

Tennessee CONNECTIONS

WINTER 2025 | CUSTOMER FOCUSED ⚡ COMMUNITY DRIVEN

For more than a decade, Erwin Utilities employees have spread holiday cheer by gathering donations for local organizations. PHOTO COURTESY OF ERWIN UTILITIES

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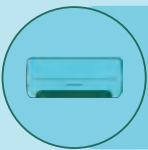
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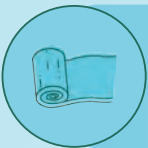
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Tennessee CONNECTIONS

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Deck the Halls

With Energy-Efficient Gifts

The holiday season is a time of joy, celebration and gift-giving. As we embrace the festive spirit, let's remember the importance of energy efficiency.

Everyone has experienced the strain of the economy, and we all play a role in the amount of energy we consume. This Christmas, choose gifts that bring the holiday spirit to your loved ones and contribute to reducing energy use.

Here are eight gift ideas that make both the recipient and their electric bill happy.

1 Solar-Powered Gadgets

Solar-powered gadgets are the perfect gift for tech enthusiasts and eco-conscious individuals alike. From solar chargers to power banks to garden lights, these devices harness the power of the sun to provide renewable energy.

Solar chargers are particularly handy for keeping smartphones and other devices functioning while on the go, perfect for those who go camping, hiking or just enjoy being outdoors.

2 Energy-Efficient LED Lights

Among the most iconic decorations of the holiday season are the twinkling lights that adorn our homes and trees. Opting for energy-efficient LED lights instead of fluorescent and incandescent light bulbs is a great way to reduce energy use.

LED lights use less electricity, last longer and produce less heat, making them a safer and more energy-efficient choice.

3 Energy-Efficient Home Appliances

Consider giving the gift of energy-efficient home appliances. Energy Star-appliances, such as refrigerators, washing machines and dishwashers, lower energy use and

save money on utility bills. Plus, they often come with awesome features and designs, making them functional and stylish.

4 Smart Thermostats

A smart thermostat is a fantastic gift for anyone looking to make their home more energy efficient. These devices learn the household's temperature preferences and adjust heating and cooling systems accordingly. Thermostats can significantly lower heating and cooling costs and reduce energy waste by minimizing the amount of electricity used to heat and cool a home.

5 DIY Energy-Saving Kits

For those who love hands-on projects, consider creating a DIY energy-saving gift basket. These kits can include weatherstripping, LED bulbs and smart power strips. Encourage your friends and family to embark on energy-saving home improvement projects that are easy to complete and help them reduce their energy consumption and lower their energy bills in the process.

6 Blankets and Warm Clothing

Some of the most heartwarming and energy-efficient gifts we can give this season are blankets and warm clothing. These gifts provide more than just physical warmth—they can help reduce energy use during the colder months. By remaining cozy with warm blankets and attire, your friends and family can stay comfortable while lowering the thermostat.

These gifts can provide an energy-efficient approach to staying cozy this winter while helping to lower the thermostat.

7

Smart Outlets and Switches

Smart outlets and switches are excellent tools for improving home energy efficiency, making them a thoughtful and practical gift. These smart devices allow consumers to remotely control and schedule the power to various appliances and electronic devices, ensuring they are not left on unnecessarily.

Through smartphone apps and voice commands, users can turn off lights, chargers and other devices when not in use, reducing standby power consumption.

By giving smart outlets and switches as Christmas gifts, you empower your loved ones to take control of their energy consumption and lower their electricity bills.

8

Dryer Balls and Drying Racks

Dryer balls and drying racks can significantly boost energy efficiency in the laundry room. When used in the dryer, dryer balls help improve airflow and reduce drying time, cutting down on energy consumption. Additionally, they prevent static cling and soften clothes naturally, eliminating the need for dryer sheets.

Drying racks also offer benefits. They are an alternative to using the dryer and are ideal for delicate items. Gifting both or one of these items is a surefire way to help your friends and family reduce their energy use, while helping them keep their clothes fresh and clean.

This holiday season, embrace the spirit of energy efficiency and give practical gifts. These thoughtful Christmas gifts bring joy to your friends and family, and contribute to saving them money on their electric bills. Give the gift of saving all year long. ■



ADOBE STOCK PHOTO BY PIXEL-SHOT

Season *of* Giving

The holidays are a time for giving, and that spirit shines bright for the team at Erwin Utilities. For more than a decade, EU has spread holiday cheer by gathering donations for local charities, from adoptable angels to the community's animal shelter.

The annual tradition spans all of EU's departments with employees buying and bringing in items for donation, which are then wrapped and dropped off to the receiving charitable organization. It's a tradition President and CEO Lee Brown says embodies the very foundation of not only the Christmas season, but also Erwin Utilities' values.

"Our team members are part of this community, myself included," Brown says. "We are always aiming to build a brighter future for our community. I think giving back goes hand in hand with that sentiment and really reflects who we are. We want to better this community, and bringing Christmas joy to those around us is one way we can make that happen."

Erwin's Center on Aging is among the organizations the utility has donated to in the past. During previous holiday seasons, each of the utility's five departments has "adopted" two senior residents, collecting gifts such as cozy pajamas, blankets, and slippers to make their Christmas a little

warmer. It's a small gesture that has a big impact.

