

CONNECTED

Blast into summer

Fireworks, fun draw crowds

**FUNKY
FESTIVALS**

**GARDENING
TIPS**



By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

Training broadband professionals

New NTCA partnership will make a difference

As rural communities like yours experience the life-changing benefits of fast, reliable internet service, the NTCA is proud to expand its support of the professionals making these innovations possible.


We are partnering with Northwood Technical College, which will offer remote workforce training opportunities exclusively for NTCA members. This agreement is one example of how we are pulling out the stops to help providers like yours bridge the digital divide.

Building a robust internet network requires a range of skills, but the work doesn't end after the first connections are installed. Maintaining the systems that power work-from-home jobs, telehealth and so much more demands highly skilled workers.

This new initiative with Wisconsin-based Northwood Tech will help NTCA members secure the expertise needed to not only accelerate broadband deployment but also sustain future-proof technologies.

Northwood Tech has several decades of innovative telecommunications and broadband training experience, but its Broadband Academy's focus extends beyond network systems, hardware and software. The consumer experience, and how communications professionals can better serve their customers, is also a priority.

Northwood Tech President John Will says the partnership with NTCA allows the school to reach and train more students and upskill employees who will gain industry-recognized digital badging credentials.

Also, the remote classes mean NTCA members and Northwood Tech will use broadband technology for broadband training. It's just one more example showing how fast internet service can make a difference in the nation's rural communities. 

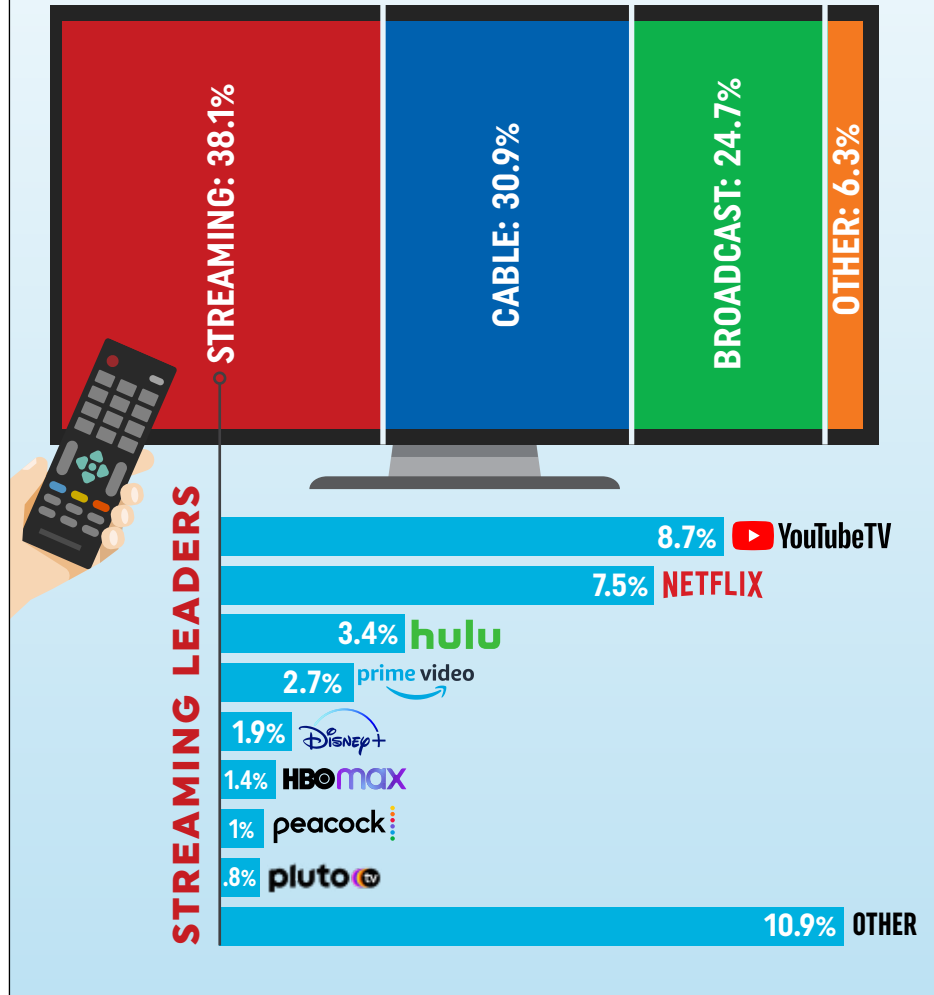
Entertainment riches

Viewers match their interest to the service

Whether you enjoy the predictable pace of a baseball game, catching a 30-minute comedy viewed when your schedule allows, watching a movie from your favorite genre — or just about any other entertainment choice — there's a wealth of options.

And today, you can design the viewing experience you want.

Nielsen, a company that measures audiences to provide important research to advertisers, released a report earlier this year that gives a peek into our viewing habits:



GAMING FAVORITES

For many people, a little screen time means something more interactive than a show or movie — they play video games. Nielsen identified some of the top games from recent months, so here are a few to consider if you're looking for fresh options.

