

SEPTEMBER 2026

Illinois Country Living

Ripe *with* Possibility

*How Sarah Frey transformed
her family farm*

 Association of Illinois
Electric Cooperatives

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FEATURE
The llama life

PRAIRIE TABLE
The perfect place
and time

FINEST COOKING
Cooking for a crowd

+
CO-OP
NEWS



Eye Doctor Helps Illinois Legally Blind To See

High Technology For Low Vision Patients Allows Many To Drive Again



For many patients with macular degeneration and other vision-related conditions, the loss of central visual detail also signals the end to one of the last bastions of independence: driving. A Mascoutah optometrist, Dr. Marianne McDaniel, is using miniaturized telescopes that are mounted in glasses to help people who have lost vision from macular degeneration and other eye conditions.

"Some of my patients consider me the last stop for people who have vision loss," said Dr. McDaniel, one of only a few doctors in the world who specialize in fitting bioptic telescopes to help those who have lost vision due to macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, and other debilitating eye diseases.

Imagine a pair of glasses that can improve your vision enough to change your life. If you're a low vision patient, you've probably not only imagined them, but have been searching for

them. Bioptic telescopes may be the breakthrough in optical technology that will give you the independence you've been looking for. Patients with vision in the 20/200 range can many times be improved to 20/50 or better.

Macular degeneration is the leading cause of blindness and vision loss in people over 50. Despite this, most adults are not familiar with the



A scene as it might be viewed by a person with age-related macular degeneration.

condition. As many as 25% of those over the age of 50 have some degree of macular degeneration. The macula is only one small part of the retina; however, it is the most sensitive and gives us sharp central vision. When it degenerates, macular degeneration leaves a blind spot right in the center of vision, making it difficult or impossible to recognize faces, read a book, or pass the driver's vision test.

Nine out of 10 people who have macular degeneration have the dry form. New research suggests vitamins can help. The British medical journal BMC Ophthalmology recently reported that 56% of patients treated with a high-dose combination of vitamins experienced improved vision after six months.

While age is the most significant risk factor for developing the disease, heredity, smoking, cardiovascular disease, and high blood pressure have also been identified as risk factors.

Macular degeneration accounts for 90% of new legal blindness in the U.S. While there is currently no cure, promising research is being done on many fronts. "My job is to figure out everything and anything possible to keep a person functioning, especially driving," says Dr. McDaniel.

"Bioptic telescopes can cost over \$2,000," said Dr. McDaniel, "especially if we build them with an automatic sunglass."

"The major benefit of the bioptic telescope is that the lens automatically focuses on whatever you're looking at," said Dr. McDaniel. "It's like a self-focusing camera, but much more precise."

To learn more about bioptic telescopes or to schedule a consultation, give Dr. McDaniel a call. You can also visit our websites.

www.mascoutaheyecare.com

1-618-566-8899

Office located in Mascoutah, Illinois
Marianne McDaniel, O.D.





PHOTO COURTESY OF FREY FARMS



Illinois Country Living

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On the cover: Sarah Frey of Frey Farms

PHOTO COURTESY OF FREY FARMS

2026 AIEC
ANNUAL MEETING

Illinois Country Living is a monthly publication serving the communications needs of the locally owned, not-for-profit electric cooperatives of Illinois. With a circulation of more than 210,000, the magazine informs cooperative consumer-members about issues affecting their electric cooperative and the quality of life in rural Illinois.

PRESIDENT/CEO

Craig Sondgeroth

CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

Rebecca Barlow

EDITOR

Colten Bradford

ASSISTANT EDITOR

Lisa Cherry

VICE PRESIDENT OF COMMUNICATIONS

Chris Reynolds

CREATIVE SERVICES
COORDINATOR

Kayla Adkins

GRAPHIC DESIGNERS

Jen Danzinger

Meghan Jenkins

CONTRIBUTORS

Brittnay Haag

Les O'Dell

SALES REPRESENTATIVE

Cheryl Solomon

Cheryl@amp.coop

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Powered by those we serve

THE PHRASE “MEMBER POWERED” describes our identity. The Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives (AIEC) exists because of Illinois’ electric cooperatives. And our member cooperatives exist because of the people who own them and the families, farms, businesses and communities they serve.

Everything we do begins and ends with those members — every legislative priority, every training class, every safety program, every communication tool and every service we provide.

Ultimately, it’s all about making Illinois’ electric cooperatives stronger so they can better serve the people who depend on them every day. That is what being “member powered” really means.

When I think about this past year, one word keeps coming to mind — together. No organization succeeds because of one individual. It succeeds because people work together toward a common purpose. Over the past year, our member cooperatives continued

demonstrating exactly what cooperation among cooperatives looks like.

When one cooperative finds a better way to solve a problem, everyone benefits. When one cooperative faces a challenge, others step forward to help. And when our industry needs one strong voice, we speak together. That is why the AIEC exists.

One of our most important responsibilities is making sure that electric cooperatives have a seat at the table whenever decisions are made. Those

conversations happen every day in Springfield and in Washington, D.C. Increasingly, they happen with policymakers who often don’t fully understand the cooperative business model.

It is our responsibility to educate them. This past year, we worked to protect local control and ensure that new laws support — not hinder — the ability of electric cooperatives to provide reliable and affordable electricity.

But advocacy belongs to all of us. This year, leaders from all our Illinois electric cooperatives participated in our Lobby Day in Springfield, and we took a large group to the U.S. Capitol to advocate for electric cooperatives to make sure Congress understands the unique role electric cooperatives play in rural America.

Those conversations matter. Legislators hear from thousands of people every year.

What they remember are the stories. Stories about farmers, small businesses, manufacturers, schools, hospitals, families and the cooperative employees who work through the night restoring power after storms. Those stories make a difference.

Member powered. Those aren’t just two words. Together, they’re a promise. A promise that our decisions will always begin with our members. A promise that we’ll continue working together. A promise that we’ll remain true to the cooperative principles that have served rural Illinois for generations. If we continue living that promise, I have no doubt that the best days for Illinois electric cooperatives are still ahead. 💡

This is an excerpt of Craig Sondgeroth’s CEO report presented during the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives’ annual meeting on July 30, 2026.



Craig Sondgeroth is the president/CEO of the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives.



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GEORGE WASHINGTON'S ESTATE SHORE EXCURSION ★ MOUNT VERNON, VA

One of the nation's most iconic homes, Mount Vernon offers a glimpse into 18th-century life through its beautiful gardens and grounds as well as intriguing museum exhibits honoring George Washington's life and legacy.



Baltimore
MARYLAND
Annapolis
Washington, D.C.
Mount Vernon
Williamsburg
VIRGINIA
Yorktown
Norfolk
Kitty Hawk

NAVAL ACADEMY SHORE EXCURSION ANNAPOLIS, MD

Explore the academy's historic grounds with our expert guide and experience "life on the yard." Witness the noon meal formation and take in breathtaking views of the campus.

THE WRIGHT BROTHERS

In 1903, the Wright brothers achieved the first powered, sustained, and controlled airplane flight in Kitty Hawk, NC. Two years later, they surpassed their own milestone when they built and flew the first fully practical airplane.

NORTH CAROLINA
Beaufort
Wilmington
SOUTH CAROLINA
Charleston

HISTORIC SAVANNAH TROLLEY EXPLORATION SHORE EXCURSION ★ SAVANNAH, GA

Experience a fully narrated journey aboard the Old Town Trolley, featuring open-air seating ideal for capturing memorable photos. Along the way, expert conductors share engaging stories, landmarks, and over 270 years of history from Georgia's First City. As your exploration brings the past to life across more than 100 points of interest, you will discover Savannah's rich legacy and timeless charm.



ALABAMA
Ocean Springs
Mobile
Pensacola
Gulfport/Ship Island
New Orleans

FORT MASSACHUSETTS ★ SHIP ISLAND, MS

Fort Massachusetts is a historic brick fort located on West Ship Island, Mississippi. It was built by the U.S. government in the mid-1800s as part of a coastal defense system following the War of 1812.

GEORGIA
Jekyll Island
Amelia Island
JACKSONVILLE
Green Cove Springs
St. Augustine
Blue Spring State Park
CAPE CANAVERAL
FLORIDA



SEAPLANE ADVENTURE TO DRY TORTUGAS SHORE EXCURSION ★ KEY WEST, FL

Seventy miles west of Key West, Florida lies one of North America's most inaccessible National Parks—Dry Tortugas. The park is renowned for its marine life, pirate legends, and sheer unspoiled beauty.

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Punta Gorda
Marco Island
Key Biscayne
Key West



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SEPTEMBER CHECKLIST

National Preparedness Month



Build or refresh your emergency kit. Include

essentials like bottled water, nonperishable food, flashlights, extra batteries, a first-aid kit, medications, phone chargers and important documents.

Stay informed.



Use a weather radio for severe weather alerts and keep your current contact info updated with your electric cooperative for outage updates and restoration information.



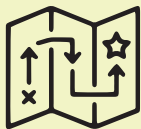
Use generators safely.

Always

operate generators outdoors, far away from doors, windows and vents, and never plug a generator directly into your home's electrical system.

Have a plan.

Talk with your family about where you'll meet if you're separated, how you'll communicate if cell service is limited, and what to do during an extended outage.



AIEC President/CEO Craig Sondgeroth (left) and AIEC Board Chairman Rick Rubenacker (right) present State Treasurer Michael Frerichs with the IEC Public Service Award.

