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Stephanie Hightower

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ON THE COVER



Stephanie Hightower turns a lifelong love of creating into a thriving leather business (Photo courtesy of Small Herd Leather)

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



I've decided that somewhere along the way, the word "thankful" became a little too easy to say.

We say it when someone holds the door open, when a friend does us a favor or when something works out the way we hoped. And while there's certainly nothing wrong with any of that, I wonder how often we really stop to think about what we're thankful for, especially when it comes to the things that didn't go according to plan.

I think some of the greatest blessings in life are the ones we never saw coming.

Take Stephanie Hightower, for example. I have known Stephanie for years, and one thing I've always admired about her is her creativity. That girl can do just about anything she puts her mind to. So when she started working with leather, I wasn't particularly surprised. What has been fun to watch is how that interest has grown into Small Herd Leather, a business that is absolutely thriving.

As you'll read in this month's cover story, Stephanie eventually made the decision to leave her full-time job and take a chance on herself. It wasn't a decision she made lightly, and it certainly hasn't meant fewer hours or less work. But she believed she could make a living doing something she loved, and thankfully, her husband, Chase, believed it too.

One of my favorite things Stephanie said during our interview was that she'll always bet on herself. I love that attitude. I also love that while she's confident in her abilities, she's quick to give Chase credit for helping her get where she is today.

And that brings me back to Thanksgiving.

When we sit down around the table this month, most of us will have plenty of obvious things to be thankful for. Family, friends, good food, a roof over our heads and, hopefully, a little time to slow down. But I hope we also remember the less obvious things. The opportunities we almost passed up. The people who believed in us before we believed in ourselves. The unexpected changes that turned out to be exactly what we needed.

Of course, I don't think we have to pretend every hard thing happens for a wonderful reason. Some things are just hard, and sometimes we're simply grateful to have made it through them. Still, there is something special about looking back and realizing how much good has come from circumstances we never would have chosen for ourselves.

Happy Thanksgiving!

Savannah Magoteaux

Savannah Magoteaux, Editor
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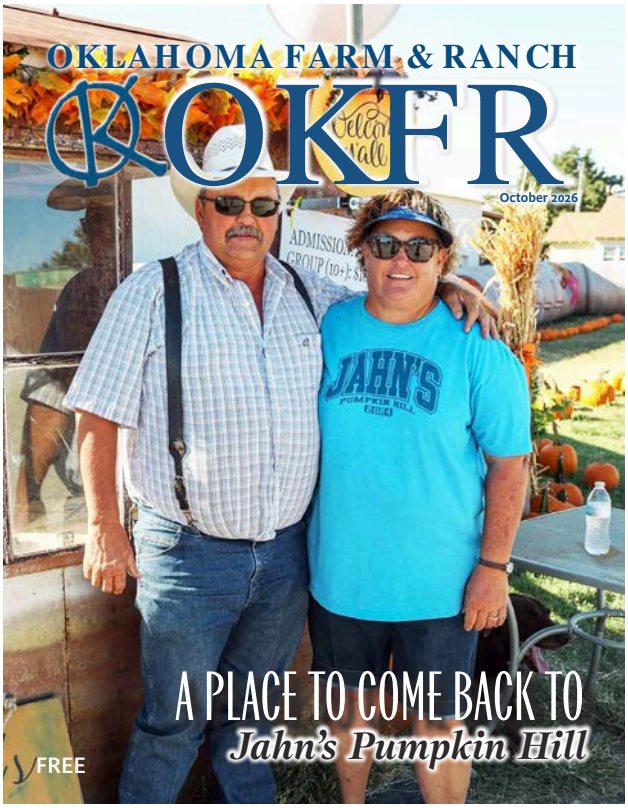
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Did you miss last months issue?
No worries - check out the archives at: okfronline.com





Farm & Ranch...

As the seasons change, livestock health and land management remain top priorities for Oklahoma producers. Dr. Barry Whitworth examines recent rabies exposures and the precautions owners can take around potentially infected animals. From Noble Research Institute, Will Moseley and James Locke explain how invasive plants threaten forage production and wildlife habitat, and what landowners can do to limit their spread. We also look at the clues cattle manure can provide about diet, digestion and herd health.



Rabies alert!

By Barry Whitworth, DVM

On September 10, 2026, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued a Health Alert Network Advisory (https://www.cdc.gov/han/php/notices/han00533.html) in response to multiple reports of human exposure to rabid or possible rabid animals. According to the advisory, CDC reported a 17% increase in questions related to rabies exposure from July through August compared to the same period in 2025.

State health departments have reported several cases of rabies exposure this year. The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services investigated an incident involving a mobile petting zoo. Ultimately, several baby goats were diagnosed with rabies which resulted in several people being advised to take post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) treatment. In Maryland, the Frederick County Health Department reported that 2 beavers tested positive for rabies. One of the beavers attacked a man fishing. One of the most recent reports involved a heifer in Minnesota. This incident resulted in the owner, the owner's daughter, two minor children, two of the veterinarians that examined the animal, and three assisting veterinary technicians being advised to seek PEP or rabies booster vaccinations.

According to the rabies disease map found at the Oklahoma Animal Disease and Diagnostic Laboratory (https://oaddl.okstate.edu/), Oklahoma reported 36 cases of rabies through September 25, 2026. Rabies was diagnosed most often in wild animals with skunks (21) being the most affected species, followed by cattle (6), cats (5), and dogs (2). There was 1 horse and 1 bat.



Beavers are among the wild mammals that can carry rabies. Avoid handling animals displaying unusual behavior, and contact the proper authorities if exposure is suspected. (Courtesy photos)

Prior to 1947, human cases of rabies were as high as fifty cases per year. Domestic animal cases of rabies were in the thousands. However, in 1947 a campaign was started to vaccinate dogs against rabies in the United States. As a result of this massive campaign, human and domestic animal cases of rabies in the US decreased dramatically. Currently, the US deals with less than 10 human cases of rabies per year. However, around 1.4 million Americans still seek medical attention from potential rabies exposure every year and 100,000 receive PEP. Anyone who has questions about exposure to rabies should contact the Oklahoma State Department of Health at (405) 426-8710 and ask to speak with Epi-on-Call. The Epidemiologist is available 24/7 and will assist in determining if an individual needs PEP.

The spread of rabies to domestic animals or people is usually from a bite from an infected animal. The virus may gain entry by saliva coming in contact with a mucous membrane or a break in the skin. Aerosol transmission has been reported in laboratories and bat caves, but this is very rare. Once an animal or person is infected, the virus will enter the central nervous system. The time from exposure to onset of clinical disease is highly variable, with bites in the face being the shortest.

Animals infected with rabies initially display nonspecific clinical signs such as abnormal behavior, anorexia, lethargy, fever, and vomiting. Following the initial nonspecific clinical signs, signs associated with the neurological system will begin to appear such as ataxia, weakness, self-mutilation, paralysis, seizures, aggression, swallowing difficulties, excessive drooling, abnormal vocalization, and straining to defecate or urinate. Many of these signs can be confused with signs of other diseases or health issues. For example, swallowing difficulties may be interpreted to mean the animal is choking. A person may try to examine the mouth and be infected with the virus accidentally. Once clinical signs appear, death usually occurs in the next few days.

When an animal has neurological signs, rabies should be suspected. Producers should avoid contact with the animal and contact their local veterinarian. If the veterinarian suspects rabies, they will not treat the animal since the condition is fatal and the danger to humans is not worth the risk of treatment. To confirm the diagnosis of rabies,

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a veterinarian will submit the brain for testing.