"This tradition really brings out the heart of who we are as a company," says Marketing and Public Relations Specialist Brittnee Bryant. "Service is at the heart of what we do, and that extends beyond our utility services. We aim to make an impact on our community by showing that we care. I think a great way to do that is by making sure no one feels forgotten during the holidays."

The Center on Aging has expressed deep gratitude for the utility's continued generosity.

"Lots of times, a lot of these people we have don't even have families left, so the only time they get anything new is when they get adopted," the organization's activities department says in a statement. "When they get their presents, they're very happy, some are tearful."

As the season of giving continues, Erwin Utilities encourages everyone to find ways to make a difference—whether by donating to local charities, volunteering time, or simply offering kindness to a neighbor.

Here are a few of the various charities accepting donations in our area:

Unicoi County United Way
P.O. Box 343, Erwin, TN 37650

Relay for Life of Unicoi County
relayforlife.org/unicoiTN

Kiwanis Club of Erwin
www.facebook.com/erwinkiwaniis

Salvation Army of Johnson City
Email Olivia.Brokaw@uss.salvationarmy.org to learn how to be a host site or request an angel tag to fill.

Together, we can make this holiday season shine even brighter for our community. ■



LEFT: Gifts collected by Erwin Utilities employees line a table before wrapping begins. **BELOW:** Wrapped gifts are ready for distribution.





Erwin Utilities employees wrap gifts for donation.



Gifts are loaded and ready for delivery by Erwin Utilities employees.



Layers of Love

Born of the pandemic, organization matches those in need of a meal with a home-cooked lasagna

By Cheré Coen

It's a common dilemma, one that unfortunately plagues society daily. The world's so big and full of pain, what can one person do?

Rhiannon Menn found the answer in a pan of homemade lasagna.

The need in Rhiannon's community became painfully clear in 2020 as she witnessed medical workers in San Diego stretched thin and families and individuals isolated inside their homes during the COVID-19 pandemic. California was the first state to shut down, and many residents lost their jobs, leaving some destitute. Rhiannon began making meals she left on doorsteps—a pan of lasagna to feed her neighbors and remind them they weren't alone.

What she didn't expect from her simple act of comfort-food kindness is how the neighborhood, then the city, then the world, would react.

The Start of a Movement

As word spread about Rhiannon's lasagnas, others reached out, asking to join the effort. A network soon came together to match those in need with home chefs wanting to cook. No one asked questions or required information from those seeking help. They just offered support within a home-cooked meal.

"It started to grow like firecrackers," says Andria R. Larson, executive director of Lasagna Love, the nonprofit that grew out of Rhiannon's original delivery. "We were able to bring people together through nourishment."

As word got out in late 2020, Rhiannon and Andria had to develop spreadsheets to keep up with the demand. A volunteer from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology helped develop their website.

"We were just random acts of kindness that came together," Andria says. "And the ripple effect keeps going. We're now in four countries and all 50 states."



Andria R. Larson

Lasagna Love's mission is simple: address food insecurity in an old-fashioned way, with a home-cooked dish. Those in need—people who have lost their job or housing, families struggling to make ends meet or even college students away from home longing for a home-cooked meal—can register on Lasagna Love's website. The main office sends on the information to local leaders throughout the United States, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom, who match them with home chefs. The lasagna chefs are volunteers—as are 99% of the organization's members. The chefs buy the ingredients, prepare the lasagnas and deliver the meals to recipients with notes of encouragement.

Not everyone who volunteers with Lasagna Love cooks. Some donate money and ingredients, while others provide administrative help.

TOP RIGHT: Andria R. Larson serves as executive director of Lasagna Love. **BELOW:** Volunteers cook pans of lasagna to deliver to those in need, from people who lost their jobs to families struggling to make ends meet. PHOTOS COURTESY OF LASAGNA LOVE



“Some love to cook, some want to donate their skill set,” Andria says. “They are all part of the larger mission.”

To date, more than 23 million people have been affected by Lasagna Love, with more than 80,000 volunteers serving up assistance in one capacity or another. Lasagna Love ambassadors deliver, on average, 3,500 lasagnas each week.

“Radical kindness and generosity continues to spread,” Andria says. “What better way to do that than a pan of homemade lasagna?”

Ingredients of Love

Andria insists that even those who have difficulty in the kitchen can create a pan of lasagna.

“It’s really not that complicated,” she says. “It’s meat, sauce, noodles, cheese, and repeat.”

Some recipe tweaks are necessary if recipients have dietary restrictions. For instance, some noodles might need to be gluten free, and vegetarians may request a meatless dish. Many chefs incorporate family recipes, so recipients receive a meal that’s been beloved for generations. Some chefs may use recipes from the main office, along with a tutorial on how to put the pieces together.

No matter which recipe is used, the

main ingredient is always a desire to help.

“Through all of it, kindness continues to be needed and woven back into our community,” Andria says. “No one should be without food, but we find many in need.”

Home chefs may be individuals, families or groups, but the primary contact must be at least 18 years old.

In Tennessee, state director Melanie Johnson finds many groups wanting to

community service goals with earning a Lasagna Love Patch. To receive a patch, Scouts explore how to initiate positive change in their neighborhoods, engage in activities that match the core values of Lasagna Love and explore the challenges individuals face today, such as food insecurity. Participating troops help address local waitlists by preparing and delivering meals “while learning invaluable skills and fostering a spirit of

“Radical kindness and generosity continues to spread. What better way to do that than a pan of homemade lasagna?”