Illinois electric co-ops honor three elected officials

During the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives (AIEC) annual meeting, held July 30-31, three elected officials were named recipients of Illinois Electric Cooperatives' (IEC) Public Service Award, which recognizes dedicated public service to Illinois citizens and outstanding contributions to the rural electrification program. This year's recipients include State Treasurer Michael Frerichs, State Senator Sue Rezin and State Representative Marcus Evans Jr.

State Treasurer Michael Frerichs

"Treasurer Frerichs has been a great friend and supporter of electric cooperatives across the state," said AIEC Vice President of Government Relations Nick Reitz. "Throughout his career, he's been a champion of the electric cooperative program and uses his voice to be a strong advocate for downstate rural Illinois."

Frerichs, a member of the Democratic Party first elected as the Illinois state treasurer in 2014, began his third term in January 2023. Before becoming treasurer, he served in the Illinois

Senate from 2007 to 2015, representing east-central Illinois. His district included communities served by Eastern Illini Electric Cooperative.

"I generally don't like receiving awards, but I love your organization," Frerichs said. "I love the partnership we've had over the years, both as treasurer and state senator. And so, when I say thank you, I mean that sincerely. Thank you very much for this award and for all the work you do."

State Senator Sue Rezin

"I've always appreciated Senator Rezin's approach to Illinois politics, with well-informed and common-sense approaches to all the issues. That's especially true when it comes to energy," said Corn Belt Energy Corporation Board Director Frank Kobilsek. "We greatly appreciate her support of the co-op community."

Rezin is a Republican who has represented Illinois' 38th Senate District since 2010 and has served as deputy

Continued on page 8

Sudoku

by Myles Mellor and Susan Flanagan

To solve the puzzle, each row, column and box must contain each of the numbers 1 to 9. Level: Medium

Solution on page 33.

4	1	3	9		6			5
	9		4	5				
2		6	7				4	
			6					
		9	2		4	1		
					5			
	6				3	7		2
				6	2		9	
8			1		9	3	5	6

ILLINOIS TRIVIA CHALLENGE

It's time to test your knowledge with a new Illinois Trivia Challenge! This month features little-known facts about Illinois towns. Answers are on page 33.



- 1. What Illinois town was originally named Hardscrabble?
 - a. Rockford
 - b. Pekin
 - c. Streator
- 2. Which Illinois town was named after a university before the university existed?
 - a. Greenville
 - b. Monmouth
 - c. Normal
- 3. What Illinois town was founded as a utopian religious settlement?
 - a. Nauvoo
 - b. Bishop Hill
 - c. Belleville
- 4. Which Illinois town is the self-proclaimed Horseradish Capital of the World?
 - a. Collinsville
 - b. Metropolis
 - c. Vandalia

"Elected officials" continued from page 7



State Senator Sue Rezin thanks the audience for the honor of receiving an IEC Public Service Award at the 2026 AIEC Annual Meeting.

minority leader of the Senate Republican Caucus since 2021. She helped establish the Grundy County summer internship program and founded the Illinois Valley Flood Resiliency Alliance, which helps communities prepare for flooding and other extreme weather events. She chairs the National Foundation for Women Legislators and serves on the National Conference of State Legislatures' Task Force on Energy Supply.

"Thank you for this honor, and thank you for what you do," Rezin said to Illinois' electric cooperative leaders. "It's incumbent as a legislator to recognize the value of this organization and what you bring to the table and keep reliable, resilient and low-cost power."

State Representative Marcus Evans Jr.



Evans represents Illinois' 33rd District as a Democrat, serving communities in south suburban Cook County. He is assistant majority leader in the Illinois House and chairs the Labor and Commerce Committee. Evans has advanced legislation involving energy reliability, labor rights, transportation, healthcare access and early childhood development.

He also serves on the bipartisan Legislative Audit Commission, became president of the National Conference of State Legislatures in 2025, and is active in other state leadership organizations. Evans advocates for health equity, accountability and community engagement.

Evans was unable to attend the meeting and will be presented with his Public Service Award at a later date.

AIEC



Look out for AI scams

Artificial intelligence (AI) doesn't always appear artificial and that can be a problem. AI can create realistic text, voices, images and websites in seconds. Those capabilities make many everyday tools more useful, but they also make it easier for scammers to impersonate family members, banks and even your electric cooperative.

Continued on page 10

2026 scholarship recipients announced

This fall, 17 students will head to college as 2026 recipients of Thomas H. Moore Illinois Electric Cooperatives (IEC) Memorial Scholarships. The scholarship program has grown from initially awarding two \$1,000 scholarships in 1996 to now offering 17 \$3,000 scholarships.

The Illinois Community College System Foundation (ICCSF) administers the scholarship fund. The scholarships are available to high school seniors who plan to enroll in a full-time undergraduate course of study at an accredited 2- or 4-year college, university or vocational/technical school.

Ten scholarships are awarded to students who are children of an Illinois electric cooperative

consumer-member. Five are reserved for students enrolling full-time at a 2-year Illinois community college who are children of an Illinois electric co-op member or employee.

The Earl W. Struck Memorial Scholarship is awarded to one student who is the child of an Illinois electric co-op employee or director, and the LaVern and Nola McEntire Memorial Lineworker's Scholarship goes to a student attending lineworker school at Lincoln Land Community College.

Congratulations to the 2026 Thomas H. Moore IEC Memorial Scholarship recipients. 💡

AIEC



Barlow elected AIEC board chairman

The Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives' (AIEC) board of directors held a reorganizational meeting on July 31, directly following the AIEC's 2026 annual meeting, and unanimously elected Rebecca Barlow as its new board chairman. She is the first woman to hold this position.

Barlow grew up and resides south of Clayton where she owns and operates the Red Bird Inn Bed and Breakfast, which is the old farmstead of her paternal grandparents. She joined the board of Adams Electric Cooperative in 2009 and was chosen to serve on the AIEC board in 2017. In her spare time, Becky can be found working in her flowerbed and taking care of her two mini horses, Skippy and Tony, and her black standardbred horse Postal.

Rick Rubenacker, a sixth-generation grain farmer in southern Illinois and a representative of Wayne-White Counties Electric Cooperative on the AIEC board, ended his two-year term as chairman of the AIEC board. The AIEC thanks Rubenacker for his dedication and service as board chairman.

Rounding out AIEC board leadership elections include JCE Co-op's David Senn as vice chairman, McDonough Power Cooperative's Mike Cox as secretary and EnerStar Electric Cooperative's Kevin Julian as treasurer. 💡

AIEC

College or university recipients



Anna Dietrich
Adams Electric Cooperative



Avery Beer
Clinton County Electric Cooperative



Jaxon Kearns
Coles-Moultrie Electric Cooperative



Trent Schmid
Eastern Illini Electric Cooperative



Cody Mevert
Egyptian Electric Cooperative Association



Luke Charlton
Menard Electric Cooperative



Lillian Arnold
Monroe County Electric Cooperative



Cale Seitzinger
Norris Electric Cooperative



Gracyn Horn
SouthEastern Illinois Electric Cooperative



Caden Cambron
Tri-County Electric Cooperative

Community college recipients



Haven Cash
Clay Electric Co-operative



Malcolm Gretencord
Corn Belt Energy Corporation



Faith Morrison
Shelby Electric Cooperative



Kaylee Lurkins
Southwestern Electric Cooperative



Corin Robinson
Western Illinois Electrical Coop.

Earl W. Struck Memorial Scholarship



Elizabeth Hammann
M.J.M. Electric Cooperative



LaVern and Nola McEntire Memorial Lineworker's Scholarship



Braxton Rock
Canton



Where is it?

The winners of the July hidden object contest were Mindy Lewis of Clay Electric Co-operative and Richard Witzig of Corn Belt Energy Corporation. Congratulations! Your ICL prizes have been sent.

Willie Wiredhand was hidden on the feed sack on page 26 of the August 2026 issue. Winners' names will be drawn, and they will be notified. Visit Illinois Country Living on Facebook after each month's deadline for a closeup of the object's location and winners' names.

For this month's hidden object search, be on the lookout for a tractor, in honor of harvest season. The symbol, pictured above, can vary in size and will NOT be hidden on this page, page 6, a lettered page (the local co-op pages) or in an ad.

Entries must include your name, address, name of your electric co-op (nonmembers are also eligible), and the page number and location of the symbol. Visit icl.coop/hiddenobject and fill out the entry form (also found under Contact Us on the website) or mail a postcard or letter to Illinois Country Living, Hidden Objects, 6460 S. 6th St. Frontage Road East, Springfield, IL 62712. We will NOT accept entries via phone call or email.

All entries must be received by the 25th of the publication month. Only one entry is allowed per household every month. If multiple entries per household are submitted, only the first will be considered. Winners' names and the symbol's location will be published in each month's issue of Illinois Country Living. 📧

"AI scams" continued from page 8

"AI can help scammers produce polished, convincing messages and build fake websites that closely mimic a bank or even an electric co-op," said Carter Manucy, NRECA's senior director for cybersecurity.

Scammers can build sites and communications that resemble an electric co-op and contact members with high-pressure calls or emails demanding instant payment via gift cards, wire and even cryptocurrency or risk shutoff.

So, what should co-op members do in that situation? Stop and make sure the contact is legitimate. Members should treat any unexpected demand for immediate payment by gift card, wire transfer or cryptocurrency as a scam and contact their co-op directly using the number on their bill.

