP FOR EMERGENCY NOTIFICATIONS IN YOUR COUNTY

It's the season for severe weather. To make sure you stay weather aware, it's a great idea to sign up to receive important weather and emergency notifications in your area. One service to consider is Alert Iowa, which is the State of Iowa's official emergency notification system.

Through Alert Iowa, state and local officials use a single, statewide notification system that provides local control of how and when to disseminate emergency and public safety messages to residents.

There are three ways to sign up for county alerts:

- 1 Create a profile through your county's website opt-in page
- 2 Download the Smart911 app and create a customized profile
- 3 Send a text message to opt-in

Scan this QR code to learn if your county is participating and sign up to receive free alerts via text message, email and/or voice message.



ENERGY SAVINGS FOR SMALL BUSINESSES

BY JENNAH DENNEY



Electric cooperatives are proud to serve small businesses that are essential to our local communities. As costs for pretty much everything continue to rise, small business owners are feeling strained. Luckily, there are steps Iowa's small business owners can take to conserve energy – and save money.

Many small businesses are in commercial buildings smaller than 50,000 square feet. These buildings use 44% of the energy consumed by commercial buildings in the U.S. According to the Environmental Protection Agency's ENERGY STAR® program, small businesses in the

U.S. collectively spend a staggering \$60 billion on annual energy costs. Additionally, a survey conducted by the National Federation of Independent Business found that energy costs are a top-three expense for more than a third of the nation's small businesses.

Small businesses can reduce their energy costs by taking advantage of competitive rates, prioritizing upgrades to increase efficiency and making simple changes to how they do business. Doing so can directly affect a business's bottom line and make it more competitive in the current market.

Here are a few areas small business owners can focus on saving energy and money.

Lighting. Many small businesses, like offices and retail stores, depend greatly on lighting, which can be a significant expense. There are two ways to increase the efficiency of your business's lighting system: install energy-efficient bulbs and fixtures and change how you use lighting.

New LED bulbs use less energy and last much longer. LEDs come in various options and prices, making them great replacements for older, inefficient bulbs.

Encourage employees to turn off lights when they're not being used. You can also install light switches with sensors so lights automatically turn off when no one is in the room.

Equipment and appliances. Turning off office equipment and devices can help save energy and money. Computer monitors can add up to \$30 to an office's energy bill if left on during evenings and weekends.

Restaurants typically use up to 10 times more energy per square foot than other commercial buildings. To save money, it is important to have energy-efficient food service equipment.

Additionally, kitchens in many other kinds of small businesses use microwaves, coffee makers and refrigerators, which should be considered when reviewing overall energy use.

Heating and cooling systems. Heating and cooling account for a large portion of a small business's energy bills.

Tracking energy use and maintaining the heating and cooling system can help small business owners save on energy bills. The system should be inspected annually, and filters should be replaced regularly. If the system needs replacing, consider alternative options like a heat pump

with a seasonal energy efficiency ratio (SEER) of 13 or higher. Your local electric co-op can offer advice on efficient heating and cooling equipment.

Air leaks and insulation. Just like our homes, small businesses have windows, walls, a roof and insulation as part of their building envelope. Air leaks can lead to higher bills. Leaks are typically found around windows, doors, walls and the roof. Seal these areas for additional energy savings.

Water. Efficient use of energy and water go hand in hand. In most cases, gas or electricity is used to heat water, which costs money. The more heated water your business uses, the more you can save by determining how to use water most efficiently. Lowering the water temperature between 110-120 degrees is an easy way to save on water heating.

Transportation. Many businesses can recognize fuel savings and lower the total cost of fleet ownership and transportation networks by switching to electric vehicles (EVs).

EVs have lower maintenance costs because they are more reliable than internal combustion engine vehicles. This is because EVs have fewer mechanical parts that can break, and they often provide better data to allow for more proactive maintenance. Depending on your



Photo: Ford Motor Company

transportation needs, EVs may be able to offer better energy savings for the long term.

In conclusion, small businesses can take simple steps to better control how much energy they use *and* how they use it. Not sure where to start? Ask your electric co-op if they offer energy audits, which can identify areas to save the most energy.

Jennah Denney writes on consumer and cooperative affairs for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, the national trade association representing more than 900 local electric cooperatives.

Scan this QR code to learn more about resources available through the Iowa Energy Efficiency Assistance Program for Rural Small Businesses.