— Andria R. Larson, executive director of Lasagna Love

serve lasagna weekly across the state. She continually works with church groups, parents homeschooling their children and those looking for community service hours. Members of a ladies group in Clarksville deliver their lasagnas once a quarter. She’s even had a yoga class volunteer.

“It’s a great group activity,” Melanie says. “For families, it’s a great opportunity to involve kids at different age levels.”

Lasagna Love recently partnered with the Girl Scouts to marry the Scouts’

altruism,” according to the organization.

Andria agrees that creating and delivering lasagna is “passion work” and fosters the idea of a village mentality when society’s support systems fail or are not in place. She insists volunteers receive just as much emotional support as the recipients.

“It’s an emotional connection that you can’t duplicate,” she says of cooking and delivering the meals. “This is definitely more than lasagna.”



Lasagna Love founder Rhiannon Menn creates pans of lasagna with her son.

For recipients, it's as easy as signing up on the Lasagna Love website. There are no hoops to jump through, no paperwork to determine need. No fee is required, and privacy is paramount. Deliveries are contact-free to the doorstep unless the recipient requests otherwise. Recipients set the time, date and place of the delivery, and the process crosses all language and cultural barriers.

Sometimes, it's not the lack of finances that brings people to Lasagna Love. It may be someone in need of emotional sustenance.

"Most people have a need, but sometimes it's a harried parent who's working and tired of bringing home fast food," says Brenda Walkenhorst, local leader for the New Orleans metropolitan area. "You don't have to show reason."

For some, it's the first time they have asked for help. The lack of bureaucracy eases their anxiety, Andria says.

"We want to make the experience easy," she says. "There's no judgment, no qualifications. Hard times can happen anytime. We don't want people to face it alone. We're here."

How to Help

Lasagna Love is always in need of volunteers—and not just those who love to cook. The organization accepts donations, and sponsors may be called on to do everything from helping in the organization's administration to providing ingredients to chefs each month.

"It's a way for people to get involved without cooking," Andria says.

Those who wish to cook must complete a brief online training course on safe food preparation and share how often they wish to take part. Volunteers may participate as much or as little as they are able.

The ripple effect Rhiannon and Andria started in 2020 remains, Andria says, and the organization continues to grow thanks to the steady stream of volunteers. This year, Lasagna Love began spreading kindness in the United Kingdom.

"One of the things I did not expect from a group of five women to the state we are in now was being able to see how many people generally want to help," she says. "It really is impressive to see." ■

For more information about Lasagna Love, visit lasagnalove.org.



Volunteers may cook as many or as few lasagnas as they're able, as individual volunteers or as a group activity. Many volunteers use the opportunity to create lasagna with family members, church groups and other organizations. They sometimes add their own styles to the pan.



Messages of hope are delivered with each pan of lasagna.



ADOBE STOCK IMAGE BY AURA

Serving Tennessee One Lasagna at a Time

It wasn't long after Lasagna Love organized to serve home-cooked meals to American families in need that Melanie Johnson joined up. She oversees the organization's efforts across the entire state of Tennessee—12 districts and several metropolitan areas—and a group of volunteers that includes more than 200 home chefs. To date, more than 1,400 chefs have delivered 15,080 lasagnas to more than 64,000 Tennesseans.

But it's not enough, says the Knoxville native.

"The need is great, especially in rural areas," Melanie says, adding that at press time she had 928 people on a wait list. "There is more need than chefs."

Melanie is always looking for volunteers, insisting that donating time to Lasagna Love is easy. Volunteer chefs can cook once a week or once a year, depending on the amount of time and money they can spare. They may be individuals, families or groups, whatever works best.

"It is super flexible to join," Melanie says. "It can be a one-time thing, or it can be an ongoing thing. We're very flexible. We're also super flexible to take time off. Even if they serve one family, one time, that's one family served."

For those who shy away from stoves, Melanie insists creating a pan of lasagna is easy. It's inexpensive, and if chefs need help, she offers them an easy recipe devised with ingredient costs in mind.

"It's a delicious lasagna balanced with the cost," she says of her \$20 recipe. "And it's simple. They can put together a rather tasty lasagna in about 15 to 20 minutes."

Those who don't have time to offer may wish to start an ingredient drive of shelf staples such as noodles, sauce or canned tomatoes, Melanie suggests. Others may prefer the sponsor chef program, where financial donors join forces with chefs who can't afford to buy the ingredients but can volunteer their time.

"There are a lot of ways for people to get involved," she says.

What volunteers receive in exchange for their contributions is enormous, Melanie insists.

"You get more than you give," she says. "You never know what people are going through. It makes you realize we all want the same things—to feed our family, to have health, our happiness, to lower our stress levels. It's very humbling to me."

Even though Tennessee's Lasagna Love crew has racked up impressive numbers since its inception in 2021, there's still much more work to be done. Melanie enlists volunteers through social media, newspaper articles, flyers and bookmarks in libraries. She also partners with food banks.