"Call back using a number you already know, never one the caller provides. For a co-op message, use the number on your bill," said Manucy. "Any message that pressures you to act immediately is the top red flag, no matter how real it sounds."

As AI makes scams much more difficult to spot, it also equips these rip-off artists with ways to boost their output and victimize thousands of people in just a few clicks. AI allows criminals to create, personalize and distribute convincing scams at a scale that once required far more time and people.

"Criminals can generate thousands of tailored attacks cheaply, so more scams reach members' phones and inboxes, more often," Manucy said. As a result, the loot scammers are reaping is unprecedented. Americans reported nearly \$900 million in AI-assisted scam losses in one year, according to the FBI.

There are several ways to protect yourself against today's AI scams. Distrust urgency of a request for money or personal data, and verify parties making requests through a trusted channel, such as a phone number on your bill. Before clicking a link, check the website address for veracity.

Set a family code word not shared online and ask for the code word if you receive an emergency call. A cloned voice won't know it.

Protect yourself when paying for goods and services online. Reject requirements for gift cards, wire transfers or cryptocurrency as these payments are difficult (and sometimes impossible) to recover.

Most important, if you become a victim of a scam, report it to the Federal Trade Commission at ReportFraud.ftc.gov. 📧

Cathy Cash, NRECA



Last chance to enter the 2026 SnapShots contest

It's the final call for Illinois Country Living's 2026 SnapShots contest. Whether you're a photographer, an enthusiastic hobbyist or an amateur, this is your chance to share how you see Illinois.

The contest celebrates the beauty of the Prairie State throughout the year, with four seasonal categories: Winter, Spring, Summer and Fall. Photographers may submit up to three photos per category, capturing landscapes, rural life, nature or moments that reflect the spirit of each season.

A panel of judges will select first-, second- and third-place winners in each category, along with an overall Grand Champion. Photos will be judged based on composition, visual impact and category theme. Prizes awarded will include \$250 for the grand prize winner, \$100 for first-place winners, \$75 for second and \$50 for third.

Winning photographs will be featured in the December 2026 issue of Illinois Country Living and showcased in the 2027 SnapShots Calendar, giving photographers statewide recognition throughout the year. In addition, contest runners-up will be published in the magazine's SnapShots section during 2027.

Important dates and details

- Photos must be taken in Illinois
- Open only to Illinois electric co-op members
- High-resolution photos only
- Submission deadline: Sept. 30, 2026
- Entry limit: Three submissions per category
- How to enter: Go to icl.coop/snapshots or go to page 23 for more details

To accommodate the contest, Illinois Country Living is currently running archived photography in the SnapShots section through November 2026. 📧

ICL

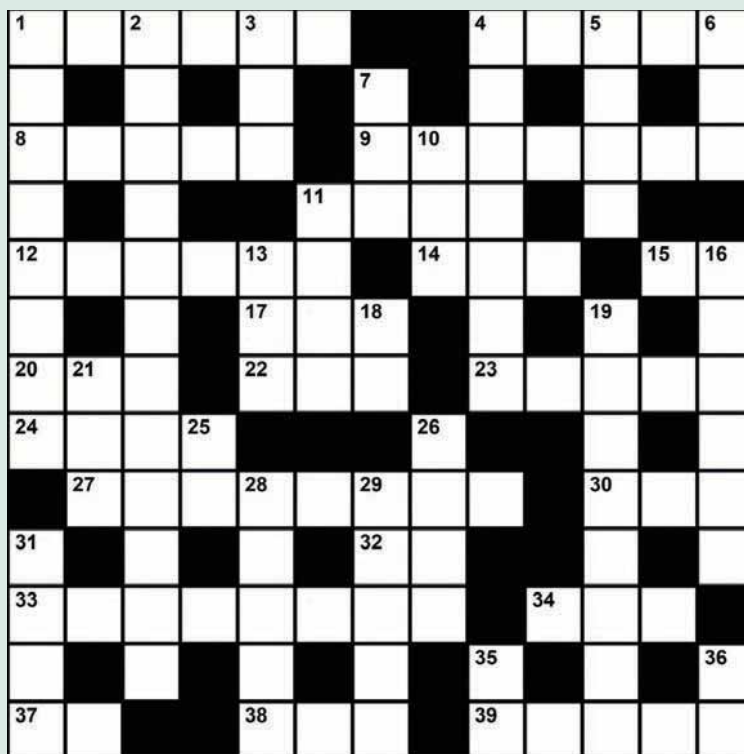
Across

- 1 Leaves in fall can change from green to this bright color
- 4 Bird family which migrates in fall to Central and South American countries
- 8 Toys with tails
- 9 Autumn crop gathering
- 11 Solid and stable
- 12 Wander
- 14 Central part of an ear of corn
- 15 Sector that deals with food production, abbr.
- 17 ____ glance (quickly), 2 words
- 20 Unagi in a sushi bar
- 22 Sapphire, for one
- 23 "The Lord of the Rings" bad guy
- 24 Plant stalk
- 27 Taylor Swift song associated with autumn and rainy sweater weather
- 30 Sportscaster Berman
- 32 Nurse, abbr.
- 33 Rock band that sang "Wake Me Up When September Ends," 2 words
- 34 "____ to the West Wind," whose first line is "O Wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being"
- 37 Ave. intersector, abbr.
- 38 "Green" energy source
- 39 "Parsley, sage, rosemary and ____" Simon and Garfunkel

Down

- 1 They drop their fruits in autumn mostly, 2 words
- 2 Nat King Cole classic, 2 words
- 3 Satellite navigation system, for short
- 4 Many tourists travel to this state as "leaf peepers" in fall
- 5 Marsh plant
- 6 Cereal grain used in porridge
- 7 Windy city, abbr.
- 10 Rainbow shape
- 11 Grand party
- 13 Fall behind
- 16 Northwest Illinois town which is a top spot for fall foliage
- 18 Morning hours, for short
- 19 Old West legend Doc _____, friend of Wyatt Earp
- 21 And so on, abbr.
- 25 Gentleman's title, abbr.
- 26 A large number of
- 28 Sand hills
- 29 Wheat seeds stored during the fall season
- 31 Long periods of time
- 35 Medical professional who diagnoses and treats movement dysfunctions, abbr.
- 36 "Let it ____," (Beatles' advice)

Solution on page 33.



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TEAM KENTUCKY

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SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER Datebook

LET'S GO!

Sept. 19 Paws at the Pavilion GALENA

An annual fundraiser benefiting Safe Haven, a local no-kill animal shelter

Sept. 26 Third Annual Pawpaw Festival PAW PAW

Free, family-friendly festival celebrates the pawpaw, North America's largest native tree fruit

Oct. 4 Gym Bob's Jamboree BIBLE GROVE

Opry-style live music featuring a variety of classic and '90s country for the whole family

Oct. 7-10 Greenup Annual Apple Festival GREENUP

Locally grown apples and fresh cider, an apple pie eating contest, vendors, food and family activities

For more information, a complete listing of events or to submit an event, visit icl.coop/datebook.



Artisan Market at Hornbaker Gardens

SEPTEMBER
19

Enjoy the country setting for a day filled with more than 35 artists, delicious home-baked treats, live music, a henna artist, local lunch fare, craft beer, wine tasting, fresh-picked local produce, balloon twister for the kids and more. The popular community mural is back — paint one of two hundred tiles that will come together throughout the day to create a mosaic mural.

Sept. 19, 2026: all day

● Hornbaker Gardens, 22937 1140 North Ave., Princeton

Admission: free

[Facebook.com/ArtisanMarketatHG](https://www.facebook.com/ArtisanMarketatHG)

Bos Brothers Old Fashioned Fall Harvest

SEPTEMBER
25-27

See corn go from the field all the way to fresh cornbread on the table. View demonstrations of harvesting, such as plowing stalks and stubble, corn shelling, rock crushing, blacksmithing, sawmilling and woodworking. Also enjoy rug weaving, pottery throwing, macrame, quilting, crocheting and more. Join Sunday's church service in the barn — all are welcome. Back Road Pullers tractor pull follows.

Sept. 25-27, 2026: 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Friday-Saturday; 8 a.m.-3 p.m. Sunday

● Bos Brother Historical Farm, 8105 Springhill Road, Erie

Admission: free

Bosbroshistoricalfarm.com



Fear Forest

OCTOBER
2

Brace yourself for the opening night of a spine-chilling adventure at Shenandoah Riding Center's Fear Forest, a haunted trail that promises to push your courage to the limit. Embark on a moonlit journey through eerie woods filled with frightening scenes, creepy characters and heart-pounding scares. Be prepared for a 30-minute walk through uneven terrain. Fear Forest will take place on select nights throughout October. Tickets are limited each night; register online.

Beginning Oct. 2, 2026: 7 p.m.

● Shenandoah Riding Center, 200 N. Brodrecht Road, Galena

Admission: varies

fareharbor.com/embeds/book/shenandoahridingcenter

U-Pick Mums Farm Day

OCTOBER
3

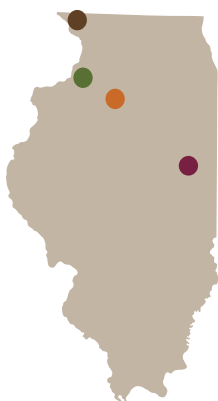
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Share the road with farmers

Navigating roadways during fall harvest

FALL HARVEST IS A busy time. Farmers must move slowly with large equipment, but public roads are often the only way to get from point A to point B. Navigating roadways can be dangerous for farm equipment operators and drivers who follow them.