Rabies can be prevented by vaccination and by preventing unnecessary exposure of domestic animals to wildlife. All pets should be vaccinated. Obviously, vaccinating a large herd or flock of animals would not be cost effective. However, animals that are in constant contact with humans such as show animals, a family milk cow, or horses should be vaccinated. Preventing contact with wildlife is difficult but keeping the farm clean and free of food sources should discourage wildlife from entering areas where animals are kept.

Additional information about rabies is available at the CDC at https://www.cdc.gov/rabies/. Also, livestock producers may contact their local veterinarian and/or their local Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension County Agriculture Educator for more information.

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Noble Learning:

Invasive plants are a threat to agriculture

By Will Moseley and James Locke



Eastern redcedar can spread into grassland where fire is absent, reducing the area available for desirable forage and native plant communities. (Courtesy photo)

Properties managed for livestock and wildlife have plant communities that are manipulated to accomplish specific goals.

When an accidental, or intentional, introduction of an invasive plant species happens, those goals can become difficult or impossible to accomplish.

Some invasive plants were introduced with the best of intentions for improving soil health, stopping erosion, or providing improved forage production or wildlife habitat. However, we have learned that many of these plants do not provide the expected benefits and actually displace more desirable plants.

Some of the most serious invasive plants in the Great Plains are the old world bluestems (i.e. yellow, Caucasian, plains, King Ranch, B. Dahl), sericea lespedeza, eastern redcedar, musk thistle, Bradford or callery pear, and salt cedar.

Why invasive plants matter

The primary consequence of these invasive plants becoming established is that they displace native or more desirable plant communities with ones that are less productive or provide poorer wildlife habitat. Livestock production systems rely on forage production.

When invasive plants displace the target species in native plant communities or introduced monocultures, the result is almost always lower forage quality and production than the intended plant community. If a property is managed for wildlife, invasive plants often reduce plant diversity and negatively affect habitat.

How did they get here?

There are several ways these plants are introduced. Many were introduced intentionally to reduce soil erosion. However, over time, we learned their in-

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vasive nature outweighed their soil erosion mitigation benefits. Others were introduced to provide forage for livestock, while others escaped from ornamental plantings. Some of these plants are still sold to producers and landowners who might not know they are introducing an invader. If allowed to produce seed, these plants can be naturally dispersed by wind, flowing water or by animals far beyond their original area of introduction. They often also spread by disturbances such as tillage, mowing and haying. It is common to see bands of old world bluestems along roads (public and private) due to traffic bringing seed in on tires and the constant disturbance. It is also common to see invasive plants become established in areas where hay that was contaminated with them has been fed. Finally, some (such as eastern red cedar) are native plants that have become invasive due to the lack of naturally occurring fire. The lack of naturally occurring disturbances, like fire or very short durations of overgrazing by bison, have allowed some native species to become invasive.

How to prevent and control invasive plants

The best control is preventing the introduction from ever occurring. Producers should ensure their sources of hay are not contaminated with invasive plants. If one must purchase questionable hay, feed it in a confined area that can be monitored and control any invasive plants that come up before they can reproduce or spread. Make sure that outside equipment is cleaned to prevent it from introducing seed from the last place it has been.

Check seed before buying to ensure it doesn't contain something that could become a problem. This is particularly important for the cover crop and pasture mixes that include a variety of species. If invasive plants become established, quick response to the threat is needed to prevent the plant from spreading and becoming more difficult to contain or eradicate.

Visit www.okinvasives.org for more information on invasive plant control and links to neighboring state's invasive plant sites.



Hay can transport unwanted plant seeds onto a property. Producers should know their forage sources and monitor feeding areas for invasive plants.

Know your plants

Invasive plants are an ever-growing threat to agricultural and native landscapes that make it more difficult to properly manage the land. Producers and land managers must know what plants should be on their property, the invasiveness potential for anything new they might introduce, and how to contain or eradicate those invasive plants that do become established.

It is our responsibility to ensure that invasive plants do not start or spread from our properties.


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What your manure is telling you?

By Savannah Magoteaux



Manure consistency, color and visible feed particles can offer clues about diet and digestion, especially when producers look for changes across a group of cattle.(Courtesy photos)

Most producers spend plenty of time looking at cattle and very little time looking at what they leave behind. Manure is not glamorous, but it can be one of the quickest clues that something in a herd has changed. Color, consistency and visible feed particles can reflect diet, water intake, passage rate and digestive function. The key is using manure as an observation tool, not as a diagnosis.

Penn State Extension describes manure evaluation with three C's: color, consistency and

content. Start with consistency because it is usually the easiest change to notice across a group. Normal manure from cattle on a forage-based diet generally forms a soft pile rather than running like water or standing in hard balls. Diet changes can move it in either direction. Lush forage often loosens manure. Limited water or very dry diets can make it firmer. Grain level, protein, heat stress, parasites, disease and many other factors can change consistency as well.

That is why one odd pile should not start a panic. Walk through the pasture or pen and look for patterns. Are most cattle similar, or is one animal different? Did the herd just move to wheat pasture, receive a new supplement or begin eating a different cutting of hay? A consistent change across a group after a feed change may be nutritional. A single animal with persistent diarrhea, blood, mucus or obvious illness deserves closer attention and may require veterinary evaluation.

Color changes with diet. Fresh grass often produces greener manure, while hay-based diets tend to produce darker brown or olive manure. Grain-heavy diets can appear more yellow-brown. Color by itself is rarely enough to tell a producer what is wrong. Very dark or bloody manure, however, should never be dismissed as simply a feed issue.

Content can be particularly useful when evaluating how feed is being processed. Whole or obvious grain in manure may mean grain processing, intake level or passage rate deserves another look. Long pieces of forage can suggest poor chewing or rumination, although the entire ration and the cattle themselves must be considered. Older cattle with worn teeth may not reduce forage particle size as effectively as younger cows.

Foamy or bubbly manure can occur when fermentation shifts farther down the digestive tract, but again, that sign is not specific enough to diagnose acidosis from a glance. The safest way to use these clues is to let them trigger better questions. Is feed intake normal? Are cows chewing cud? Has the ration changed? Is water available and clean? Are cattle bright and behaving normally?

Manure can also reveal management problems that are not strictly nutritional. Extremely firm manure may accompany dehydration. Loose manure in calves can quickly become dangerous because of fluid loss. Variation within a group can suggest that cattle are sorting feed or that some animals are not getting equal access.

The most useful manure inspection is simple and regular. Notice what is normal for a particular group on a particular diet. Then changes become easier to spot. Producers do not need to become amateur diagnosticians. They only need to recognize that the ground behind the cow can sometimes tell them where to look next.

Season matters, too. A pasture full of lush cool-season forage can produce manure that looks very different from manure behind cattle eating dormant grass and hay. Water intake, supplements and sudden ration changes can all alter what a producer sees. That is why manure works best as a comparison tool. Learn what is normal for a group on a given diet, then pay attention when the pattern changes across several animals.

If manure consistently contains obvious feed particles or looks dramatically different after a ration change, it may be worth reviewing forage quality, processing and supplementation with a nutritionist or veterinarian.

The pile itself is only a clue. Its real value is prompting the next question.



Changes in manure are most useful when compared with what is normal for a particular herd, ration and season. An unusual appearance alone does not establish a diagnosis.

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Equine...

A horse's needs can change with age, but good management starts with understanding the animal in front of you. This month, we examine what makes a horse a senior and why condition, soundness and daily function may tell owners more than the calendar. We also explain why a horse's digestive system is designed for frequent forage intake and how long gaps between meals can affect gut health. These are useful considerations for horses of all ages, whether they are working hard or enjoying retirement.



When is a horse old?