"We try to advertise everywhere," she says. "We are known as the Volunteer State, and we would love to have more volunteers." ■

Classic Pies for *Festive*



By Anne Braly

Beautiful pies are a hallmark of the holiday season, a celebration of family and friends gathered around the table for the Yuletide feast. There's no disputing the best pies are made from scratch—gifts from the cook that will make memories for Christmases to come.

Millionaire pie is a classic, no-bake dessert that can be made ahead—just what you need during the busy holidays. Cranberry pie makes a lovely statement with its red filling and a crown of sweet whipped cream. And could there be a better pie than grasshopper pie, with its bright green filling?

These pies encompass the spirit of the holiday season and bring a gorgeous finale to festive dinners.

Tables

MILLIONAIRE PIE

14 graham crackers, finely crushed (about 2 cups)

1 stick unsalted butter, melted

$\frac{1}{3}$ cup granulated sugar

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt, divided

1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups sweetened coconut flakes

1 cup chopped raw pecans

4 ounces cream cheese

14-ounce can sweetened condensed milk

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup fresh lemon juice

20-ounce can crushed pineapple, drained

8-ounce container whipped topping

Canned whip cream and maraschino cherries, for serving



Place racks in upper and lower thirds of oven; heat to 325 F. Spray a deep pie dish with cooking spray.

In a large bowl, mix cracker crumbs, butter, sugar and $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt until combined. Press mixture into bottom and up the sides of the prepared dish.

Toss coconut and pecans on a large baking sheet and spread in an even layer. Bake coconut and nuts on top rack, tossing halfway through. As the coconut and pecans are toasting, place pie crust on bottom rack, baking until crust is golden brown and coconut and nuts are lightly toasted, 15 to 20 minutes. Keep a careful eye on both to guard against burning. Let cool 15 minutes.

In a large bowl, using a mixer on medium-high speed, beat cream cheese until smooth. Add milk, lemon juice and $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt, beating until well combined. Stir in pineapple and all but $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of the toasted coconut and pecans. Fold in whipped topping and pile high in cooled crust. Create swirls with canned whip cream around edge of pie, then top each swirl with a maraschino cherry. Sprinkle remaining toasted coconut and pecans in center of pie. Freeze until firm, at least 4 hours or, wrapped, up to 1 month. Let pie come to room temperature before slicing.

GRASSHOPPER PIE

- 15 chocolate sandwich cookies, such as Oreos
- 3 tablespoons butter, melted
- 24 large marshmallows or a 13-ounce container marshmallow fluff
- $\frac{2}{3}$ cup half-and-half
- 2 tablespoons creme de menthe liqueur, plus more to taste
- 2 tablespoons creme de cacao liqueur
- 1 cup heavy cream
- Drop or two of green food coloring, optional
- Extra cookie crumbs, for sprinkling

Place the cookies and melted butter into the bowl of a food processor, and pulverize. Press the crumbs into the bottom and up the sides of a 9-inch pie pan, reserving a few to sprinkle over the pie later. Place the crust in the freezer for at least 15 minutes while you make the filling.

In a saucepan, heat the marshmallows and half-and-half over low heat, stirring constantly. As soon as it's all melted and combined, place the saucepan in a bowl of ice to cool down quickly. Once cool, add creme de menthe and creme de cacao. Taste and add more creme de menthe, if needed. Add one to two drops of green food coloring, if using.

In a mixing bowl, beat the heavy cream until stiff. Pour the cold marshmallow mixture into the whipped cream, and fold together gently.

Pour the filling into the chocolate crust. Sprinkle the reserved cookie crumbs over the top. Place the pie in the freezer until firm, at least 2 hours. Remove from the freezer 10 minutes or so before you want to slice and serve.



CRANBERRY PIE

- 10 ounces Biscoff cookies, ginger snaps or shortbread cookies, finely crushed
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup butter, melted, plus more for pie plate
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon, plus a pinch kosher salt
- 16 ounces whole cranberries, fresh or frozen
- 1 cup cranberry juice, not a juice blend
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup sugar
- 14-ounce can sweetened condensed milk
- 3 large eggs
- Whipped cream and fresh raspberries, for garnish

Heat oven to 350 F, and grease a 9-inch pie plate.

In a large bowl, combine cookie crumbs, melted butter and $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt. Press into the bottom and up the sides of the prepared pie plate. Bake crust until golden and firm, about 10 minutes. Transfer to a wire rack to cool.

While crust is baking and cooling, prepare filling. Add the cranberries, cranberry juice, sugar and a pinch of salt to a medium pot. Cook over medium heat for 10 minutes or until the cranberries have burst. Remove from heat.

Using a blender, puree the cranberries. Immediately pour through a fine-mesh strainer into a bowl, using a spatula to push all the cranberry puree out while leaving behind any bits of seed. You should have about 2 cups of puree. If you don't, add more cranberry juice until you have 2 cups of liquid.

In a separate bowl, combine sweetened condensed milk and eggs and whisk together. Slowly pour in the cranberry puree, a little at a time, while gently whisking. Pour the cranberry filling into the baked pie crust. Place the pie on the oven's middle rack and bake for 30-35 minutes or until the custard has a matte appearance on the edges and is set nearly throughout, but still slightly wobbly in the middle.

Remove the pie from the oven, and place it on a rack to cool.

Once the pie has cooled completely, refrigerate for at least 4 hours or until filling is set. Top with whipped cream and raspberries before serving.