Hundreds of farmers and agricultural workers are injured or die from work-related accidents each year. Transportation incidents, which include tractor overturns, are often the leading cause of death.

Tips for drivers

When you find yourself following or passing large farm equipment, take a deep breath and do your part to keep roads safer.

Before heading out, whether it's your daily commute to work or you're visiting family, think about how long it will take to get to your destination and add extra time for busy farm roads.

Give farmers plenty of room on the road. If oncoming farm equipment takes up the entire road, pull over and wait for them to pass. If you need to pass farm equipment, be patient and wait until you are in a passing zone and there is clear visibility around the equipment. Keep an eye out for oncoming vehicles.

Go slow. Farm operators often stop or turn into fields, making wide turns, so give them plenty of time and room. Do not assume that a farmer can move over in narrow

areas — it is not always possible. Honk or motion when passing farmers; their equipment is big and noisy and they may not see you or even know you are there.

Do not tailgate; farmers often cannot see you. And do not pass and then slow suddenly in front of equipment pulling implements or farm trucks full of grain. They cannot stop quickly.

Tips for farmers

Make sure all flashers and lights are operational before the workday begins. On roadways, drive as far to the right side of the road as possible, especially when going around a curve.

Avoid traveling during busy traffic times, such as work commute hours. Pull over and allow vehicles to pass when traffic builds up behind you.

Take care at railroad crossings and be mindful of the height and width of machinery, watching power lines, bridges and other hazards. Along with turn signals, use hand signals. Stay rested, and do not drive when you are too tired or hungry.

Tips for everyone

If you are involved in an accident with electric equipment, such as a utility pole or power lines, the safest place is inside your vehicle or cab. Here's what you need to do: Stay inside your vehicle, call 911 to

report the downed lines or damaged equipment, remain calm, wait for the utility crew to deenergize the equipment, and do not get out until someone from the utility says it is safe to do so.

If you must get out of the vehicle because it is on fire, cross your arms over your chest and make a clean, solid jump out, landing on both feet, and intentionally hop with your feet together as far away as you can. If you are unable to hop, shuffle with your feet close together.

When you exit, do not touch the vehicle and the ground at the same time. You could become electricity's path to ground from touch potential (touching something energized and the ground at the same time).

Hopping helps avoid step potential (placing each foot at a different voltage). When electricity escapes into the ground, it is likened to ripples in a pond, with each ripple representing a different voltage.

If you are a bystander, do not approach. Downed lines and other damaged equipment can energize the ground and nearby objects. Never go near a downed power line or try to move it with an object. Electricity can jump from a wire or object to you to find the quickest path to ground.

Know that a power line doesn't have to be arcing or sparking to be energized. For information about safety around electricity, visit SafeElectricity.org.



Erin Hollinshead is the executive director of Safe Electricity, a program creating a safer, smarter world by providing lifesaving electrical safety education.

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Creating lifelong habits

Teach children about energy efficiency

DO YOU HAVE ENERGY-SAVING helpers at home? Teaching your children to build good energy habits

unplug by pulling the cord. When playing outside, educate them to stay away from downed power lines,

they want, they can close the fridge while making up their minds. Closing your home's doors is another tip to keep heated or air-conditioned air inside the home.

Hot water is something else to consider. In addition to reducing wasted water, using less hot water helps you save on your energy bill. Heating water is typically the second-highest energy use in a home, behind heating and air conditioning. Reduce energy use by turning off the water while hand-washing dishes, taking short showers and not overfilling the bathtub.

Gamify your bill

Review the electric bill with older children. Be sure to focus on energy use, which is shown in kilowatt hours. This is also a good opportunity to teach about budgeting and finances. If you save money on the electric bill, you may be able to do something fun with that money instead. Consider miniature golf, getting ice cream or choosing a longer-term goal to fund a weekend family trip.

Ponder a family reward for using less energy than the previous month or the same month of the previous year, or an individual reward for the one who guesses how many kilowatt-hours were used that month. The winner could get to pick the movie for family night.

Exploring energy efficiency and conservation with your children doesn't have to be a chore. Find fun ways to build lifelong energy habits and save energy around your home. 💡



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARK GILLILAND

Reduce energy waste at home by teaching children how to fully power down electronics, such as gaming systems and TVs.

saves money on your electric bill today and sets them up for a lifetime of smart energy use. Here's how to get your family started on a household energy-saving adventure.

Safety first

When it comes to electricity, start with safety basics. Secure cords so appliances, lamps or other plugged-in items can't be pulled down. Use outlet covers and safety plugs to keep little hands from getting injured.

As they get older, teach children not to stick objects in outlets. When they are old enough to use outlets, let them know they should never

keep a safe distance from all electrical equipment and avoid the dangers of electricity near water.

Teaching energy habits

Keeping safety in mind, you can teach age-appropriate energy habits. Turning off fans and lights when leaving rooms is a good foundational habit. Fully powering down TVs, computers and gaming systems reduces energy waste.

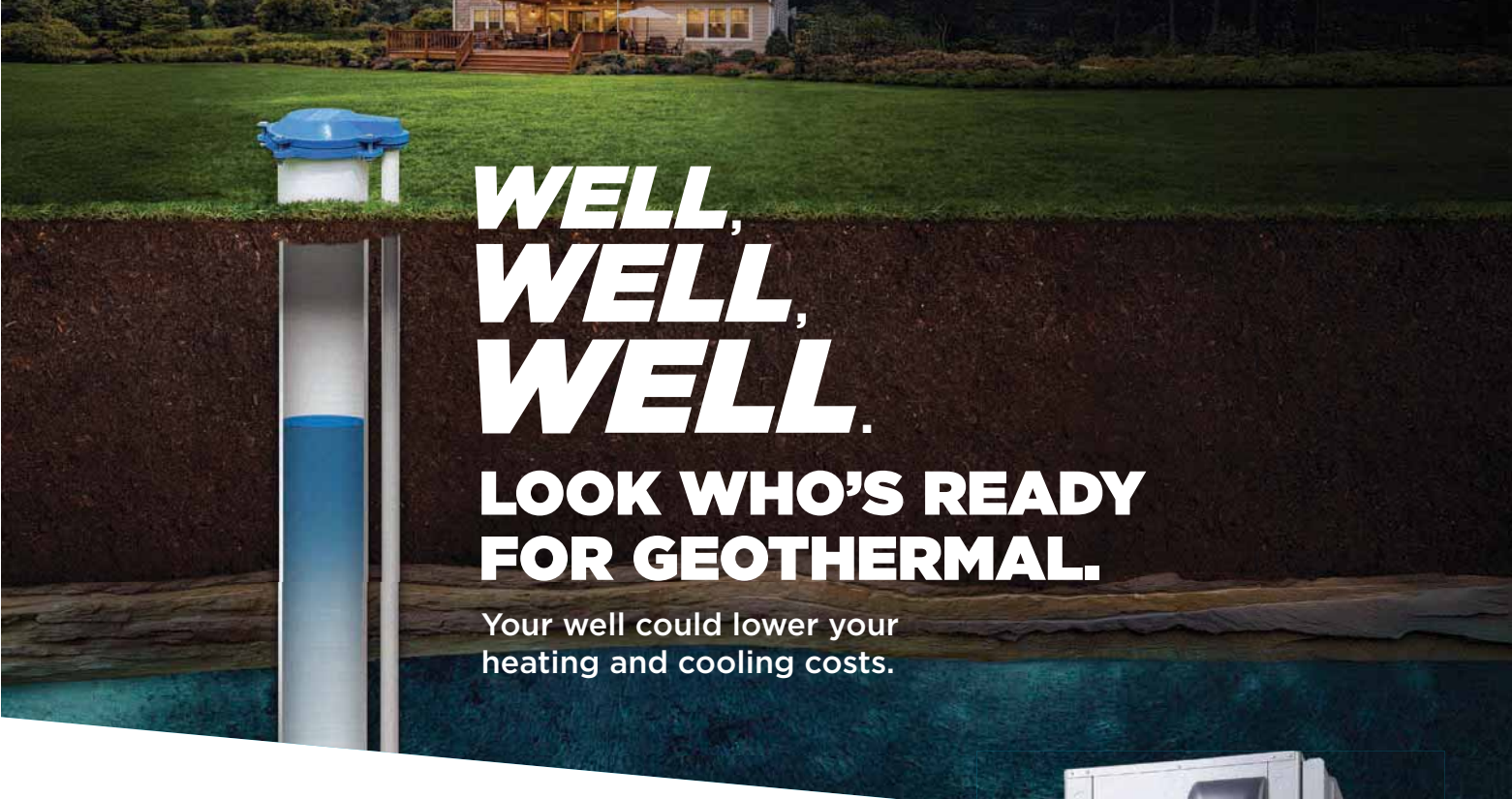
Keeping the refrigerator door open is a common energy waster for kids and even some adults. Show them they can take a quick look inside and scan their options. If they need time to decide what



Miranda Boutelle is the director of operations and customer engagement at Efficiency Services Group in Oregon, a cooperatively owned energy efficiency company.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF RIVIAN

One area where EV growth remains strong is commercial and delivery fleets. Amazon is rolling out thousands of electric delivery vehicles manufactured by Rivian.