By OKFR Staff

Ask five horse owners when a horse becomes old and you may get five answers. Fifteen sounds old to someone shopping for a prospect. Twenty sounds young to a person whose favorite gelding is still carrying grandchildren around the pasture at 27.

Veterinary guidance is moving away from treating one birthday as the line between adult and senior. Merck Veterinary Manual notes that there is no specific age at which a horse becomes a senior, although many begin showing physical signs of aging by about 20. Penn State Extension similarly notes that some people use 15 as a senior benchmark, while visible age-related changes often appear closer to 20.

That distinction matters because age by itself does not tell an owner what to feed, how much exercise is appropriate or whether a horse should retire. A healthy 20-year-old with good teeth, sound joints and appropriate body condition may need fewer management changes than a 14-year-old with chronic lameness or endocrine disease.



A horse's age is only one factor in evaluating whether it needs senior-specific care. Body condition, teeth, mobility and overall health also matter. (Courtesy photo)

Teeth are one of the first places age begins to change management. Horses have long-crowned teeth that continue to erupt as the chewing surface wears. Eventually the reserve crown is used up. Older horses can develop loose or missing teeth, gaps, periodontal disease and uneven wear that make long-stem hay difficult to chew. Quidding, dropping partially chewed wads of feed, slow eating and unexplained weight loss are reasons for a dental examination.

Muscle changes are another common clue. Older horses may lose topline muscle, especially if work decreases. Arthritis can make them less willing to move, which accelerates loss of strength. A saddle that fit for years may begin pressing differently as the back changes.

Endocrine disease also becomes more common with age. Pituitary pars intermedia dysfunction, commonly called PPID or equine Cushing's disease, is associated with older horses. Delayed shedding, abnormal hair coat, changes in body fat, increased drinking and urination, recurrent infections, laminitis and muscle loss are among possible signs. Those signs are not normal simply because a horse is old.

That point may be the most important one. Aging is normal. Unexplained weight loss, profound muscle loss, chronic pain, difficulty chewing, repeated infections and dramatic coat changes deserve investigation rather than being dismissed as old age.

Nutrition should follow the individual horse. A senior feed is not automatically necessary because the calendar changed. A horse maintaining weight on good forage and a balanced ration may not need a major change. A horse with worn teeth may benefit from soaked forage replacements or a complete senior feed that can provide enough fiber without requiring long-stem hay.

Exercise should be individualized too. Many older horses do well with regular low-impact movement. Turnout helps maintain mobility, and appropriately conditioned senior horses can continue useful work. The goal is to match the workload to soundness, cardiovascular fitness and recovery, not to retire every horse at a predetermined age.

The better question is not, 'How old is he?' It is, 'What has changed?' Track body condition, muscle, teeth, comfort, appetite, water intake, coat, soundness and attitude. A horse's age belongs in the record. His condition tells you what to do with it.

Preventive care becomes more important, not less, after retirement. Older horses still need vaccines based on risk, parasite-control plans, hoof care and dental examinations. A horse that no longer travels may have a different vaccine schedule from a show horse, but retirement is not a reason to stop routine health care.

Quality of life is also broader than soundness under saddle. Can the horse rise easily? Does he move comfortably to water and shelter? Can he maintain friendships in the herd without being bullied away from feed? Does he show interest in his surroundings? Those everyday observations are often more useful than whether he can still perform the job he did at 12.

Owners who record weight or weight-tape measurements, body condition and photographs every month or two are more likely to notice slow change. Aging can be gradual enough that a horse looks the same until an old photograph reveals how much muscle or weight has been lost.

The gut is never empty

By Ann Asher

A horse can finish a grain meal in minutes, but his digestive system was not designed around two large meals and long empty stretches. Horses evolved as grazing animals, taking small bites over many hours. That pattern is reflected in everything from the size of the stomach to the enormous microbial fermentation system in the hindgut.

The stomach of an adult horse is relatively small compared with the size of the animal. Feed moves through it regularly rather than being stored for half a day. Acid is produced continuously, even when the horse is not eating. Forage and saliva help buffer that environment, one reason long periods without feed are not ideal for many horses.

After the stomach and small intestine, material moves into the cecum and large colon. This is where microbes break down fiber that the horse cannot digest with its own enzymes. The products of that fermentation provide an important source of energy. In practical terms, that means hay and pasture are doing far more than keeping a horse occupied.



Horses are adapted to graze and consume forage throughout the day. Long stretches without feed can work against normal digestive function. (Courtesy photo)

University of Minnesota Extension recommends that forage make up at least half of the daily ration for horses, and many horses can meet most or all of their energy needs from good-quality hay or pasture. Horses naturally consume small, frequent meals throughout the day.

Management often interrupts that pattern. Horses may receive hay twice a day, finish it quickly and stand for hours before the next feeding. Some do well. Others become easy targets for boredom, wood chewing or digestive problems. Slow-feed hay nets, more frequent feedings, turnout and feeding methods that extend forage time can more closely match normal behavior.

The phrase 'never really empty' should not be taken literally as a rule that every horse must have feed physically in front of it every second. Horses can and do go periods without eating. The point is that their digestive physiology is adapted to regular forage intake and continual movement of digesta rather than repeated feast-and-famine cycles.

Large concentrate meals create a different issue. The small intestine has limits on how efficiently it can digest starch. When significant starch reaches the hindgut, it can alter fermentation and pH. Splitting necessary concentrate into smaller meals reduces the amount delivered at one time.

Abrupt feed changes also challenge the hindgut because microbial populations need time to adjust. A sudden switch in hay, pasture or concentrate can change what reaches the cecum and colon before the microbial community is ready. Gradual changes are a basic part of safer feeding.

Water belongs in any discussion of gut function. Fiber holds water in the digestive tract, and dehydration can contribute to dry intestinal contents and impaction risk. This becomes especially important as horses move from pasture to dry hay in fall and winter.

The practical message is simple: build the horse's diet around forage, make changes gradually and avoid unnecessarily long gaps without feed. The horse may live in a stall, trailer, dry lot or show barn. His digestive tract still operates like that of an animal built to graze.

Forage time is not the same as forage pounds. Two horses can receive the same daily weight of hay while one finishes in three hours and the other eats for eight because of hay texture, feeder design or individual eating rate. Owners trying to extend feeding time should make changes that are safe for the horse, especially when using nets or feeders where shoes, halters or feet could become caught.

Pasture adds another variable. Grass is high in moisture and lets horses move while they graze. When pasture disappears, a horse loses both that water source and a large amount of low-level movement. The winter ration therefore changes more than the ingredient list.

Owners should resist the urge to judge gut health by appetite alone. Some horses continue eating early in a digestive problem. Normal manure production, water intake, attitude and behavior provide additional information. Any significant colic signs still warrant veterinary attention.

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BETTING ON HERSELF

Stephanie Hightower

By Savannah Magoteaux, Editor



Stephanie Hightower has tried her hand at knitting, crocheting, beadwork, sewing and painting. If something caught her eye, she usually figured out how to make it herself.

She calls it "hobby hopping." She would discover a craft, learn the techniques and move on to the next one. Then she found leatherwork.

Photos courtesy of Stephanie Hightower

A box of tools and some curiosity grew into Small Herd Leather, a business specializing in handcrafted Western handbags, purses, diaper bags and other leather goods. Customers across the country now carry her work, and the woman who struggled to finish her first project can hardly keep up with orders.

The growth has been exciting and at times overwhelming. It has also confirmed something she believes.

"Sometimes you have to bet on yourself, and I'll bet on myself before I bet on anyone else every single time," she said. "Because when it comes down to it, it's your work ethic, and if you want something bad enough, you'll make it happen."