Honoring the *Queen* of Rock 'n' Roll

Brownsville erects
statue of hometown
star Tina Turner

By Trish Milburn

The bronze statue of the performer was unveiled in September. PHOTO COURTESY OF SONIA OUTLAW-CLARK



When Anna Mae Bullock was born in 1939 in the tiny community of Nutbush, no one had any idea she would come to be known the world over as Tina Turner, the Queen of Rock 'n' Roll.

Throughout a career spanning more than seven decades, Turner's powerful voice and electrifying stage performances earned her 12 Grammy Awards, a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame twice—the first time in 1991 with ex-husband Ike Turner and 30 years later as one of the biggest female solo artists ever.

Hometown Heroine

Though Turner moved to Switzerland in the mid-1990s, the area where she was born and raised continues to honor her. Tina Turner Museum is housed in the circa 1889 Flagg Grove School, which she attended as a child. In 2012, the school was moved from its original location to the grounds of West Tennessee Delta Heritage Center in Brownsville.

The annual Tina Turner Heritage Days event is held the fourth weekend of September in Brownsville, a few miles from Nutbush. This year's festival featured a special event alongside the usual musical performances, tours of Nutbush and guest speakers. A larger-than-life bronze statue of Turner was unveiled in Heritage Park, across from Carver High School, her alma mater.

The approximately 10-foot-tall statue was crafted over the course of a year by Atlanta-based sculptor Fred Ajanogha, also known as Ajano. His work is displayed publicly around the world and is part of the private collections of such notable figures as President Jimmy Carter and memoirist/poet Maya Angelou.

The statue of Turner evolved from a sketch to a clay sculpture and was eventually cast in bronze at Lugar Bronze Foundry in Eads.

Unveiling

Turner died in May 2023 in her home in Switzerland at age 83.

"The vision for a Tina Turner statue has long been a goal, but her passing brought a renewed sense of urgency and meaning to the project," says Sonia Outlaw-Clark, director of West Tennessee Delta Heritage Center and Tina Turner Museum. "It underscored the importance of preserving her legacy and honoring Brownsville and Haywood County's most famous native daughter in a lasting, meaningful way."

Locals, fans from as far away as the Netherlands and even Turner's grandson, Randall Turner, of Los Angeles, were on hand for the unveiling. When the moment came, it was revealed that Fred had captured the performer as many remember her—on stage in a minidress

The unveiling ceremony was deeply moving—highlighting not only her enduring impact, but also the spirit of perseverance and determination that defined her life.

and heels. On the day of the unveiling, Fred said he wanted to capture Turner's strength, prominence in the music industry and the way she moved while performing.

"The unveiling ceremony was deeply moving—highlighting not only her enduring impact, but also the spirit of perseverance and determination that defined her life," Sonia says. "Education was always important to Tina, making it especially fitting that her childhood school now serves as her museum at the West Tennessee Delta Heritage Center, and that her statue stands facing her former high school."

As with many works of art, reactions to the statue have varied. Some are happy for the tribute to the musical legend, while others lament what they feel is a lack of

resemblance to Turner. This is likely because Fred's art blends realism with stylization and abstraction. This blending of styles helps express more than mere visual likeness. It also allows emotion, symbolism and other ideas to come through.

"You can copy her, but there's only one Tina Turner," Fred said at the unveiling, describing his approach and acknowledging the limits of likeness.

A True Community Collaboration

The funding for the statue came from a \$100,000 grant from the Tennessee Department of Tourist Development and an additional \$150,000 from Ford Motor Co. as part of its Good Neighbor Plan

for West Tennessee, where the new Ford BlueOval City is being constructed to build EV trucks.

"This project is a true community collaboration, made possible through the partnership of the city of Brownsville, Ford Motor Co., other generous corporate donors, and the dedicated fans, friends and residents who wanted to see Tina's legacy preserved," Sonia says.

The project is not yet complete. Still to come are interpretive panels surrounding the statue—further sharing Turner's journey and celebrating the remarkable life she lived.

"We want future generations to have a place to visit, look up at the statue and see what is possible—to know that dreams can be achieved, no matter where you come from," Sonia says. ■

TENNESSEE CONNECTIONS PLANNER

From holiday parades and cocoa crawls to winter wildlife and cowboy cook-offs, Tennessee's winter calendar is packed with family-friendly fun. Here's a look at what's happening across the state this season.



GATLINBURG, PIGEON FORGE & SEVIERVILLE

Through Feb. 16

Smoky Mountain Winterfest

More than 15 million lights illuminate 25 miles through Sevierville, Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg during this beloved holiday tradition. Visitors can stroll through SkyLand Ranch's Festival of Lights through Jan. 2, experience Shadrack's Christmas Wonderland and enjoy holiday shows at Dollywood through Jan. 4, and skate at the Wilderness at the Smokies Waterpark Resort through Jan. 11. visitsevierville.com

PHOTO COURTESY OF SEVIERVILLE
TENNESSEE CONVENTION &
VISITORS BUREAU

BROWNSVILLE

Through Dec. 31

Markowski Lights

Soak in the holiday spirit at one of Tennessee's brightest traditions. The 21st annual Markowski Lights display fills the night with more than 1 million shimmering Christmas lights. Families can drive through the sparkling wonderland and look out for special appearances from Santa, the Grinch and other holiday favorites. This dazzling event is also the anchor of Brownsville's Holiday Trail of Lights—a must-stop for anyone seeking festive cheer. visitbrownsvilletn.com/calendar