Shifting gears

Understanding EV trends

ELECTRIC VEHICLES HAVE UNDERGONE a notable shift over the past year. New policies, changing consumer demand and decisions by automakers are shaping the current EV market and what may come next.

One major turning point came with the expiration of the \$7,500 federal EV tax credit in September 2025. The effect on new EV sales was immediate. Transaction prices effectively rose across the board, and lease deals that previously made EVs more accessible largely disappeared.

Sales figures show two clear trends. In late 2025, many people rushed to purchase EVs before the tax credit ended. This resulted in a 44% spike in sales. Afterward, EV sales quickly declined.

In early 2026, Americans purchased 212,600 EVs, which was a 28% drop compared to early 2025. The EV market share also fell to 5.8%, down from a high of 7.5%. But that decline might be slowing.

With more leased vehicles being returned and resold, the used EV market is growing with a reported sales increase of 12% in

early 2026. New EV price tags have also dropped more than 12% since demand slowed.

Another trend shows automakers are adjusting their focus. Ford is shifting part of its EV battery production to manufacture batteries for other uses, like data centers and electric utility equipment.

General Motors is also making changes, with a sharper focus on self-driving vehicle technologies. While these shifts are a result of slower EV sales, both companies continue to manufacture EVs.

Even with slower sales, new, lower-cost EV models are becoming available.

The 2026 Chevy Equinox EV starts at under \$35,000 and can travel up to 319 miles on a single charge. Pricing for some newer models, like the Nissan LEAF and the Chevy Bolt, is expected to start under \$30,000. These lower prices might prompt more drivers to consider EV options.

One area where EV growth remains strong is commercial and delivery fleets. Companies like

Amazon, UPS and FedEx are adding electric vans and trucks to their daily operations. Amazon is rolling out thousands of electric delivery vehicles manufactured by Rivian, which are now a common sight in many communities.

Fleet vehicles are a good fit for electrification because they follow set routes, return to a central location each day and can charge overnight. This makes costs more predictable and easier to manage. Companies are expected to continue investing in EV fleets.

Even with slow sales, EVs represent a growing source of electricity demand. The U.S. Department of Energy projects that in rural areas, home-based Level 1 and Level 2 charging could meet 82% of EV electricity demand by 2030.

While the pace of EV adoption in the U.S. remains uncertain, electric co-ops are well positioned to adapt. By planning ahead and staying flexible, co-ops will continue to provide reliable, affordable power while supporting members as their energy needs evolve. 💡



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.



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Ripe *with* Possibility

How Sarah Frey transformed her family farm

By Les O'Dell

IT IS LIKELY THAT Sarah Frey has never sighed and thought, “Oh well, that’s just the way it is.”

Pessimism is not in her DNA. Instead, “What if?” and “How could we?” are her predominant trains of thought, and they have taken her to success as an entrepreneur, speaker, author, innovator and advocate for both agriculture and rural America.

She says optimism came naturally, growing up on 80 acres in rural Wayne County, but her journey hasn’t necessarily been easy.

Always moving

Even at age 8, a time when many girls’ worlds revolve around pretend, play and friends, Frey was knee-deep in public relations, sales and hard work. Every summer, she would accompany her mother on a produce route, selling melons to a dozen grocery stores, one at a time, in their part of southern Illinois.

“We’d drive to southern Indiana to buy melons to sell to the grocery stores on our route,” she remembers. “My mom would send me into the grocery store, and it was hot outside, so we didn’t have a lot of time to spend at any one location — the sun was beating down on those melons.

“She would drop me off in the front, I would go in, talk to the produce manager, find out how many melons he needed that day, grab a shopping cart and meet my mom in the back of the store where we would unload the melons. I’d put the cart back, collect the money and jump in the truck as she was pulling away. Then, we’d go on to the next store and do it all over again.”

By the time she was a teenager, her “What if?” thinking was ripe with possibilities. At 15, she was attending high school and college at the same time. To make ends meet, she took over the produce route, growing it from the dozen stores she and her mother had been servicing to well over 100 retailers. It was all with a goal to move on.

“Everything I was doing, I was doing with focus in an effort to leave home and never return,” she says.

Then at age 16, as her family’s farm was facing foreclosure, more “How could we?” thinking came into play, and it led her to change her plans. “I knew I had to stay,” Frey recalls. “I decided, ‘I’m going to create a life that my family is going to want to come back to.’” She bought the farm and began to find a way to make it work.



PHOTO COURTESY OF FREY FARMS

"The moment when I decided to buy the farm, I believed that forces greater than myself were making me stay. I saw my future playing out in front of my eyes, and it felt like a life of sacrifice. Now I see how staying has given me great gifts," she says. "That was the moment when everything changed."

Right time, right place, right produce

As she continued to expand the produce route — one truck, then a truck and trailer, followed by an even larger truck — she made a connection that she sees as a turning point. After one delivery, she talked with the produce buyer at the brand-new Walmart distribution center near Olney. She already had been supplying melons to some of the retail giant's stores that the new facility would be servicing.

"I asked if they would be accepting deliveries there," Frey says. "She said, 'Yes, and I'm so glad you stopped by. I'm going to need three semi loads of watermelons every week and two loads of cantaloupes. Can you just take care of that for us?'" Her answer? An enthusiastic, "Of course!"

"That really set us up to be able to grow the operation and then, ultimately, set us toward regional and national business." The gravity of that agreement — one made by a 19-year-old with a produce truck — and the trajectory of success that would follow is not lost on Frey.

"When people say to me that I negotiated with Walmart when I was so young, I know that I actually had years of experience which had already prepared me for that — all of the things that I had done and been through, and the grit of being raised on the farm without a lot of the modern luxuries. There were many things that came together from my past that prepared me for that moment," she says.

Back on the farm

Turning the home farm into a success took more "How could we?" thinking. Knowing that less-than-ideal soil was one of the factors in the farm's original struggles, she looked for an alternative to row crop agriculture. She didn't have to look far, leaning on her experience with produce, and decided to give pumpkins a shot. Just like the ever-growing produce route, it worked.

Diversifying with homegrown produce and distribution, Frey has fulfilled her vision — one by one, her four brothers have returned to the farm to help run the business, which now consists of farms (totaling more than 12,000 acres of production) and facilities in seven states, along with more than three dozen distribution partners across the country,

Sarah Frey works with her brothers Leonard, Harley, Ted and John.



with some of Frey Farms located on Wayne-White Counties Electric Cooperative lines. Over the years, she has led through hard work and innovation.

As the farm continued to grow, so did its transportation needs. Moving hundreds of melons and other products from field to processor looked like an expensive process — until she realized it was possible to cut the roofs off discarded school buses — perfect farm transportation vehicles.

“We basically got a \$50,000 piece of equipment for \$2,500,” she says. “Now, almost 30 years later, we use hundreds of buses to harvest our crops all across the country.”

She also developed Tsamma Watermelon Juice, discovering a way to use fruit that often is tilled under at the end of the season. The brand has undergone rapid national retail expansion — it was the first watermelon juice to be distributed across the country — and millions of dollars in revenue are reported annually for this single product alone.

Tsamma is just one product from Frey Farms. The company, which also produces cantaloupes, squash, sweet corn, peanuts, pumpkins, ornamentals and watermelons, holds the distinction of being the nation’s largest pumpkin producer, but actually grows more watermelons than pumpkins.

Frey Farms also makes Sarah’s Homegrown agua frescas in a variety of flavors, and a new product, Sarah’s Homegrown Pumpkin Pie Mix, will be available this fall at Aldi stores.

A focus on rural communities

Frey, now 50, says she wants to continue to grow the Keenes, Ill.-based enterprise and the rural areas like it where the company works. “I have a passion and an appreciation for rural communities as we continue to expand our business, and we want to do that in communities that don’t look much different than the one I grew up in,” she says. “I get a lot of satisfaction when we are able to create jobs and opportunities for people in rural areas.”

Her own accomplishments have gained her national attention and accolades. She was suggested as a possible nominee for Secretary of Agriculture, and she’s been appointed by both Democratic and Republican administrations to boards, councils and commissions. Frey has also been named one of the most influential women in American agriculture.

“It is an honor to be considered for anything or to be mentioned as a worthy candidate for a possible position, but at the end of the day, I’m committed to running my business and doing the work that I have set out to do,” she explains.

She shares her recipe for the work she has set out to do in her book, “The Growing Season,” writing that, “I know I can do this, but if I’m going to do it, I have to do it my way, and I can’t keep doing the same thing.”

It’s something she believes others can do, as well. “I think that everyone has it in themselves to be successful,” she urges. “It’s just looking at things differently and challenging the status quo. It’s the willingness to change, to be open to opportunities and to be willing to think about things differently. For me, it was just literally a decision and then a lot of hard work.”

She continues, “I believe, regardless of circumstances, success is still attainable. It takes being uncomfortable, but if you are willing to accept change and change yourself, the American dream is still alive and well.” ☺





Illinois Seasons

SnapShots Photography Contest

From the cityscape of Chicago to the forests of southern Illinois, the Land of Lincoln is beautiful in every season.