A creative beginning

Hightower grew up in a small rural community among the redwoods of Northern California, riding horses and barrel racing from an early age. At 18, she visited her brother, who was stationed at Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma, and saw what the state had to offer.

"This is horse country," she recalled thinking.

She liked the people, the available land and the chance to build a life around horses without California prices. Even a round bale of hay impressed her.

"I was so blown away by round bales," she said.

She moved to Oklahoma two years later, at 20. She met her husband, Chase, and the couple has lived in the state ever since.

Hightower had long admired custom belts, tack and other handmade leather pieces, but quality work often cost more than she wanted to spend.

"I look at something and I'm like, 'I'm not paying $800 for that. I can make that,'" she laughed.

Her mother, a silversmith who runs a business called Lost Coast Arts, helped make that





Top: Stephanie is an avid barrel racer.
Bottom: Stephanie and her husband, Chase.

possible. She and a friend, Mary Ann Underhill, owner of Underhill's Western Craft, bought the equipment of a retiring craftsman and split it. Half went to the friend's daughter, and the other half went to Hightower as a birthday gift.

One day, a large box arrived holding nearly everything she needed to start.

The gift thrilled and intimidated her. The box held stamps, equipment and supplies a seasoned craftsman had collected over years, and Hightower had to learn what to do with all of it.

For a long stretch, she practiced tooling without knowing how to turn it into a finished piece. She would work on something, then set the tools aside when life got busy. Eventually she realized she needed to stick with it.

"If you pick it up and put it down, you never grow," she explained. "You have to stay consistent with it."

She committed to one complete project: a rifle sling for Chase.

"I was like, 'I'm gonna build this rifle sling, and if it's ugly, it's ugly,'" she recalled.

The sling turned out better than she expected. Chase still uses it, and she counts it among the pieces she is proudest of.

"I figured it out, and that was really the turning point," she said. "I was like, 'Okay, this isn't as hard as I thought it was going to be.'"

From there, she started exploring what else she could make



Stephanie's first complete project was a rifle sling for her husband.

From hobby to business

Shortly after Hightower finished the sling, a friend asked her for personalized leather koozies and became her first paying customer.

Hightower tried to talk her out of it.

"You don't want to buy anything I'm making right now," she recalled telling her.

That friend insisted. Hightower remade the koozies several times and learned something about tooling and construction with each attempt. Carver loved the results and later hired Hightower to make pieces for her wedding, including shoes and a bouquet wrap.

More orders followed. Around Christmas, customers asked for belts, wallets and personalized gifts. Each project sharpened her skills, and the requests kept coming.

Taking the leap

Hightower had worked with leather for about three years without picturing it as a full-time career. She held a stressful administrative job at a heating and air conditioning company, a 45-minute drive from home each way.

At the same time, she and Chase faced fertility challenges. After learning that in vitro fertilization was their only option, she began to wonder whether easing stress in other parts of her life might help.

She liked her job, but the hours and commute wore on her. Meanwhile, leather orders were coming in faster than she could fill them in her spare time.

One evening, she asked Chase what he thought about her leaving her job to give Small Herd Leather a real chance.

The couple went through their finances to see whether they could get by without her income if the business failed.

"Basically, we budgeted for me to fail," she explained.

Once the numbers worked, Chase told her to go for it.

"He was really on board with it from the get-go," she said. "He was like, 'Let's do this.'"

About a year and a half ago, Hightower left her job to run Small Herd Leather full time. She gained freedom and took on responsibilities she hadn't anticipated.

"I left my eight to five to work seven to nine," she laughed.

As the business's only employee, she handles design, production, customer messages, ordering, shipping and marketing. Even away from the shop, she answers messages and plans the next project.

Some days a machine jams, materials arrive late or a deadline looks impossible. Wedding orders add pressure because the pieces must be ready by a fixed date, whatever goes wrong with equipment or shipping.

Hightower has never regretted the decision. The business keeps growing, and she has learned that working for herself

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Top: Always creative, Stephanie has dabbled in many hobbies, including beadwork.
Bottom: A recent custom order.

Continued from page 23

takes as much discipline as creativity.

Designing with purpose

Handbags have driven much of that growth.

Hightower had bought a pattern for a convertible backpack purse and left it untouched for nearly a year because the construction looked too complicated. When she finally tried it, customers loved the result.

She adapted the pattern, adding Western fringe, tooled leather patches and other details that made the purses her own. The convertible design became one of her best sellers.

"I can't make them fast enough for people," she said.

Hightower estimates she has made 40 to 45 convertible backpack purses in the past year alone. Customers order more than one bag, come back for more and recommend her to people she has never met. One customer in New York owns three.

She loves hearing from customers who get recognized in public.

"I'll get texts from girls that carry my purse, and they'll be out somewhere, and they'll be like, 'Is that a Small Herd Leather bag?'" she said. "It'll be someone they don't know. They don't know me, but they know my business, and that's really exciting."

The convertible purses sell well, but Hightower takes the most pride in a design she created from scratch.

While visiting her friend Monica McClung, an accomplished barrel racer, in the Oklahoma Panhandle, she met a young mother who admired the backpack purses but needed something more practical for life with small children.

The mother wanted to reach baby wipes and her wallet without digging through a crowded bag.

Hightower went home determined to solve the problem. After about a month of designing and testing, she finished a convertible backpack diaper bag with a built-in wipe dispenser on one side and a wallet compartment on the other.

The owner can wear it as a backpack and still reach her essentials.

"That I can confidently say was 100% my design," she said.

The custom diaper bags have become another strong line for Small Herd Leather. Hightower likes personalizing them with ranch brands, cattle designs and colors that suit the owner. For a mother raising children on a working ranch, those details make the bag personal as well as useful.

"I like helping and making people's lives easier," Hightower said.

Designing something different for each order keeps her interested. Leatherwork has held her attention in a way her earlier hobbies never did.

"Leather was the first thing that ever just fully consumed me," she said. "It stopped me in my tracks. I don't hobby hop anymore. It consumed me, and all my days are kind of thinking about what I could make and change."



More of Stephanie's creations can be viewed at SmallHerdLeather.com

Building something together

Through every stage of the business, Hightower has leaned on Chase. He built tables for her shop, worked on equipment and talked her through problems when frustration set in.

"He was that backbone for me," she said. "He's like, 'You know what you're doing. Keep going. You got this.'"

Now the couple has a second business. Chase recently launched Chasing Rain Custom Seamless Guttering, which installs gutters. He had worked in the industry before, and the couple decided the time was right to invest in his skills.

Hightower is returning the support he gave her. She designed his logo, helps with social media and cheers him on as he builds a customer base. Requests for estimates arrive regularly.

"It was really nice to watch him succeed because he really rode hard for me to succeed," she said.

Both keep demanding schedules, and they pitch in wherever the other needs help, whether that means troubleshooting equipment, cooking dinner or reorganizing the shop after a rough day.

"You really pick up where the other one's lacking, and he does the same for me," she said.

Looking ahead

Hightower is preparing for the next stage. She is building a new website, smallherdleather.com, where customers will be able to request custom orders. Social media has already connected her with buyers across the country. Her Facebook page recently passed 3,000 followers, and some of her videos have drawn tens of thousands of views.

She plans to develop a signature collection of high-end handbags with intricate tooling and one-of-a-kind designs, released in small monthly batches of individually numbered pieces.

She has no plans to hire employees. She wants to make every piece that leaves her shop.

"I like to keep it small," she said. "I like to know I'm making them. I know everything that goes into them."

She stands behind her work long after the sale and encourages customers to contact her if a piece ever needs repair.

"In 10 years, if your purse strap breaks, send it back. I will fix it or replace it," she said. "I stand by everything because I know it's going to last you the rest of your life."