Photo sourced from Pixabay.com.



Small businesses can reduce their energy costs by making upgrades to increase efficiency and making simple changes to how they do business.



Many small businesses have kitchens that include microwaves, coffee makers and refrigerators. These appliances should be considered when reviewing overall energy use.



Tracking energy use and maintaining the heating and cooling system can help small business owners save on energy bills.



BEEF

RECIPES

SWISS STEAK

- 2 pounds round steak, 1-inch thick
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup flour
- 2 teaspoons salt
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon pepper
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup oil
- 4 medium onions, sliced
- 1 medium green pepper, seeded and sliced
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup celery, chopped
- 1 clove garlic, crushed
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup chili sauce
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup water

Serve with mashed potatoes or rice

Dredge steak in flour, salt and pepper. Brown in hot oil on both sides. Remove when brown. Add onions and sauté. Return meat and add green pepper, celery, garlic, sauce and water. Bring to boil then reduce heat. Cover and simmer 1 hour until tender. Cut into 6 slices, serve on platter with sauce poured over. Serve with mashed potatoes or rice.

Holly Heeren • Alexander
Franklin Rural Electric Cooperative

BEST EASY BEEF AND BROCCOLI STIR-FRY

- 3 tablespoons cornstarch, divided
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup plus 2 tablespoons water, divided
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 pound boneless round steak or charcoal steak
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil, divided
- 1 small onion, cut into wedges
- 4 cups broccoli florets
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup reduced-sodium soy sauce
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon ground ginger
- rice
- toasted sesame seeds, optional

In bowl, combine 2 tablespoons cornstarch, 2 tablespoons water and garlic powder until smooth. Cut beef into 3-inch strips. Add beef to cornstarch mixture and toss. In a large skillet or wok, stir-fry beef in 1 tablespoon oil until beef reaches desired doneness. Remove from skillet and keep warm. Stir-fry onion in remaining oil for 4-5 minutes until softened. Add broccoli and cook for 3 minutes until tender but still crisp. Return beef to pan. Combine soy sauce, brown sugar, ginger, remaining 1 tablespoon cornstarch and $\frac{1}{2}$ cup water until smooth. Add to skillet, cook and stir for 2 minutes. Serve over rice and garnish with toasted sesame seeds, if desired. Serves 4

Diane Peebler • Danville • Access Energy Cooperative

BEEFY ITALIAN ROLL-UPS

- 12 ounces cottage cheese
- 2 teaspoons onion powder
- 2 teaspoons garlic powder
- 2 teaspoons Italian seasoning
- 1 4-ounce can mushrooms
- 16 ounces mozzarella cheese, shredded, divided
- 1 pound deli roast beef, sliced
- 12 flour tortillas
- 1 jar spaghetti sauce

Combine cottage cheese, seasonings, mushrooms and 8 ounces mozzarella cheese. Put slices of roast beef on tortilla, top with spoonful of cheese mixture and roll up. Spread half jar spaghetti sauce on bottom of 9x13-inch pan. Place beef rolls seam down, then pour remaining spaghetti sauce on top. Bake at 375 degrees F for 30 minutes. Top with remaining cheese and bake 3-5 minutes until cheese is melted.

Mary Gropper • Chelsea • T.I.P. Rural Electric Cooperative

LOBIA STEAK

- 1½ pounds round steak
 - 1 tablespoon shortening
 - 1 medium onion, chopped
 - 1 medium green pepper, chopped
 - 1 can green beans, drained
 - 1 can mushrooms, drained
 - 1 cup ketchup
 - 1 8-ounce can tomato paste
 - ¼ teaspoon garlic salt
 - ¼ teaspoon oregano
- Serve with rice, mashed potatoes or Chow Mein noodles

Cut steak into bite-sized strips and brown in shortening. Add remaining ingredients and simmer until meat is done and tender. Serve on rice, mashed potatoes or Chow Mein noodles.