NASHVILLE

Through Dec. 28

Nashville's Nutcracker

The Nashville Ballet brings the beloved holiday classic to life with a distinctly Nashville twist at Tennessee Performing Arts Center. This acclaimed production features live music from

the Nashville Symphony, original choreography by Paul Vasterling and characters pulled from the city's rich history. Voted Best Dance Production of 2022, it's a magical holiday outing for first-time guests and returning fans. tpac.org

SPRINGFIELD

Through Dec. 28

Winter Wonderland

The city's annual Winter Wonderland tradition continues with thousands of twinkling lights and more than a dozen holiday scenes. Families can enjoy drive-thru and walkable experiences from 5:30–9 p.m., with walk-thru activity nights scheduled for Dec. 6, 13 and 20. Last year's event drew more than 38,000 visitors, making this free celebration a community favorite. springfieldtn.gov

SEVIERVILLE

Dec. 13

Cocoa Crawl Christmas Market

Downtown Sevierville's holiday market invites shoppers and families to sip hot cocoa, browse handcrafted gifts and enjoy festive treats and local artisans from 3–7 p.m. pigeonforgewinterfest.com

JONESBOROUGH

Dec. 13

Lighted Christmas Parade

Historic downtown Jonesborough shines bright during this beloved nighttime parade. Floats, marching bands, dancers and classic cars light up Boone and Main streets starting at 6 p.m.—with Santa himself closing out the festive procession. jonesborough.com

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

MORRISTOWN

Dec. 13

Jingle Run for Hope

Lace up for the 10th annual Jingle Run for Hope 5K Run/Walk through beautiful downtown Morristown. Proceeds benefit local cancer patients and their families through the Morristown Regional Cancer Center. The scenic course begins and ends on West Main Street with chip timing, course volunteers and post-race refreshments to keep spirits high. visitmorristowntn.com/things-to-do

PIGEON FORGE

Dec. 31

New Year's Eve Celebration

Free family-friendly event at the Island's entertainment complex featuring live music, attractions during the day, and an impressive fireworks display ringing in 2026. The celebration kicks off at 10 a.m. and runs through midnight. islandinpigeonforge.com/events/new-years-eve

MORRISTOWN

Jan. 17-18

Winter Angel Expo

Chase the winter blues away at the 12th annual indoor car show presented by the Hamblen County Car Club at the Great Smoky Mountain Expo Center. The event showcases everything from antique classics to modern tuners—plus 50/50 drawings, prizes, music bingo and more. Admission is \$10. Children 12 and under get in free. Proceeds support Angel Tree charities. hamblenccc.com

TIPTONVILLE

Jan. 30-Feb. 1

Reelfoot Lake Eagle Festival

Every winter, bald eagles flock to Reelfoot Lake, creating an unforgettable wildlife spectacle. Visitors can join guided tours and interpretive programs led by experienced park naturalists. Telescopes and expert insight make this a family-friendly way to connect with Tennessee's natural wonders. Reservations required. tnstateparks.com



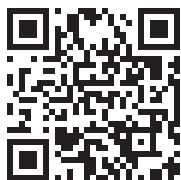
PIGEON FORGE

Jan. 5-8

34th annual Wilderness Wildlife Week

Celebrate the natural beauty of the Smokies with four days of wildlife, history, music, astronomy and hands-on gardening workshops. This free event at the LeConte Center at Pigeon Forge includes guided hikes and jeep tours, seminars, craft classes, photo exhibits and more. It's an annual favorite for outdoor lovers and families alike. Some activities, such as the photo competition, require preregistration. mypigeonforge.com

PHOTO COURTESY OF JUSTIN ROBINSON



Include Your Upcoming Event

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



PIGEON FORGE

March 6-8

Chuck Wagon Cook-off Weekend & Competition

Experience cowboy culture at its tastiest during this three-day celebration. The event kicks off Friday with an intimate dinner and show, followed by Saturday's cook-off at Clabough's Campground featuring chuck wagon lunches, rodeo fun and old-fashioned cowboy contests. Sunday wraps up with Chuck Wagon Breakfast and Cowboy Church. The event is free, but there are ticketed activities. mypigeonforge.com

PHOTO COURTESY OF JUSTIN ROBINSON

Shine Bright—and Stay Safe— This Holiday Season!

Twinkling lights make the season merry and bright—but that festive glow can hide some shocking electrical dangers. Here are some tips to help you deck the halls safely this holiday season:

- **Check your decorations**—Always make sure to check your decorations. Inspect cords for any cracks and broken bulbs.
- **Consider the age of your lights**—Older lights tend to generate more heat. It may be time for an upgrade, which is not only safer but also more cost effective.

- **Hang lights safely**—Use plastic hooks instead of staples or nails which can cause damage and shorts to your cords.

- **Read labels**—Make sure cords and connectors are being used properly and safely before you plug them in.

- **Use extension cords wisely**—Avoid overloading circuits or running multiple high-wattage decorations from a single outlet.

- **Set your lights on a timer**—This is beneficial for safety as well as your electric bill. ■

Have a happy, bright, and safe holiday season!