She hopes families will pass her bags down through generations. She also wants to keep traditional leatherwork alive; each hand-carved design carries hours of practice and knowledge that a factory can't copy.

After years of sampling crafts, Hightower has found one worth building a career around.

Her workbench holds plenty of ideas, designs to refine and projects in progress, and every one of them involves leather.

The orders keep coming. When she thinks back on leaving a steady paycheck, she sees how far she has come, with Chase beside her and a shop full of finished bags to show for it.

For Stephanie Hightower, betting on herself has paid off.

To learn more about Small Herd Leather or inquire about a custom order, visit smallherdleather.com or find Small Herd Leather on Facebook.

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2026 Holiday Gift Guide

Christmas is just around the corner, and giving gifts is one of the most enjoyable parts.

Need ideas?

Check out these businesses, which are sure to have the perfect present to give next month.

Lifestyle...

The changing seasons bring familiar routines to rural households, from favorite meals to early plans for Christmas. Ann Asher looks back at why generations of home cooks saved bacon grease and how that practical habit became part of country-kitchen tradition. In "Where the Paved Road Ends," Beth Watkins tackles the challenge of setting a Christmas budget, with a few laughs along the way. And in Lacey's Pantry, pan-seared venison offers a flavorful way to put a successful hunting season on the dinner table.



Why save bacon grease?

By Ann Asher

Long before a jar of bacon grease became a nostalgic countertop accessory, saving cooking fat was simply practical. A hog represented months of feed and labor. Throwing away useful fat made little sense when that fat could flavor beans, fry potatoes, season vegetables, start gravy or serve purposes beyond the kitchen.

Rendered pork fat took several forms. Lard was traditionally rendered from fatty tissue, while bacon drippings were the seasoned fat left after cured bacon was cooked. In everyday kitchens the distinction did not always matter much. A spoonful of flavorful fat could replace another cooking oil that had to be purchased.



Saving bacon drippings was once an everyday way to add flavor and make the most of ingredients already on hand. Modern food-safety guidance favors covered, refrigerated storage. (Courtesy photo)

That thrift was especially important in rural homes where grocery trips were less frequent and households relied heavily on what they produced. Fat carried flavor and calories, and it made inexpensive foods taste better. A pot of beans, pan of cornbread or skillet of greens could be transformed with a little pork fat.

Cast iron and saved fat became closely associated for another reason. A thin coating of fat protected iron cookware from moisture and helped maintain the polymerized surface cooks now call seasoning. The exact methods varied from kitchen to kitchen, but keeping a skillet lightly greased after cleaning was common practice.

Kitchen grease also had uses outside cooking. Nineteenth-century Americans made soap from animal fats combined with lye. Smithsonian historians demonstrating period soapmaking have used leftover bacon grease and poultry drippings to illustrate how household fats could be repurposed. Other animal fats were historically rendered for lamps, lubricants and numerous domestic tasks.

Nothing about that history means a jar of grease should be treated casually today. Bacon drippings contain food particles and can become rancid. Modern food-safety practice favors straining the fat and storing it covered in the refrigerator or freezer rather than leaving an open crock beside the stove for weeks. When the odor changes or the fat shows signs of spoilage, it should be discarded.

Nutrition has changed the way many families view animal fat as well. Bacon grease is high in saturated fat and should be used for flavor rather than treated as a health food. The point of the old practice was economy and utility, not a belief that every spoonful was nutritionally ideal.

Still, the little grease jar tells a larger story about older farm kitchens. Food was valuable. Leftovers had a next use. Scraps went to chickens. Bones went to stock. Worn cloth became rags or quilts. Fat from the skillet went into tomorrow's meal instead of the trash.

Grandma saved bacon grease because it worked. It was already paid for, it tasted good, and in a household accustomed to using what it had, pouring it away would have seemed wasteful.

Saving grease also fit a cooking system built around repeated use of the same pan. A skillet might fry breakfast, brown meat for dinner and bake cornbread without ever being treated as a disposable surface. The flavor left behind became part of the next meal. That continuity is one reason older family recipes can be hard to reproduce exactly with a nonstick pan and neutral vegetable oil.

During periods when commercial fats were expensive or rationed, saved drippings became even more valuable. Home cooks mixed practicality with taste, using stronger-flavored bacon fat where it helped and plainer lard where a neutral result was preferred.

Saving drippings was also part of a broader household habit: useful fat was not casually discarded. Rendered animal fats could be used in cooking, and in some households accumulated fats also found their way into soapmaking. What mattered was making the most of an ingredient that had already been purchased, raised or butchered.

Modern food-safety advice is less casual about storage. Strained bacon grease should be kept in a clean covered container, and refrigeration is the safer choice for home storage. The old crock beside the stove is a good piece of kitchen history, but it is not necessarily the best model for today's kitchen.

Where the Paved Road Ends

Dear Scrooge, define budget

By Beth Watkins

I have decided this is the year I am going to budget for Christmas. I realize those of you who know me personally may need a moment. Go ahead. I'll wait.

Because when it comes to budgeting, I am generally riding shotgun on the struggle bus, waving cheerfully as we blow straight past the exit marked Financial Responsibility.

I always start out with good intentions. Every November, I tell myself the same things: We are going to keep Christmas simple this year. After all, Jesus is the reason for the season. I am going to make a list. I am going to set a dollar amount. I am not going to buy things just because they are cute. Then somebody puts a tiny pair of cowboy boots in front of me, and suddenly all fiscal restraint is gone.

We have 11 grandchildren. ELEVEN. Then there are four adult children, their spouses, Dirty Santa gifts, stocking stuffers, Christmas dinner, baking supplies—and decorations!

I have been told that I absolutely do not need any new decorations because the storage tubs stacked high on an equipment trailer in the shop are apparently adequate to pull off turning our entire house into a winter wonderland.

The Grinch I live with has basically one job: pull the trailer over to our garage. Well, that and bring down the six fully assembled Christmas trees stored in the attic. And help me carry in the two giant trees from the trailer that require assembly. And assemble them. But after that, his work is practically done.



Every year, Beth Watkins plans to keep Christmas simple. Then, suddenly, all fiscal restraint is gone. (Photo courtesy of Beth Watkins)

The rest of the totes are light enough that I can bring them in myself. I open my tablet, scroll through my Christmas décor pictures and see exactly where the contents of each tub belong. I unload the tote, replace everything with the everyday décor from that room and carry the box back to the trailer.

Once the entire house has been transformed into Holiday Home Headquarters, the Grinch takes the trailer back to the corner of the shop and gets it out of my way. Yes, it is constantly in his way. But he should be used to that by now.

Christmas has a sneaky way of nickel-and-diming you to death. Yes, I realize it's November and I should have started saving earlier. But if I had done that, I would have seen something shiny sometime around June and dipped into the Christmas savings.

So, let's see where I can save a little money. You know that little cursor that blinks on a blank screen, waiting for you to type? Blink. Blink. Blink.

Wait a minute. I think I just heard the dryer buzz. I think I'll go fold some laundry while my brain works through this mathematical problem. Apparently, when faced with a budget, I become remarkably productive in every other area of my life.

Okay, I'm back. While I was in the laundry room, I started another load. I only do laundry on Mondays. I am not a fan of Mondays, so what better way to spend one than mindlessly doing laundry?

There is an ongoing debate in our house over the amount of Tide I use. You see, the bottle says there are 65 loads of laundry to be accomplished from that one bottle. I do about six loads of laundry in a normal week. There are usually four Mondays in a month. That equals 24 loads. So, according to my Stud Muffin, one bottle of Tide should last me almost three months. Give or take.