Illinois Country Living is enhancing its **SnapShots** section and is accepting entries for its 2026 Photography Contest, featuring four categories:

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- 📷 Each category will award \$100 for 1st, \$75 for 2nd and \$50 for 3rd
- 📷 Runners-up will be published in the SnapShots section in 2027

KEY DETAILS:

- 📷 Photos must be taken in Illinois
- 📷 Open only to Illinois electric co-op members
- 📷 Deadline is Sept. 30, 2026
- 📷 Limit: Three submissions per category
- 📷 Photos must be high-res digital files

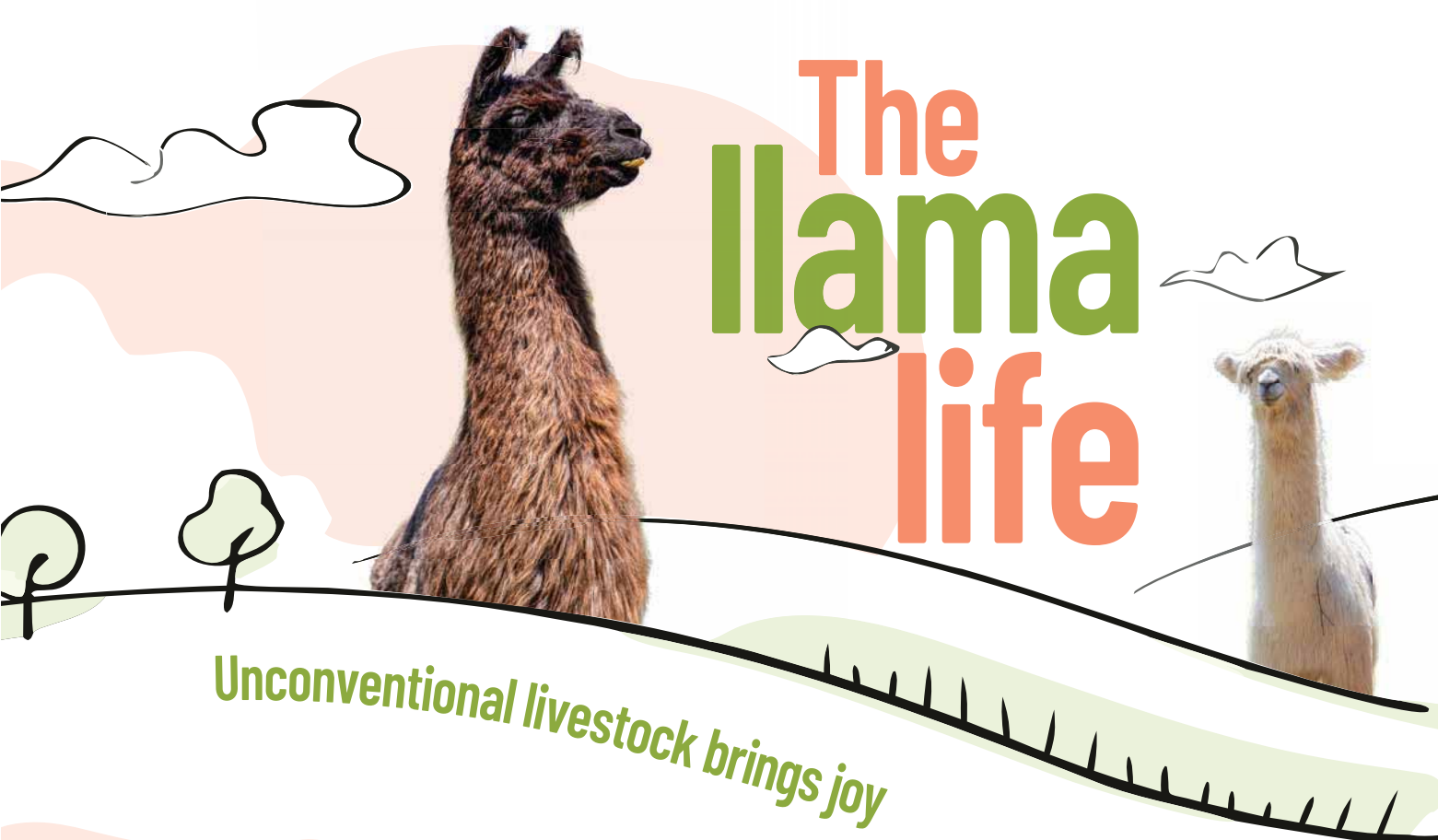


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The llama life

Unconventional livestock brings joy

By Colten Bradford

IT MAY BE ONE of the shortest retail seasons in Illinois. For just four hours each fall, Kris Allen opens the doors of her farm store to hundreds of visitors. The store itself, however, isn't the main draw. The llamas are the main attraction.

For three decades, the shaggy and, frankly, goofy animal has been a fixture on the farm Kris shares with her husband Terry, called K&T Llamas and located on Illinois Electric Cooperative lines just outside of Bluffs.

It all started when the Allens took their twin girls on a trip to the Illinois State Fair. And although they didn't know it at the time, this trip changed the course of the family's lives. The culprit? Llamas in costume, of course.

"We saw [kids] showing these animals dressed in costume, these big animals, and we thought, if they are that gentle, that looks like something that would be neat for our family," Kris says.

The couple wanted their girls to learn the responsibilities of taking care of livestock, though the parents would be learning alongside them, because neither Kris nor Terry had any experience either. "So, this was a new adventure for all of us," she says.

Llamas are domesticated members of the camel family native to South America and are closely related to alpacas. They

have been raised for thousands of years, particularly in the Andes Mountains, and are traditionally used as pack animals and for their fiber (fur). Today, they're also kept as livestock, companion animals and guard animals for sheep and goats.

Back in Illinois, the Allen family embarked on their new adventure with two geldings — who also happened to come with a bottle-fed sheep named Daisy.

The Allen's daughters began showing llamas throughout the Midwest and for 4-H. At the time, Scott County did not offer a llama project, so the family traveled to Pike County to participate. Showing llamas also introduced the family to a larger, close-knit llama community. Over the years, they met fellow owners from across the U.S.

Today, Kris is helping the next generation experience the animals — this time closer to home. Scott County now offers llamas as a 4-H project, and Kris leases animals to participating children for \$10, which is a formality required by 4-H so they can show. Beginning in May, participants visit the farm weekly to work with their llamas.

They practice showmanship and teach the animals to navigate obstacles. Depending on the year, they may also participate in pack or costume classes. Unlike many livestock competitions, the llamas themselves aren't the focus of the judging.

"I want them to be judged on their ability to interact," Kris explains. "The more time you spend with your animal, the better they respond to you."

That interaction is important because llamas are quick learners. Kris says they can get bored after doing the same



Sebastian and Kris Allen



Llamafun Guest House

obstacle three or four times. “Once they’ve caught onto it, they’re ready to go on to something else,” she adds.

The Allens currently own 13 llamas, which is much fewer than in the past. At one time, they had as many as 40. Now retired, Kris from banking and Terry from the nearby Reynolds plant, they are gradually downsizing their herd.

“This was my escape, my get-away,” she says. “This part was not work.”

Despite the smaller herd, the animals continue to serve plenty of purposes around the farm. For one, they are used for breeding. Two, they produce fiber, which Kris sends to a mill for processing before spinning and weaving it herself. She turns the fiber into scarves and hand-felted hats sold in her farm store. She also sells the raw fiber.

Then there’s Sebastian. Purchased from Colorado when he was just 6 months old, he has earned the title of the farm’s “PR llama.” Docile and friendly, Sebastian is a crowd pleaser.



K&T Llamas' farm store

“He goes into nursing homes,” Kris says.

“He’ll go into the rooms by the beds, and someone who can’t get out who wants to touch and feel one — he’s the llama for that.”

While llamas have a reputation for spitting, Kris says there’s a reason for the behavior. “They spit to protect themselves, just like a dog would bite or bark,” she explains. That protective instinct is especially strong in mothers with young crias — the term for baby llamas.

A place to stay

For some visitors, watching the llamas doesn’t require a day trip or an appointment. They can simply pour a cup of coffee and step onto the porch of the Allen’s rental home.

Since 2019, the Allens have operated their Llamafun Guest House on the farm, giving visitors a chance to experience rural life, complete with the llamas grazing just outside the front door.

The house once belonged to Kris’ aunt, who always played a big role on the llama farm and who had dreamed of opening a bed and breakfast but never had the opportunity. After she died in 2018, Kris and Terry purchased her home, which adjoined their farm.



They didn't want to sell the house, nor did they particularly want someone living so close to them full time. "So, we decided we'd try a guest house," Kris says.

The property now offers two separate rental spaces — which can be booked through Vrbo — with the upstairs and downstairs available independently. Guests have access to amenities including grills, a fire pit, yard games and a pair of e-bikes available for rent.

The high-speed internet gives guests the choice of truly getting away or bringing the office with them. The farm has fiber-optic internet service, something Kris says has become an asset for visitors who work remotely.

The house also provides a convenient home base for excursions to Springfield and Hannibal, Mo. Or visitors can stay put and enjoy rural living. The Allens offer guests the opportunity to meet the llamas, take photos and, depending on the weather and their schedule, walk one around the farm.

A day on the farm

Once a year, the Allens invite the community to visit the farm for their annual open house, or open pasture. It has been a tradition for about 25 years that has drawn as many as 350 people to their farm on a single day. This year's open house is scheduled from noon to 4 p.m. on Oct. 4.

The farm store will be open — the one day a year it is open to the public — and it will be stocked with handmade scarves, pottery and llama Christmas ornaments made by Kris herself. The shop also stocks many other products made from llama fiber from Peru, such as hats, gloves and socks.