Penny Sue Haley • Keswick • T.I.P. Rural Electric Cooperative

BEEF STEAK SUPREME

- 2 pounds round steak
- ¼ cup flour
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- oil
- 1 cup onions, chopped
- 1 can beef broth
- ½ cup water
- ½ cup sour cream

Cut steak into six serving size pieces. Coat steak in flour, salt and pepper. Set aside leftover flour mixture. Brown steak on both sides in heated oil. Add onions, broth and water. Cover and simmer at least 1 hour until meat is done. Add sour cream to flour mixture, then stir into broth mixture for gravy. Serves 4-6

Barb Sowers • Fredericksburg
Butler County Rural Electric Cooperative

SLOW COOKER BARBECUE BEEF RIBS

- 5 pounds beef ribs
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, chopped
- 1 cup ketchup or barbecue sauce
- 1 cup unsalted beef broth
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 2 tablespoons white vinegar
- 2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
- 1 teaspoon yellow mustard
- ¼ teaspoon pepper

Place ribs in slow cooker, then scatter onion and garlic over ribs. Combine remaining ingredients and pour over ribs. Cook on low for 10 hours. Serves 6

Janet McCune • Homestead
T.I.P. Rural Electric Cooperative

CAST-IRON SKILLET STEAK

- 3 teaspoons kosher salt, divided
- 1 pound New York strip or ribeye steak, 1-inch thick

Sprinkle steak with 2 teaspoons salt, let stand 45-60 minutes. Preheat cast-iron skillet over high heat until extremely hot. Sprinkle remaining teaspoon salt in bottom of skillet. Pat beef dry with paper towels then place steak into skillet. Cook 1-2 minutes until steak is easily moved. Flip over, placing steak in a different section of skillet. Cook 30 seconds and then begin moving steak, occasionally pressing slightly to ensure even contact with skillet. Continue cooking, turning and flipping 1-2 more minutes until cooked to desired degree of doneness, 135 degrees F for medium-rare, 140 degrees F for medium and 145 degrees F for medium-well. Serves 1-2

Kathy Steele • Hedrick • Access Energy Cooperative

WANTED:

SCHOOL NIGHT RECIPES

THE REWARD:

\$25 FOR EVERY ONE WE PUBLISH!

Deadline is May 31

Please include your name, address, telephone number, co-op name and the recipe category on all submissions. Also provide the number of servings per recipe.

EMAIL: recipes@ieclmagazine.com

(Attach your recipe as a Word document or PDF to your email message.)

MAIL: Recipes

Iowa Electric Cooperative Living • 8525 Douglas Ave., Suite 48, Des Moines, IA 50322-2992



A MATTER OF TASTE: YOUR GUIDE TO GROWING DELICIOUS TOMATOES

BY CHASE SMOAK

Tired of losing tomatoes to unwanted garden pests? Worried you'll need to sacrifice excellent taste for improved yield? Take a deep breath and relax. This year, you can have your tomato and eat it, too. With the help of a few new varieties and field-proven tactics, you'll be on your way to growing the best tomato crop yet.

If you want to grow delicious, homegrown tomatoes this year, simply focus your attention on these three stages of gardening: planning, preparing and protecting.

Stage 1: Plan

Planning for a successful tomato harvest starts with choosing the right varieties to grow in your garden. A nonprofit organization called All-America Selections (AAS) may have the answer. The group tests new varieties before they hit the market, and their trial notes will tell you

everything you need to know.

How does it work? Professional horticulturists across the country volunteer to grow test plots of new tomato varieties and compare notes on disease resistance, yields and taste alongside established varieties.

"Our judges rate taste and texture first, then everything else second," says Diane Blazek, executive director of AAS and the National Garden Bureau. "You can have the most prolific, cute, unique new tomato, but if it doesn't taste good, nobody wants it."

Stage 2: Prepare to plant

Your tomato garden needs access to full sun (6-8 hours a day) and should have good drainage. Tomato plants hate wet feet and often succumb to root rot when left in waterlogged soils. They do, however, need regular watering throughout the growing

season, so select a spot with easy access to water. Irrigating deeply but infrequently strengthens plants and encourages deep, healthy root systems for hot summer days.

Avoid planting where tomatoes, potatoes, peppers, eggplant and other solanaceous crops have been grown within the past three years. Many pests overwinter in the soil adjacent to plants and will terrorize unsuspecting gardeners.

Once you've selected the right spot, make sure to test your soil and amend the ground as indicated. Check with your local extension office or garden center to help you arrange a test and interpret the results. Tomatoes are nutrient hogs that require a good supply of nutrients from start to finish, so you'll likely need to fertilize before and during the growing cycle.

Adequate moisture is necessary for nutrient uptake. Drip irrigation works well and doesn't soak leaves, which often leads to disease issues.

And don't forget to deal with weeds. They are an often-overlooked source of tomato pests. After clearing the site of any weeds, spread mulch 3-4 inches deep and keep it a palm-width away from the bases of tomato stems.