CRANBERRY SALAD *Recipe*

INGREDIENTS

- 1 - 6 ounce package of raspberry or cherry Jell-O gelatin mix
- 1 - 14 ounce can whole berry cranberry sauce
- 1 - 20 ounce can crushed pineapple, undrained
- 2 cups orange juice
- ¼ cup chopped pecans, walnuts or celery (optional)

DIRECTIONS

Bring orange juice to a boil, immediately remove from heat. Add powder gelatin and stir until completely dissolved. Add in cranberry sauce while orange juice is still warm to help break up the clumps in the cranberry sauce. Add a whole can of crushed pineapple, including juice. If you'd like, add chopped nuts or celery. Chill at least 3-4 hours or preferably overnight.





JENNY MOREFIELD

JOB TITLE: Customer Accounts & Compliance Coordinator

YEARS AT EU: 12 years



FAVORITE PART OF THE JOB: "The favorite part of my job is working with assistance agencies to help our customers. Our community is blessed to have so many financial assistance programs. I love that Erwin Utilities is committed to reaching out to their customers and letting them know who can help."

JAMES MUMPOWER, CPA

JOB TITLE: Director of Finance & Accounting

YEARS AT EU: 12 years



FAVORITE PART OF THE JOB: "It's great to work at an organization that is truly offering essential services that every community member needs—and doing so with quality people."

RANDY ARROWOOD

JOB TITLE: Assistant Water & Wastewater Operator

YEARS AT EU: 11 years



FAVORITE PART OF THE JOB: "I like that my job keeps me engaged doing various tasks within the water and wastewater departments."

ENGINEERING WEEK 2025

FEB. 22-28



JOSEPH WIGINGTON, P.E.



JASON FOSTER, P.E.



ADVENTURE AWAITS

Experience science through play at Muse Knoxville

PHOTO COURTESY OF
TENNESSEE RIVER
VALLEY GEOTOURISM

What Is It?

Located in Knoxville's Chilhowee Park, Muse Knoxville is a children's science museum that focuses on hands-on learning in the fields of science, technology, engineering, arts and math. Here, children can step inside the Whirlwind Room, design in the Make Space, explore light and motion, and experience the wonders of the night sky inside the planetarium. Outdoors, there's a spacious play area and learning garden.

History

Muse Knoxville opened in 2014, merging the former East Tennessee Discovery Center with the local Muse arts initiative to create a single destination for creative learning. Its mission is to inspire and empower children through transformative learning experiences. The nonprofit museum offers programs like Muse for All, which works to ensure every child can access STEAM education regardless of background or income.

What to Do

Step into the planetarium for a 360-degree journey through space for a cozy retreat on a winter afternoon. In the Build exhibit, kids can engineer, tinker and experiment. Toddlers will love Mess Makers, weekly sensory art sessions for preschoolers. Seasonal workshops and programs often pop up during winter break, offering extra opportunities for fun and learning. On the fourth Friday of each month, except holidays, Muse offers Free Family Night from 5–7 p.m.

Beyond the Museum

Across the park, the Knoxville Zoo offers year-round exhibits and plenty of winter animal activity. Less than 10 minutes away, downtown's Market Square awaits with cafes, shops and live music. Grab a hot chocolate, enjoy the lights or go for a short winter stroll. Nearby, neighborhoods like Old City and Happy Holler have plenty of local restaurants and bakeries. Families can also find scenic riverfront views at Volunteer Landing.

More Info

The museum is open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Friday and 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays. It's closed on Mondays during the school year and on major holidays. Admission is \$12 for ages 1 to 64; \$6 for seniors, educators and military members; and free for children under 1. Parking is free in the Chilhowee Park lot at 516 N. Beaman St. For schedules, tickets or program details, visit themuseknoxville.org or call 865-594-1494.



Caring for Transplants

As we trudge along through the cold weather, it may seem like spring—and the exciting gardening projects that come with it—will never arrive.

If you are a vegetable gardener, though, the winter months are actually an ideal time to plan and get those spring transplants started. Vegetable plants may have different germination and growing requirements, but some fundamentals are the same. Here are a few tips to help you get those veggies off to a strong start.

Light

Plants need light. It seems simple enough, but when vegetable plants are growing indoors, getting them enough light can present a huge challenge. But how do you know when they need more?

The easiest way to identify when seedlings need more light is when they become thin and leggy, and the color fades from green to yellow. In contrast, healthy seedlings will be short, bushy and dark green. Generally speaking, putting your transplants in a window will not provide enough light to keep them healthy and happy.

A great way to supplement window light is to use fluorescent or LED grow lights. These can be found at many local garden stores or online and help give your plants the amount of light they need. However, if a window is the only option, pick one that is southern facing and receives plenty of sunlight.

Water

Watering can also be really tricky when growing transplants, especially from seed. Before the seeds germinate, the soil should be slightly damp but not saturated. To achieve this, it can be helpful to “mist” the soil using a spray bottle until the seeds have germinated.

After germination, the soil media should be watered more thoroughly but less frequently. This gives the soil more time to dry out between waterings, which helps reduce the disease pressures. Soil media that stays too wet can lead to damping

off, a fatal fungal disease that ultimately kills the transplants. It can also attract other pests, such as fungus gnats and algae, to hang around.