During the day, the llamas will be the main attraction. Kris' 4-H members help visitors lead llamas through a simple obstacle course using two lead ropes — one held by the 4-H member and the other by the guest.

"We had a lady who was 94 do it, and toddlers just learning to walk do it," Kris says. "It's been really neat. It's for all ages."

The Allens also time their breeding so visitors may get a glimpse of a newborn cria around the time of their open house, although protective mothers and their babies are given some space.

For Kris, some of the most memorable visitors are grandparents who bring their grandchildren. "What a memory maker," she says. 🌱

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Open house scheduled Oct. 4, 2026 from noon to 4 p.m.



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THE PERFECT PLACE AND TIME

KAIROS BAKEHOUSE FINDS ITS SWEET SPOT

By *Lisa Cherry*

WHILE BRAINSTORMING NAMES FOR the bakery she planned on opening in her hometown of Strawn, then 21-year-old Lily Eisenmann and her friend happened upon the perfect moniker. “We found this word, and we just liked how it sounded. Then we [read] the definition, and it just fit,” says Lily.

The ancient Greek word was “Kairos” — the perfect, delicate, crucial moment; the fleeting rightness of time and place that creates the opportune atmosphere for action, words or movement — and both the word and its definition now hang on the wall inside Kairos Bakehouse, which opened earlier this year.

And fit it does. Lily originally envisioned opening a mobile bakery. That was until the opportunity for a permanent location crossed her path — the former St. Rose Church building on Route 47.

“I [had] bought my grandpa’s RV that we grew up camping in, so that was the plan originally,” she explains, “[but] it was getting a little bit complicated.” According to Lily, after deciding to purchase the church building, things just seemed to fall into place.

The church, established in 1939, required some work. With the help of her immediate and extended family, remodeling began. Lily painted the sanctuary, which would become the customer seating area. Creating a kitchen and addressing the plumbing took a little more expertise. Her cousins Sydney Parkhe, interior designer and owner of Texture + Tenon Interiors based in Champaign, and Jason Leman, a builder, both offered a helping hand.

“I would basically give [Sydney] a rough idea of what I wanted, and then she would come up with what it ended up being,” Lily says. “[It] ended up being a family affair. I have another cousin who owns Leman Builders, and he was our contractor.”

One of the additions was a drive-thru window for customers. “We figured being in such a small town, and being on 47, [it would] make it easy for them to stop. ... Plus, there are a lot of farmers, and they’re always in a hurry,” she laughs.

Lily’s mom Abby helps with the books as the young entrepreneur learns the process in real time, and her sister Grace is the bakehouse’s chief barista and creator of its

inventive drink menu and specials, like the popular s’mores macchiato on their summer menu.

“Our coffee menu, it’s like all the standards — lattes, macchiatos, smoothies, sparkling waters — then we get a little bit more interesting with a lot of our flavors. A lot of our syrups are house made,” says Lily. “The baking menu is the same. We have five or six things that are the same all the time, and then five or six things that are [seasonal].”

“We work well together,” adds Grace. “I think it’s nice to work with family, because you can say your opinions without feeling scared. ... You can be creative and have ideas, and if they’re bad ideas, somebody will tell you, and then good ideas, we’re all going to work together to make [them] happen. I think that’s been one of the fun parts.”

While Grace handles the drink menu, Lily’s passion is in her role as pastry chef. “Customer favorites are cinnamon rolls, blueberry rolls, and the croissants and chocolate croissants,” she shares. “Croissants, you can’t find a lot around here. That’s been something people find interesting. [And] cinnamon rolls are always a hit.”



Croissants are her favorite creations, however. “They’re just fun to make. They’re challenging, but when you get them figured out, and they turn out well, you feel pretty accomplished.

“We’re trying to do a few more savory pastries,” Lily adds. “Usually, you just get the sweet stuff.” Savory menu items currently include bacon rolls and spinach feta rolls. She also plans to add sourdough at some point and eventually breakfast and lunch.

“That’s the plan down the road, but it’s a double-edged sword, with how busy we’ve been,” she says. “People have been supportive, but then also we’ve been so busy we haven’t had time to get to breakfast. [But] I feel like that’s a good problem to have.”

Lily adds that one benefit of waiting is to gather input from customers about what they would like to see offered. “It’s a process,” she explains. “We’ll get to that later [after we] get our feet under us a little bit.” Meanwhile, the community continues to support the fledgling establishment as it has since Lily opened its doors.

“People have come out of the woodwork to support us; [the] generosity that

we’ve gotten from people has been really cool. I think that’s a big thing that made this possible,” says Grace. “Darin Bazzell from Knapp Kitchens had [furniture] in his warehouse, and he just donated [it] to us. ... We’ve had a lot of that.”

Another source of support is their crew of 11, not counting Lily and Grace. “They’ve done amazing work so far,” Lily says. “They’ve all gone above and beyond. ... I couldn’t be more grateful.” Grace echoes her sister’s sentiments. “The girls have stepped up. I can sing their praises all day long.”

Both sisters agree that the goal was to create a spot where people felt welcome to sit and stay as long as they wanted, either solo or with family and friends. They also hope in the future that Kairo’s will be able to host some community events, like a farmer’s market or Christmas market.

“With Strawn being such a small town, it’s been cool to bring in more people to see it, because it’s a sweet town,” says Grace. “We’ve had a lot of people telling us how they’ve traveled [here] ... it’s been sweet to see and hear that people have cared to travel this far.” 📍

Left to right: The remodeled sanctuary; a few of their daily specials; the repurposed pulpit; a customer favorite — Kairo’s cinnamon roll; Lily Eisenmann (left) and her sister Grace; bacon and mozzarella rolls; and the s’mores macchiato.

LET’S EAT!

Kairo's Bakehouse

206 S. 1st St., Strawn

HOURS

Mon-Sat: 6 a.m.-2 p.m.



Cooking for a crowd

TO ME, THREE IS a crowd. For others, that number is apparently much higher. Sometimes, you need a recipe that can feed at least a dozen people without requiring a second mortgage at the grocery store. These crowd-sized recipes are not only easy but also built for potlucks, parties or family gatherings where “serves four” simply won’t cut it. However, we do live in a free country. For a crowd or not, feel free to make these recipes whenever you want. Enjoy! 💡

WE NEED RECIPES!

Sugar-free desserts

Please email recipe submissions or questions to finestcooking@icl.coop or mail them to Finest Cooking c/o Illinois Country Living, 6460 S. 6th St. Frontage Road East, Springfield, IL 62712. Please include your name, address, phone number (for questions), and the name of your electric cooperative. Additional recipes can be found on our website at finestcooking.com.



Recipes are prepared, tasted and photographed by **Colten Bradford**, Illinois Country Living editor.



Churro Bars

Submitted by Sandy Angelo, Illinois Electric Cooperative

Servings: 12

1 cup butter, softened	2-1/4 cups all-purpose flour	Topping:
1 cup granulated sugar	1/2 teaspoon salt	1/4 cup granulated sugar
1 cup brown sugar	1 teaspoon baking powder	1-1/2 teaspoons cinnamon
2 eggs		
1-1/2 teaspoons vanilla extract	1-1/2 teaspoons cinnamon	

Preheat oven to 350 F. Grease a 9X13-inch pan and set aside. Using a mixer, cream together butter and both sugars. Add eggs and vanilla and mix until combined. In a separate bowl, stir together the dry ingredients. Slowly mix the dry ingredients into the wet ingredients. Pour into the prepared pan and press into an even layer. Combine the topping ingredients and sprinkle liberally over the top of the dough. Bake 25-30 minutes, or until the bars are lightly browned and the middle is set. Allow the bars to cool for 30 minutes before cutting them into squares.

Easy Tropical Punch

Submitted by Cindy Burch, Shelby Electric Cooperative

Servings: 24

1 quart pineapple juice	1 gallon Hawaiian punch, fruit juicy red	2 liters ginger ale
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Freeze pineapple juice in ice rings overnight. When ready to serve, place one ice ring into a punch bowl, pour in the Hawaiian punch about two-thirds full, and fill the rest of the bowl with ginger ale.





Rock Creek Cheesy Potatoes

Submitted by Kevin Hoop, Corn Belt Energy Corporation

Servings: 12

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| 1 30-ounce bag frozen shredded potatoes, thawed | 1 tablespoon crushed red pepper flakes | 1 10-ounce can cream of chicken soup |
| 2 tablespoons olive oil | 4 tablespoons butter, melted | 1 cup sour cream |
| 1 large yellow onion, chopped | 1 tablespoon garlic powder | 2 cups sharp cheddar cheese, shredded and divided |
| 2 12-ounce cans 25% less sodium Spam, cut into 1/2-inch cubes | 1 tablespoon seasoned salt | |
| | 1 teaspoon cracked black pepper | |

Preheat oven to 375 F. Empty the shredded potatoes into a colander and drain for about 30 minutes. In a nonstick pan on medium heat, add 2 tablespoons of olive oil and cook the onion until it starts to become translucent and the edges start to brown, about 8 minutes. Place the cooked onion into a large bowl and set aside. Return pan to heat and add Spam and red pepper flakes. Cook until the Spam becomes crisp. Combine the Spam mixture with the onion mixture. Cover the bowl and place it in the refrigerator to cool. Using an electric stand mixer, add the melted butter, garlic powder, seasoned salt, black pepper and cream of chicken soup to the mixing bowl. Turn the mixer on low until thoroughly mixed. Add the sour cream and one cup of shredded cheese. Continue mixing on low. Add the shredded potatoes and remaining cheese. Mix on low until well incorporated. Fold in the Spam mixture. Lightly grease a 9X13-inch pan, pour the mixture in and smooth with a spatula. Cover with aluminum foil and make a few slits in the foil for ventilation. Cook for about an hour. Remove the foil and cook for an extra 15-30 minutes, until the top browns to your liking. Remove the pan and let rest for 5-10 minutes. If liquid remains on the top after the potatoes rest, use paper towels to soak up the excess liquid.