The lid on the bottle has several little lines depending on the size or filthiness of the load. The top line is about half a cup, and the bottom line is about a quarter cup. But if you ask Google, apparently one or two tablespoons is sufficient.

One or two tablespoons?

I eyeball it because, well, "ain't nobody got time for that" when it comes to actual measurements. I still only get a little over a month out of a bottle. Clearly, I must be getting cheated on the amount of detergent in there because there is absolutely no possibility that I am overpouring. If we are being honest, the only thing I might overpour is alcohol. But that is a story for another time.

Which brings us back to the challenge of budgeting. See? I knew I would get there eventually.

In our corner of Oklahoma, there aren't a lot of shopping choices, so mail order is my go-to. My first rule is to Google the website and make sure it is legitimate before placing an order. Then I check to see if Amazon carries the same thing because I have Prime, and free shipping speaks directly to my soul.

I read the reviews. I compare the prices. Then I get my bank card ready. I am no longer allowed to use the credit card

because, boy, can that get away from me.

When shopping other websites, there is usually some magical dollar amount you have to spend to qualify for free shipping. Then it's $14.99 here, $22.50 there and, "Well, if I'm already paying shipping, I might as well spend another $35 and get it free."

Please explain the mathematics of spending $35 to save $7.95. Actually, don't. I don't need that kind of negativity during the holidays.

But this year, I have been thinking about ways to take a little pressure off the checkbook without poking the Ebenezer Scrooge who lives with me. Because I love Christmas. I love celebrating the birth of our Lord and Savior. Do I know that December 25 was the actual day Jesus was born? Nope. And honestly, that isn't the part that matters to me. What matters is that He was born. So, if the world wants to stop for a day in December and celebrate Jesus, I am more than happy to put up eight Christmas trees and participate.

I love giving gifts. I love watching the grandbabies tear into packages. I love having my family under one roof. I even love Dirty Santa.

We also have a pair of leggings made from fabric intended to resemble faded blue jeans. They are hideous. And they return every year, no matter who gets them. Sometimes some precious soul receives them and, when they bring them back the next Christmas, they add another item to the gift so they won't feel quite so bad for the next family member lucky enough to open them.

Okay, back to the point: the budget! Here's a novel Christmas idea—although it may be a little late for me to implement it this year. Christmas shopping does not have to begin financially on November 1. What if we picked up one gift a month throughout the year or set aside a little cash every month?

And here's a radical thought: What if I stopped buying gifts simply to make the pile under the tree look bigger?

That one hurt me a little. Because I like a pile.

I solved part of that problem a few years ago. Each grandchild has a big Christmas bag with their name on it. In my quest to become the favorite Grammy of all time, I fill the bag. I still wrap every gift, but I forgo the bows, ribbons and individual name tags. It makes delivering Christmas presents much easier. We almost always have Christmas at my daughter Samantha's house because she is centrally located for our ever-growing family.

And you know, sometimes the things our families remember most aren't the things we bought. They remember the ridiculous Dirty Santa gift that got stolen the allotted number of times. They remember the year somebody brought instant mashed potatoes. Apparently, my family will never let that one die.

For the record, I still stand by the fact that my family LOVES instant mashed potatoes.

Some dishes on our Christmas table have been coming to dinner longer than some of the people sitting around it. Everybody has a special holiday dish they have been assigned for a lifetime of Christmas festivities. That is, of course, unless you screw up everybody's idea of mashed potatoes. I know. It happens. Nobody likes an overachiever. And apparently, "overachieving" means different things to different people.

The rule is simple: bring your expected dish, and you are more than welcome to bring something extra. Unless you're a vegetarian. Then bring any of the following: paper plates, plasticware, bags of ice or Blue Bell Homemade Vanilla ice cream.

And please notice I said Blue Bell Homemade Vanilla. Do not show up with a tub of Blue Bunny artificial vanilla and expect to remain in good standing with this family. This clan takes its ice cream very seriously.

Now, where were we? Oh yes. Figuring out a budget for Christmas 2026. Who am I kidding? I should have thought about a budget way back at the beginning of the year.

You know, I could sit here and tell you that starting January 1, I am going to make a plan. A real budget. I'll set aside money every month. I'll shop throughout the year. But who am I kidding? I am no spring chicken. Do we really think this is the first time I have ever tried to make a budget? Surely, if budgeting were going to become one of my natural talents, it would have happened by now.

I have never in my life been particularly good at sticking to a plan when there is something shiny involved. I am spontaneous. I see something I love—I buy it. I see something one of my grandbabies would love, I buy that too. And everybody who knows me knows I pretty much do what I want, when I want.

I am not saying that is sound financial advice. I am simply saying it has been my operating system for quite some time.

So maybe I will budget better next year. Maybe I will start shopping earlier. Maybe I will set money aside every month and amaze us all. My Scrooge will shake his head. And somehow, just like every other year, we'll make it to January.

Besides, my Scrooge loves me.

And really...

How could he not?





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Lacey's Pantry

By Lacey Vilhauer

Pan-Seared Venison



Ingredients:

- 1/2 pound of venison backstrap or tenderloin
- Salt
- 2 tbsp unsalted butter
- 1 shallot, minced
- 3 cloves of garlic, minced
- 1/4 cups brandy
- 1/2 cup venison or beef broth
- 1 tbsp worcestershire sauce
- 1 tbsp dijon mustard
- 1 tbsp tomato paste
- 1/4 cup heavy cream
- minced basil, parsley, chives to garnish

Instructions:

Bring the venison loin out of the fridge, salt it well and let it come to room temperature, at least 20 minutes. Heat the butter in a large saute pan over medium-high heat for about 90 seconds. Pat the venison dry with a paper towel and cook it on all sides. Turn the heat to medium so the butter doesn't scorch. It should take about 8 to 10 minutes or so to get a nice brown crust on the venison without overcooking the center. Remove the venison, tent loosely with foil and set aside.

Add the shallot to the saute pan and cook for 1 minute, then add the garlic and cook for another 30 seconds. Don't let the garlic burn.

Deglaze the pan with the brandy and scape off any stuck-on bits in the pan with a wooden spoon. Let the brandy cook down almost to a glaze, then add the venison or beef stock, tomato paste, mustard, worcestershire sauce and stir to combine. Let this boil down until a wooden spoon dragged across the pan leaves a trail behind it that does not fill in for a second or two. This should take about 3 minutes on high heat.

Turn off the heat and let the boiling subside. Stir in cream and don't let it boil again or it could break. Slice the venison into thick medallions and spoon the sauce over the meat.

Garnish with herbs.

Outdoors...

November is a good time to pay attention to the signs wildlife leaves behind. We explain why whitetail bucks rub trees, what those marks can tell hunters and landowners, and how to protect vulnerable saplings. Another story follows squirrels as they bury acorns, sometimes helping new oak trees grow when they fail to retrieve every cache. Norman Winter shares cool-season color from the Matrix pansy series, while Janice Russell closes the section with a wintry Parting Shot.



Why deer rub trees?

By Savannah Magoteaux

In fall, a young cedar or smooth-barked sapling may suddenly look as if someone attacked it with a rasp. Bark hangs in strips, the trunk is polished and nearby twigs are broken. The damage is a deer rub, made when a buck works his antlers against a tree.

One reason is mechanical. White-tailed deer grow a new set of antlers each year. During spring and summer the growing bone is covered in living tissue called velvet. By late summer, antler growth finishes, blood flow declines and the velvet dries. Rubbing helps strip the remaining velvet and polish the hardened antlers.

But bucks keep rubbing after the velvet is gone. Rubs also become part of communication and breeding-season behavior. The action deposits scent from the buck's forehead and other glands onto vegetation, and the visual damage itself leaves a sign that other deer can encounter.