Planting should only begin after the last frost date for your area.

Stage 3: Protect

Like the rising of the sun, pests – insects and diseases – are to be expected in every garden. The good news is they can be controlled or even avoided with commonsense management.

- **Monitor and identify.** Get to know your garden and what lives in it. Talk to your local extension office for a precise understanding of the

insects and diseases to watch out for.

- **Make an evaluation.** If you do spot harmful pests or damage on tomatoes, evaluate whether real damage is being done to the landscape. Set thresholds to guide your treatment decisions. For example, you may decide there's little benefit to treating a pest problem if there is less than 10% damage to the plant.
- **Choose a wise treatment.** If treatment is necessary, use the least toxic measure first. Proper watering, plant spacing and fertilization can help prevent or reduce the number of pests. Mechanical means are another option that requires the physical removal of pests and can be useful for small populations. For example, hornworms are easily removable by hand-picking, and aphids are often washed away by a water hose.

If these approaches fail, reach out to your local extension agent or garden center for advice on pesticides and follow all label directions. Pesticide labels are the law, and many chemicals may be unethical or even illegal to use on fruit-bearing plants.

Enjoy the pursuit

Gardening should be an enjoyable escape from the fast-paced world we live in. It's an opportunity to serve as good stewards of the land, so when the time comes, we pass on something a little better to the next generation. If you really want to experience all that gardening has to offer this summer, focus on using it to produce memories instead of a crop. If you do, you'll find everything begins to taste a little sweeter along the way.

Chase Smook is a special contributor to Iowa Electric Cooperative Living magazine.

HERE ARE A FEW 2022 AAS WINNING TOMATO VARIETIES FOR IOWANS TO CONSIDER GROWING THIS SEASON.



Celano. A national winner, Celano is an early-producing, high-yielding, grape-type tomato for your patio or garden. According to AAS trial notes, Celano developed fruit much earlier and produced much longer than comparable varieties. Deep-red, oblong tomatoes typically weigh a little over half an ounce and taste sweet. As for disease resistance, this variety has superior tolerance to late blight. Transplants should be spaced at least two feet apart in the garden and will benefit from staking.



Purple Zebra. If you want a tomato that looks just as good as it tastes, search no more. According to AAS, Purple Zebra is a national winner with fruit that is "firm in texture, complex in flavor and has a taste more sweet than acidic." This variety has high resistance to tomato mosaic virus, verticillium wilt, fusarium wilt and late blight. Start seeds indoors 4-6 weeks before the last frost for best results. In the garden, space transplants no less than two feet apart or, if using containers, select 5-gallon pots with drainage. This variety produces 150-200 green-striped, purple tomatoes and requires staking. Most gardeners can begin harvesting tomatoes 80-85 days after transplant.



Pink Delicious. A regional winner for the Heartland (Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota), Pink Delicious has everything heirloom enthusiasts love and less of what they don't. The large, pink fruit emerges earlier than comparable varieties, tastes delicious and is less prone to cracking. Gardeners will benefit from this tomato's improved seed germination and superior disease resistance. In the garden, space Pink Delicious at least 3 feet apart and provide staking. Gardeners can expect to harvest fruit after 84 days if growing from transplants or 114 days if growing from seed.

CONTAINER GARDENING

Lack the space or time for a traditional garden? No worries. You can grow tomatoes in pots and hanging baskets, too. Follow these tips:

- Use pots that are at least 6-8 inches deep with holes for drainage.
- For ease of movement, use dollies or platforms with wheels to shift plants around.
- Use a lightweight potting mix. Packaged mixes are widely available at most garden centers but avoid soilless media that lacks the required nutrients.
- When using a potting mix with added fertilizer, wait 8-10 weeks before adding more nutrients. When it's time, use a water-soluble fertilizer at its recommended rate.



FOR CONTAINERS, TRY THESE PROVEN STANDOUTS:

Terenzo. A cherry-type tomato with a trailing growth habit and sweet fruit. Height at maturity is 16-20 inches, making it a great addition to any spot with full sun and easy access.

Lizzano. This tasty tomato plant grows 16-20-inches tall and only 20-inches wide. Lizzano produces a copious amount of fruit, which can be harvested 105 days from seeding or 63 days after transplant. One perk of this variety is its noted resistance to late blight.