Editor's note: This recipe is spicy. To reduce the heat, cut down or omit the red pepper flakes.

Joe's Chicken Tortilla Soup

Submitted by Joe Marlo, SouthEastern Illinois Electric Cooperative

Servings: 12-15

- | | | |
|---|----------------------------|--|
| 4 chicken breasts, cut into bite-sized pieces | 4 cups frozen corn kernels | 2 cups chunky salsa |
| 1 teaspoon olive oil | 2 cans Rotel tomatoes | Corn tortilla chips or tortilla strips |
| 1 teaspoon minced garlic | 2 cups onion, chopped | 1 cup Monterey Jack cheese, shredded |
| 1/2 teaspoon ground cumin | 1 teaspoon chili powder | Sour cream, optional |
| 4 15-ounce cans chicken broth | 2 tablespoons lemon juice | |

In a large pot over medium heat, saute the chicken in the oil. Add the garlic and cumin and mix well. Then add the broth, corn, tomatoes, onion, chili powder, lemon juice and salsa. Reduce heat to low and simmer for about 20-30 minutes. Crush up some tortilla chips or add tortilla strips to the bottom of a bowl. Pour soup over chips. Top with cheese and sour cream.



Texas Caviar Pasta Salad

Submitted by Melinda DeWees, Spoon River Electric Cooperative

Servings: 20

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 4 cups water | 1 15-ounce can sweet corn, drained | 2 cloves garlic, minced |
| 1 cup pearl couscous, uncooked | 2 multicolor bell peppers, diced | 2 tablespoons honey |
| 1 tablespoon salt | 1 jalapeno, seeded and finely diced | 1 teaspoon salt |
| 1 teaspoon olive oil | 1/2 red onion, finely diced | 1/4 teaspoon black pepper |
| 1 15-ounce can black beans, drained and rinsed | Dressing: | 1/2 teaspoon cumin |
| 1 15-ounce can Great Northern beans, drained and rinsed | 1/2 cup olive oil | 1/2 teaspoon mustard powder |
| | 2 limes, zest and juice | 1/2 teaspoon paprika |
| | 1/4 cup cilantro, chopped | |

Place water in a large pot and bring to a boil. Add 1 tablespoon of salt and 1 teaspoon olive oil. Then add couscous. Cover, reduce heat and simmer for about 8 minutes, stirring occasionally. Drain and rinse under cold water to stop the cooking process. Place in a large bowl and drizzle with olive oil to prevent the couscous from sticking. Set aside to cool completely. Once cooled, stir in the beans, corn, peppers and onion. In a small bowl, combine all the dressing ingredients, mix well and pour over the couscous mixture. Toss together until evenly coated. Cover and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes to allow the flavors to meld together. For best results, refrigerate overnight. Serve with tortilla chips.

End growing season on a high note

Making the most of your fall garden

AS THE GROWING SEASON ends and gardens transition into a well-deserved period of rest, a few important fall tasks can help extend the season while laying the groundwork for a healthy, vibrant landscape next spring.

Cover containers with light blankets or place larger containers over them for insulation. Many annuals sold at garden centers in the fall can tolerate temperatures as low as 20 degrees Fahrenheit without suffering much damage.

damaging frost, usually in October. Overwintering tender perennials, tropical plants and some herbs can reduce replacement costs and provide a head start on next year's garden.

Select only healthy plants for overwintering and inspect them for signs of insects or disease. Rinse foliage thoroughly with water to remove hidden pests. Dig up plants carefully, preserving as much of the root system as possible to minimize transplant shock. Repot them in fresh potting mix and trim the foliage back by about one-third to encourage root repair.

Once indoors, care for overwintered plants as you would houseplants. Place them in a bright location, water when the soil becomes dry, and provide additional humidity, if needed.

Plant spring bulbs

Late September through October is the ideal time to plant spring-flowering bulbs. This allows the roots to establish while providing the cold period necessary for reliable spring blooms. Plant the bulbs in large drifts or clusters rather than individually.

Interplant them among perennials and shrubs to help conceal fading bulb foliage after flowering. Bulbs should be planted at a depth equal to two to three times their height, measured from the base to the tip of the bulb. Space the bulbs 6 to 12 inches apart to allow room for multiplication.

If the fall is dry, water newly planted bulbs weekly until the ground freezes. After planting, apply a light 2-inch layer of mulch to help moderate soil temperature fluctuations, conserve moisture and protect developing roots throughout the winter. 💡

Add fall bloomers

Fall-blooming annuals and perennials help extend the beauty of the garden and provide an important food source for pollinators that remain active into autumn. This also helps refresh summer containers.

Incorporate warm colors and textures by combining seasonal blooms and foliage with existing healthy plants. Structural focal plants, such as ornamental grasses and tropicals, often continue to perform well through fall. Cold-tolerant annuals such as pansies, ornamental kale, ornamental cabbage and Swiss chard make excellent additions to fall containers.

To keep containers looking their best later into the season, protect them on nights when temperatures are expected to dip below freezing.

Cut back plants, or not

Remove and dispose of any diseased or insect-infested plants before winter. These materials should not be added to the compost pile to protect your future garden.

Rather than cutting every plant to the ground, consider leaving some stems, seed heads and ornamental grasses standing through winter. These plants add texture, movement and visual interest to the landscape, particularly when covered with frost or snow. Many beneficial insects also rely on dried stems and leaf litter for shelter during winter, making a less tidy winter garden a wildlife-friendly one.

Overwintering plants indoors

To save your favorite plants, move them indoors before a



Brittnay Haag is a Horticulture Educator for the University of Illinois Extension serving Livingston, McLean and Woodford counties. Her work focuses on youth horticulture education through school gardens and Jr. Master Gardener programs.

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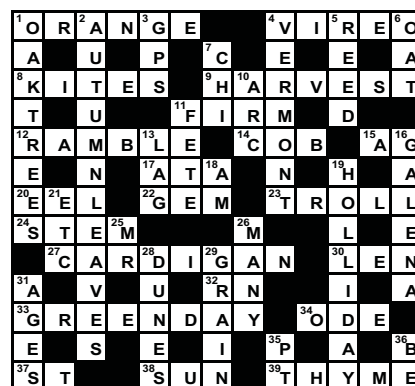
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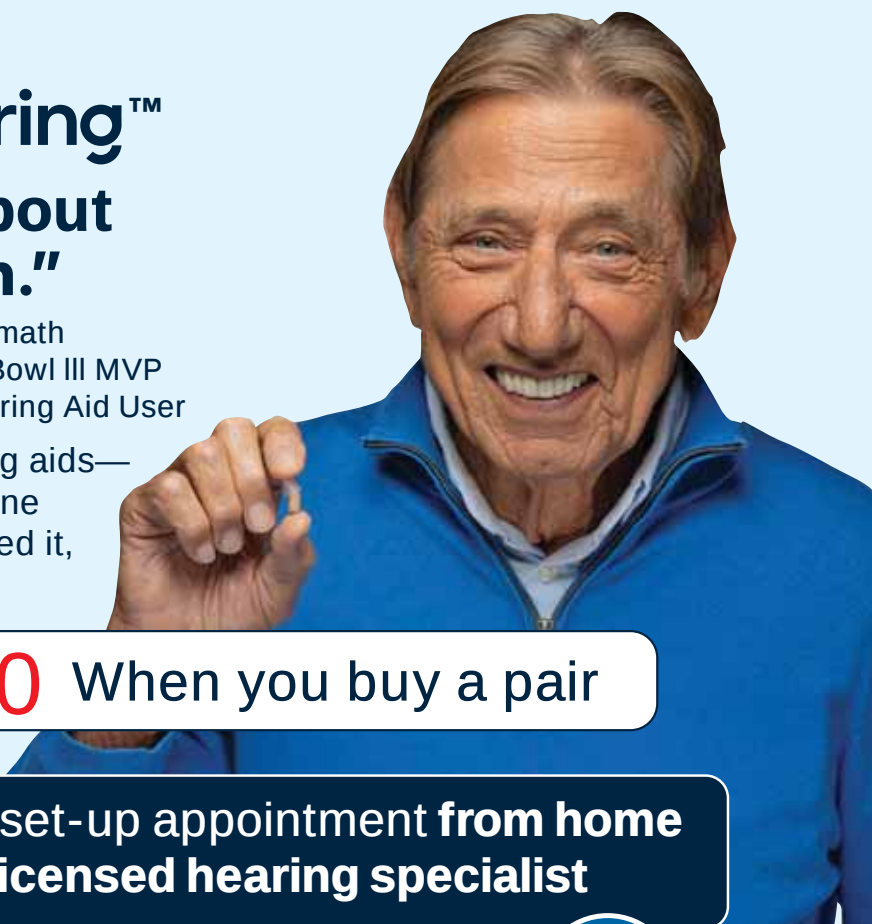
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