When the soil media feels like a slightly damp sponge, the soil moisture is about right. Unfortunately, there is not a one-size-fits-all formula for watering transplants. Regularly monitoring them and adjusting for their needs can help achieve the best results.

Soil Temperature

Even growing indoors, keeping soil at the right temperature can be difficult during winter. Depending on the vegetable, germination temperatures can range from about 70-85 degrees, and growing temperatures range from about 60-85 degrees. Soil temperatures that are too low or too high can lead to poor seed germination and plant growth, so keeping soil in the recommended range for the plant is important.

In cold weather, remember that areas around windows can be cooler, so it is not a bad idea to move your plants to warmer areas, especially at night. Heat mats are another great way to keep soil at the right temperature, and they allow plants to be put anywhere there is an electrical outlet and light. ■

It's important to note that these are general recommendations for vegetable transplants. Moisture, light and temperature requirements vary based on the type of plant you have seeded, so it's important to research the varieties you are planting in detail. For more information on growing vegetable transplants, please visit tinyurl.com/TNVegetableGarden. Call your local UT-TSU Extension Office if you need additional assistance.



Rylan Thompson is a Tennessee State University Agriculture and Natural Resources/4-H Extension agent in Knox County. He specializes in residential/consumer horticulture and 4-H and is the Knox County Master Gardener coordinator.



Flush With Fun

Going after doves where they already want to stay

The small brook barely trickling with water nourished the thick brush growing on both sides of the little stream.

I slowly moved along a narrow path leading to a break in the vegetation at the brook. As I approached the break, the streambed erupted with the distinctive whistling clatter of long, elegant elliptical wings as mourning doves scattered in all directions.

Most hunters only go dove hunting during September, but some of the best hunting occurs later in the season as birds from farther north migrate into Tennessee. Dove season lasts into mid-January, but only a few people bother to hunt them after September.

In September, most dove hunters stand in a tree line, at the edge of a field or sit in a chair surrounded by high weeds waiting for doves to fly into range. Later in the season, people might want to go looking for birds. Walking up to doves could put birds in the bag with considerable excitement.

To jump doves, hunters must first find them. Almost like quail hunting, flushing birds could explode from cover at any second. Stay alert when approaching good cover.

Doves like open fields or semi-open grassy savannas punctuated by scattered trees, brush or fencerows. Hunters can walk slowly along forest edges, power lines, fire breaks, food plots and other openings or through scattered timber.

The swift birds require food, cover, water and grit. About 99% of a dove's diet consists of seeds, but they also eat crops like corn, millet, sorghum, peanuts and cotton seeds. The small birds usually pick seeds off bare dirt, but they want leafy canopy cover above them so they can hide from hawks and other predators.

To digest rough seeds, doves swallow small pieces of gravel or sand. Hunters often find them "dusting" or picking up bits of rock

around grit piles or sandy patches.

For water, the diminutive birds could just drink from a puddle in a tire rut on a trail. Doves commonly stay around streams, creek beds or ponds. A gravelly sandbar with scrubby brush growing along a stream or pond shoreline could provide an excellent place to jump doves.

After filling their bellies, doves look for a place to rest and digest. They perch in tall trees, on electrical wires—never shoot near electrical equipment—or other areas where they can easily spot danger. In the afternoon, doves get hungry again and return to their feeding fields.

They might also hit the grit piles and water holes. When jumping doves, hunters could spot some lookout birds perched in high places watching for predators. While these birds watch for danger, several others could forage on the ground. Find some good cover to stalk them.

Often, hunters can work in teams. At fencerows or tree lines, one can walk on each side to catch birds flushing from any direction. Pay attention to where other hunters stand and watch the shots—always keeping safety at the forefront. ■

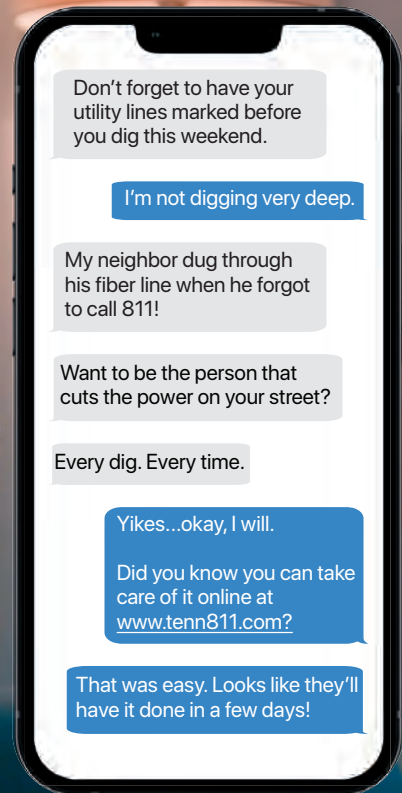
For more on Tennessee migratory bird hunting, see tn.gov/content/tn/twra/hunting/migratory-birds.html#seasons.



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



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IN MEMORIAM

Russell D. Brackins

It is with deep sadness that we share the passing of Russell D. Brackins on Oct 15, 2025. Mr. Brackins faithfully served as a member on the Erwin Utilities Board for the past eleven years. Throughout his tenure, he dedicated himself to advancing the mission of Erwin Utilities and improving the lives of its customers. His commitment, integrity, and tireless service leave a lasting legacy within our community.

SEPT 18, 1929 – OCT 15, 2025



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