HOW TO STOP BLOSSOM-END ROT

Blossom-end rot is the bane of every tomato gardener's existence. It starts as small brown spots on the blossom end of the fruit and rapidly progresses to form sizable rotten areas. This abiotic disorder is the result of a calcium deficiency, often caused by nutrient-poor soil or extreme fluctuations in soil moisture that interfere with calcium uptake. Here's how to beat it.

Add organic matter to the soil. Organic matter helps retain soil moisture and increases a plant's ability to uptake calcium. It is simply the portion of the soil composed of living or dead things in various states of decay, such as plant roots or microbes. Gardeners can add this vital soil component by incorporating organic fertilizers like compost and manure.

Fertilize responsibly. Shoot for a pH level of 6.5 and use lime or gypsum to maintain an appropriate calcium supply. When pH drops too low, nutrients like calcium, phosphorus and magnesium are less available to tomato plants. Reach out to your local extension agent for advice on soil testing and how best to prepare the ground for tomatoes.

Mulch the garden. Spread 2-3 inches of mulch around tomato plants to prevent erratic moisture shifts but keep mulch a palm-width away from the base of plants.

Irrigate correctly. Provide tomatoes with a consistent 1-1.5 inches of water per week.

Blossom-end rot, small dark spots that expand over time to form a sizable rotten area, is caused by a calcium deficiency. Proper watering and fertilization are the keys to preventing this common garden blight.

MARCH GOES OUT LIKE A LION

Severe storms ripped through eastern Iowa on March 31, with the National Weather Service confirming the storm system produced 16 tornadoes, including an EF4 tornado near Keota in Keokuk County. Gov. Kim Reynolds would later issue a disaster proclamation for 18 counties, including Appanoose, Cedar, Clinton, Davis, Delaware, Des Moines, Dubuque, Grundy, Iowa, Jackson, Johnson, Keokuk, Linn, Lucas, Mahaska, Monroe, Wapello and Washington.

High winds and tornadoes caused more than 16,600 electric cooperative outages, with most of the distribution system damage occurring in the service territories of Eastern Iowa Light & Power Cooperative, Linn County REC, Maquoketa Valley Electric Cooperative and T.I.P. REC. Central Iowa Power Cooperative's transmission system was also impacted, as the generation and transmission cooperative reported approximately 50 poles downed or damaged.

Within two hours of the storm passing, crews had made significant progress, with just 4,500 outages remaining statewide later that evening at 9 p.m. For T.I.P. REC based in Brooklyn, the damage rivaled the August 2020 derecho storm as a tornado near Sigourney took down about 5 miles of poles and three-phase conductor.

During storms, the cooperative principle of Cooperation Among Cooperatives is on full display, with unaffected area co-ops stepping up to help their neighboring co-ops restore power more quickly. Thanks to the following cooperatives for providing mutual aid to T.I.P. REC:

- Access Energy Cooperative
- Chariton Valley Electric Cooperative
- Consumers Energy
- Pella Cooperative Electric Association
- Southern Iowa Electric Cooperative



And special thanks to the following cooperatives for providing mutual aid to Eastern Iowa Light & Power Cooperative:

- Butler County REC
- East-Central Iowa REC

Spring and summer often bring severe storms and other hazards. Always put safety first by staying away from all downed power lines and taking other precautions. You can find more safety tips on Page 3 of this issue.

CONSERVATION EFFORTS NEEDED TO SUPPORT MONARCH BUTTERFLY POPULATION RECOVERY

The past year was a difficult one for the eastern monarch butterfly. According to a report released in April, monarchs occupying forest canopy in their wintering grounds in Mexico decreased by 22%, down from approximately 7 acres in 2021 to a little under 5½ acres during the winter of 2022-2023. Scientists estimate that a long-term average of 15 acres is needed to sustain the eastern monarch population and its continental migration.

The report, produced annually by the World Wildlife Fund in collaboration with the National Commission of Natural Protected Areas, the National Autonomous University of Mexico and the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve, is based on annual surveys that go back to the 1990s. The surveys provide critical data to assess the status and trends of the North American Eastern monarch population and inform conservation practices in Mexico, Canada and the U.S. The goal is to maintain a long-term average of 15 acres of occupied forest canopy during the winter, which shapes objectives for establishing breeding habitat in the Midwestern states, including Iowa through the Iowa Monarch Conservation Consortium.