Rubs are not the same thing as scrapes. A rub is made on woody vegetation with the antlers. A scrape is a pawed patch of ground, often associated with an overhanging licking branch.

Bucks may work the branch with their face and mouth while depositing scent around the site.

Tree choice varies. Young, flexible stems with relatively smooth bark are easy to work, which is why landscape trees and orchard plantings can become targets. University of Minnesota Extension notes that deer-rub damage commonly appears as shredded bark on young trunks and may extend a few feet above the ground.

A rub does not tell you exactly how large the buck was. Bigger bucks can rub bigger trees, but small trees are used by deer of many sizes. The number of rubs in an area can indicate buck activity, but it should not be converted into a precise population count.

Repeated rubbing can seriously damage young trees. If bark is removed around much of the circumference, the flow of water and nutrients can be disrupted. Tree guards, wire cages or appropriately placed fencing can protect valuable young plantings during the rubbing season.

For hunters and wildlife watchers, rubs are useful because they reveal travel patterns. A line of fresh rubs along a trail can show where bucks are moving, especially when combined with tracks, scrapes, bedding cover and food sources. A single rub beside a road tells much less.

By late winter the bright scars fade, but the tree may carry the mark for years. For the buck, rubbing is a seasonal behavior tied to antler development and breeding. For the person walking the pasture, it is one of the clearest signatures that fall has arrived.

Freshness can be read cautiously. Bright exposed wood and moist shredded bark usually indicate a recent rub, while gray weathered scars are older. Rain, sun and sap flow change appearance quickly, so rub age is best treated as recent versus old rather than assigned an exact number of days.

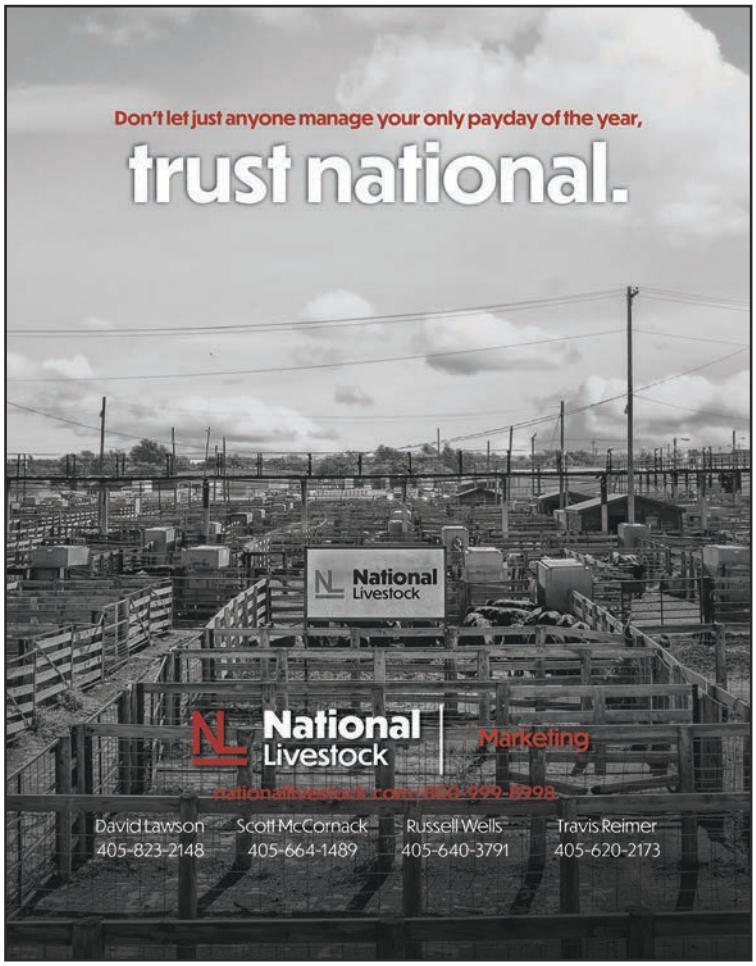
Tree protection is most important in orchards, windbreak plantings and yards where one damaged sapling matters. A physical barrier should leave room around the trunk and be tall and sturdy enough that a buck cannot simply push antlers through it.

Tree choice is not random.



Bucks may use saplings and small trees that are easy to work with their antlers, and individual deer can show preferences for certain species or locations. Rubs often appear along travel corridors and near areas where deer spend time, which is why hunters pay attention to clusters rather than treating one rubbed tree as a complete map of deer movement.

Large deer can rub small trees and smaller deer can work larger ones. Like most wildlife sign, a rub is most useful when it is read with tracks, trails, scrapes and repeated observations.





The Lacebark Elm is one of the most dependable trees for fall color in Texas & Oklahoma.
(Photos courtesy of Norman Winter, the Garden Guy)

The Garden Guy

By Norman Winter | Horticulturist, Author, Speaker

Lacebark Elm, Stunning in the winter landscape

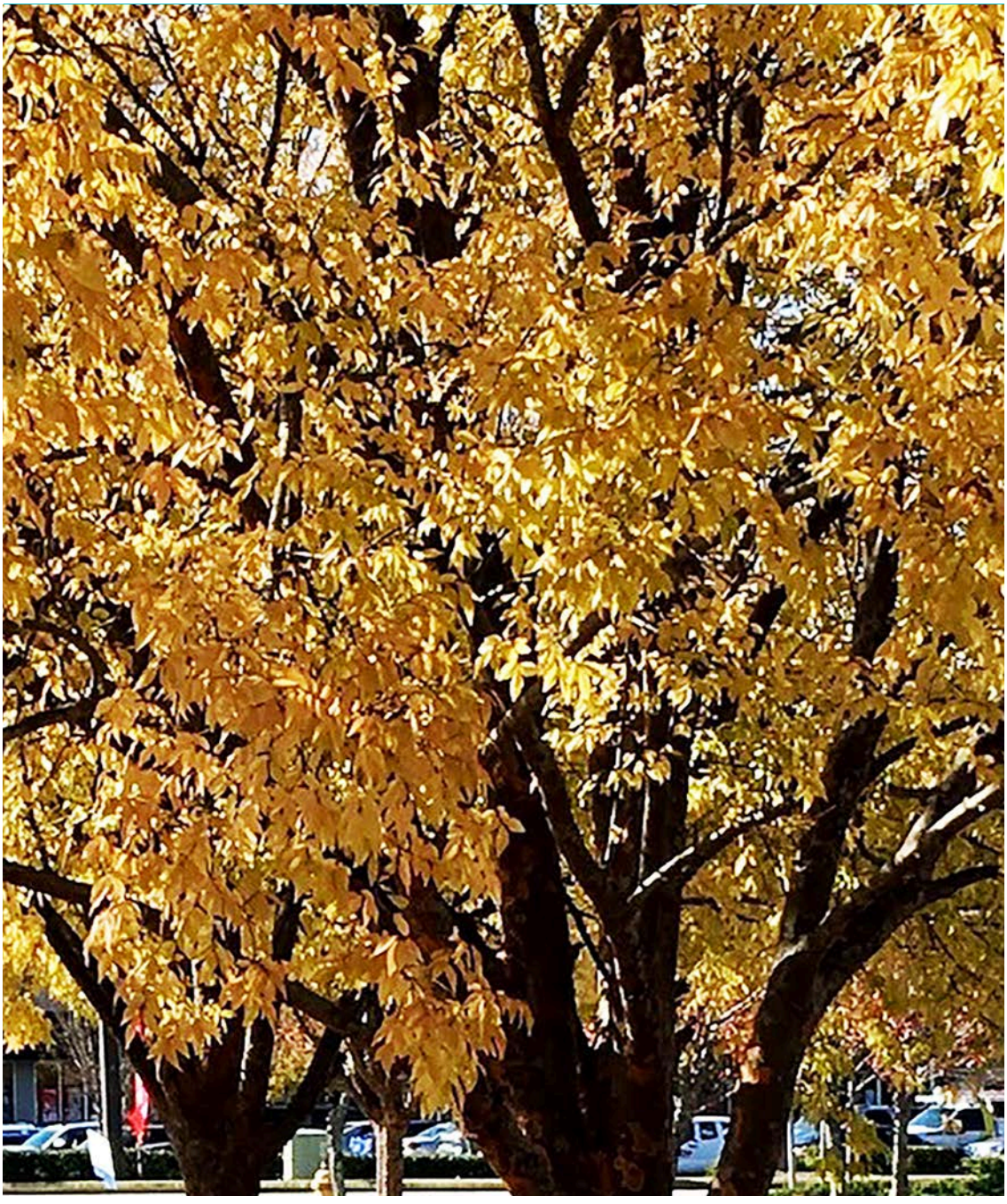
This time of the year I get mesmerized with trees such as the lacebark elm whose splendor comes not only from the fall leaf color but the incredible beauty of its bark. These are traits that seem to go unnoticed or at least unappreciated while the trees are full of green leaves.