Many factors contribute to the decline of monarch butterflies. In addition to habitat loss in their wintering grounds, the availability of breeding habitat with milkweed plants and blooming forbs in the Midwest is also critical to the species' long-term survival. Milkweed is the only plant that monarch butterflies will lay their eggs on, and it is also the primary food source for monarch caterpillars.

The international announcement comes at a pivotal time for monarch conservation, with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's re-evaluation of the monarch's status under the Endangered Species Act slated for 2024.



Fortunately, there are steps that Iowans can take to help support the monarch butterfly population. One of the most important things is establishing appropriate habitat around homes, businesses, farms and even ditches. This can be as simple as planting a few milkweed plants in yards and gardens or as involved as establishing more extensive pollinator habitat.

An updated mobile app to track habitat establishment, HabiTally, is available as a free download for iOS and Android devices from the App Store and is designed to improve data collection about monarch habitat.

"As we work to protect our natural resources and improve water quality in rural, suburban and urban settings, Iowans are also ensuring that habitat is available for pollinators and wildlife in their communities," says Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Mike Naig. "Pollinators like the monarch are

important to the ongoing productivity of Iowa agriculture."

A recent article in the journal *BioScience* integrates years of Iowa State University monarch research, showing how adding habitat will help conservation efforts. The findings estimate that the state's monarch conservation plan can potentially increase the size of the breeding monarch population in Iowa and the Midwest by 10-25% per generation.

To learn more about the Iowa Monarch Conservation Consortium, visit iowamonarchs.info and follow @IowaMonarchs on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

Are you interested in improving your land for wildlife? Scan the QR code below to find local resources in your county.



THE STORY OF THE TATTERED OLD FLAG

BY DARCY DOUGHERTY MAULSBY

If there's one thing I've learned in more than 20 years as a writer, never assume you know the real story simply based on how things appear.

I was thinking about this when a lady told me a story about a tattered flag and her older brother Bob, who had served with the U.S. Marine Corps in the Korean War. Bob drove a tank in the "Forgotten War."

Bob never wanted to talk about what he, his younger brother and their fellow service members had seen and experienced in that brutal war. He just wanted to live a quiet life back home in northwest Missouri, where he farmed for many years.

It did anger Bob, though, that people sometimes called Korea a conflict rather than a war. Still, this never stopped him from living the motto of every Marine – *semper fidelis* (Latin for "always faithful"), as he raised the American flag on his farm every morning and lowered it every night. Even when the elements took a toll on the flag, Bob still raised and lowered the stars and stripes daily.

Memories of sacrifice, heroism

Like many of his generation, Bob's world changed forever following June 25, 1950, when roughly 75,000 soldiers from the North Korean People's Army poured across the 38th parallel – the boundary between the Soviet-backed Democratic People's Republic of Korea to the north and the pro-Western Republic of Korea to the south. North Korea wanted to conquer South Korea and unify Korea under a communist regime. This invasion was the first military action of the Cold War.

By the time the war ended in July 1953, approximately 5 million soldiers and civilians had died. The Korean peninsula is still divided today.

The war sometimes came up when a childhood friend and fellow Marine who had also served in Korea stopped by the farm to chat with Bob. They'd talk about Bob's younger brother, who was



barely 17 years old when he served with a frontline infantry unit of more than 200 men in that war. This brother was one of only four men in that unit who survived a massive attack. The childhood friend was part of the search and recovery mission that found him.

By all accounts, Bob's brother was a goner, but that friend insisted he wasn't leaving him behind. He credited the freezing cold, prayers from the teenaged infantryman's mom and dad, and the grace of God for keeping Bob's brother from bleeding to death.

A meaningful ritual

I wonder if these thoughts sometimes raced through Bob's mind as he faithfully raised his tattered American flag each morning and lowered it each evening.

People often noticed Bob's flag as they drove by on the paved road near his farm. Sometimes they'd offer to

buy him a new flag. His response was always the same. "Thank you kindly, but it's important to me to leave this flag this way."

It wasn't until a niece (who was visiting Bob's younger sister) asked to photograph Bob raising the flag one morning that his family began to learn why that tattered flag was so important to Bob, who was now 88. There were tears in Bob's eyes as he spoke about the many torn lives and broken families that resulted from that ugly war in Korea. He knew he and his brother were among the blessed ones who got to come home.

So, when you see American flags flying this Memorial Day, don't be offended if a few are a little tattered. There might be much more to the story than you ever realized.

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