The lacebark elm is known botanically as Ulmus parvifolia and is from China and Korea. Lest you think badly about bringing in foreign substitutes know that this one is resistant to Dutch elm disease that wreaked havoc on our native, American elm. To be honest this is one of the most problem free trees for the landscape. It is also a manageable size, reaching 50 feet tall and as wide over time.

I have years of growing them and while they are not as showy as some of the hybrid red maples, they offer good color in shades of red, combined with pink and yellow. As the leaves fell they created a carpet of yellow worthy of capturing with the camera. Now that the leaves are almost all off, the lacebark is the showiest as you'll see below.

After a dozen years ours are about 20 feet tall and 18 feet wide offering a perfect size for the urban environment. The leaves are dark green and handsome during the summer leading up to the fall display. Some trials report that the color on this species is better in the south but certainly this is not a

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The Lacebark Elm is resistant to Dutch Elm disease, drought tolerant and is not finicky about soil pH.



In addition to a rugged nature and beautiful fall color, it produces exfoliating bark that gives a camouflage like pattern.

deterrent in its colder zone 5 or protected zone 4 regions.

Don't forget the other incredible attribute, its bark. This is where it beats the hybrid red maples. While it's called lacebark which is most appropriate, it would also make the perfect pattern for a camouflage outfit. The bark exfoliates revealing shades of orange, brown, gray and olive green. Not too many trees can match this one in color and design.

In the south the Drake is among the most popular varieties as it is considered semi-evergreen. This would be problematic for the north as it is considered cold hardy to zone 7. Northern suppliers instead choose Emerald Isle and Emerald Vase in addition to a new release called Burgundy.

Once you select the variety for your region choose a site with plenty of sun. They are not picky about soil pH which is great for everyone. Even though they are quick to acclimate dig you planting hole two to three times as wide as the root ball. This really allows for the quickest root-expansion into the adjacent soil. The lacebark is considered a fast grower for a really quality tree. Normally fast growing is in connection with inferior short lived trees.

The dormant season reveals whether or not we planned for form and structure in our gardens and the use of bark is important. If we choose the right trees like the lacebark elm we will realize that even though they are deciduous they will make a dramatic landscape impact in late fall and winter once leaves have fallen and the bark is exposed. As spring planting season rolls around give the lacebark strong consideration for your landscape.



Forgotten doesn't mean failure

By OKFR Staff

Watch a fox squirrel in November and it can look like the animal is preparing for the end of the world. It grabs an acorn, races across the yard, digs a shallow hole, covers the nut and immediately heads back for another.

This behavior is called scatter-hoarding. Instead of storing one large pile, tree squirrels bury food in many separate caches. The strategy reduces the chance that a single theft or flooded hiding place wipes out the winter supply.

Squirrels are better at finding those caches than the old joke suggests. They use spatial memory along with smell and other cues to relocate food. They may also move and rebury nuts after detecting that another squirrel is watching.

Still, they do not recover everything. During heavy mast years, oak trees can produce far more acorns than the local wildlife can eat. Some buried nuts remain in the ground and germinate.

That makes squirrels accidental foresters. An acorn that falls directly beneath its parent tree faces intense competition for light, water and space. A squirrel may carry that acorn dozens of yards before burying it, moving the seed to a place where a new oak has a better chance to establish.

The relationship is especially interesting because squirrels do not treat every acorn the same. Different oak species produce acorns that germinate at different times, and research has shown squirrels can respond to those differences by eating some immediately and caching others.

Other animals contribute too. Blue jays can transport acorns much farther than squirrels, sometimes carrying them across open ground before hiding them. Together, seed-caching wildlife help oaks expand beyond the shadow of existing trees.



Squirrels bury acorns as food for later, but some caches are never recovered. A portion of those forgotten seeds may germinate and grow into young oaks.(Courtesy photos)

From the squirrel's perspective, however, the goal is simply food security. Squirrels do not hibernate through an Oklahoma winter. They remain active and need dependable calories when green food and insects are less available. Nuts are compact packages of fat, protein and carbohydrates that store well underground.

A mast crop also affects the wider food web. When acorns are plentiful, deer, turkey, rodents and many other animals benefit. Rodent populations can

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rise after abundant food years, which can influence predators and even seedling survival later.

So when a squirrel digs up the flower bed for the tenth time, it is performing a remarkably organized form of food storage, not running around confused. The fact that a few caches are lost is part of the reason oak trees keep turning up where nobody remembers planting them.

Caching also creates competition. Squirrels watch one another, raid caches and sometimes pretend to bury food when another squirrel is watching. Researchers have documented behaviors that suggest scatter-hoarders respond to the risk of theft, making the backyard acorn scramble more strategic than it looks.

Not every buried nut becomes a tree. Many are eaten by squirrels, mice or other animals. Some rot or germinate in unsuitable places. Seed dispersal works because enormous numbers of acorns are produced. Oaks can afford to lose most of them if a small fraction survive to become seedlings.

For the tree, a forgotten nut is not necessarily a loss. Acorns and other seeds that escape retrieval may germinate away from the parent plant. Scatter-hoarding animals therefore become accidental seed dispersers, moving potential trees into places the seed could not have reached on its own.

That does not mean squirrels are careless. Research shows they use memory and spatial cues to recover caches, and smell can help at close range. But no system is perfect. The leftovers are part of the reason a squirrel's frantic fall activity can influence what grows in the woods years later.



Cached nuts help squirrels make it through leaner months. The acorns they leave behind also contribute to seed dispersal.



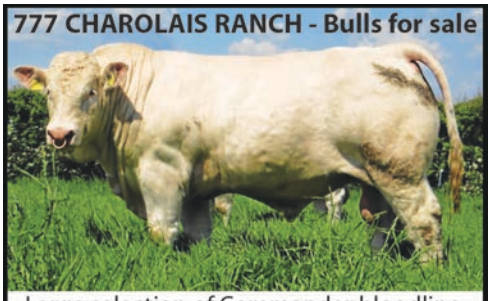
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Shimmer and Sparkles

Photograph by Janice Russell

As fall quickly turns into winter this picture reminds us of the ice, snow and cold to come. Old timers say the spoon shapes in the persimmons indicate a very cold and wet winter. This picture was taken on a cold, icy morning with the sun coming up, making the ice shimmer and sparkle. As the sun peeks through the pine trees, I couldn't help but still see the beauty of the ice on everything.



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