- ▶ Hogwarts Legacy
- ▶ The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom
- ▶ Resident Evil 4
- ▶ Diablo IV
- ▶ Minecraft



Home security

KEEP YOUR DATA SAFE WHILE WORKING REMOTELY



Story by DREW WOOLLEY

Working from home is no longer uncommon. As access to high-speed internet and tools for remote collaboration become more widespread, employers are increasingly warming to the idea of letting people get out of the office at least a few days a week.

The comfort and accessibility of remote work mean it isn't likely to go away anytime soon. But it can also introduce new challenges like security concerns. Whether you're taking your laptop to the nearby coffee shop or setting up a work station at home, keep these guidelines in mind to make sure your work is secure wherever you are.

STAY UPDATED

When you see an alert about a new software update, don't wait to install it. Among other things, these updates often close security loopholes that malware can use to get access to your data. It's also important to have an antivirus program installed that can protect your devices from the latest viruses, spyware and phishing scams.

DON'T TAKE THE BAIT

Speaking of phishing scams, it's important to be extra alert when working remotely. Bogus emails can hit an office just as easily as your home computer, but it's easier to spot a fake when the co-worker supposedly asking for sensitive information is in the same room as you. Always make sure your devices are secure outside the office, and be sure to double check any suspicious requests directly.

PROTECT WORK DEVICES

Working from home often means exposing your work devices to kids or other family members who may not be as careful about security measures as you are. Take steps to make sure others

aren't using your work devices or accidentally seeing sensitive information. Also, try to avoid doing work on personal devices that may not be as well-secured.

KEEP YOUR VPN ON

Many companies use virtual private networks, or VPNs, to help employees communicate securely via an encrypted network. If your employer does the same, it's important to stay connected for as long as you're working. Dropping that virtual defense could open the door for someone to steal important information.


STAY IN THE CLOUD

Not only do cloud applications receive regular security updates, but saving your work to cloud storage creates a shared backup of all your work. That way, even if local files on your device are lost, corrupted or stolen, you'll still have access to everything.

MAKE VIDEOCONFERENCES PRIVATE

The popularity of videoconferencing apps like Zoom has skyrocketed in recent years as more teams collaborate from afar. But a digital meeting space comes with additional security considerations. To prevent unwanted visitors from listening in or even trying to intimidate people, consider requiring a password for calls or keeping any new arrivals in a waiting room.

UP YOUR PASSWORD GAME

Strong passwords are always important, but they're even more crucial when you're working remotely. A password manager can help you keep track of numerous strong passwords, which should generally be at least 12 characters and contain letters, numbers and symbols. If that's too much to keep up with, consider using favorite song lyrics, movie quotes or other phrases that are easy to remember but more complex than your dog's name. 

Building a life, one connection at a time

Greetings and happy spring. This season brings the promise of new life, green grass, flowering shrubs, baby animals and a renewed interest in being outside.



JEFF WILSON
Chief Executive Officer

We are also beginning spring festival season. It's always so fun to see our customers and members again after the colder winter months. I usually like to take the opportunity to ask for feedback on our service. I also ask those who don't have our internet service to explain the barriers or reasons for not having it.

One of the biggest reasons cited by our phone-only customers is that they do not believe they need internet, because they don't have a computer.

That couldn't be further from the truth. In today's WiFi-enabled world, computers are only one of several devices that can connect to WiFi. The truth is many WiFi-enabled devices make day-to-day life easier. Our cellphones and reading tablets are good examples. Home security cameras, doorbells, appliances and even air fresheners are other examples.

Consider my 93-year-old mother who lives in rural Idaho. She doesn't own a computer, nor does she have any other traditional need for internet. We recently gifted her an Amazon Echo Show. This simple WiFi-enabled device breaks down the barriers of geography and mobility, connecting her to the world and supplying her with all the information she needs each day by simply asking it questions.

"What is the temperature outside?"

"What is the forecast?"

"What is the temperature in Abbeville, South Carolina?" (She likes to keep tabs on her South Carolina friends and family.)

"Tell me a joke."

"Call my family."

Sometimes it's the simple things that make a giant life.

I've been so inspired by my mother's story that we decided to reach out to our customers who have our phone service, but not the internet. We're offering them demonstrations of the Amazon Echo Show, and should they sign up for internet service, we will give them their very own Echo Show.

There are other barriers to getting internet service. Cost can often be a factor, too. We're proud to participate in the Federal Communications Commission's Affordable Connectivity Program, which provides a \$30 per month savings on qualifying individuals' internet bills.

Not sure if you qualify, or how to apply? We're here to help you. Call our office at 864-446-2111 or visit one of our locations and we'll be happy to assist you with your application. You can also go to wctel.com/acp to learn more.

In fact, only about 25% of eligible households have enrolled in the ACP. We hate to see this, especially in our communities. Cost should not be a barrier to getting internet service. Thankfully ACP eases that burden, and we're here to help you.

Together, we will help you go far without even leaving your home. 📞



Jeff and his mother Mary Wilson

The West Carolina Tel Connected is a bimonthly newsletter published by West Carolina Telephone, © 2023. It is distributed without charge to all members/owners of the cooperative.



is a member-owned cooperative dedicated to delivering advanced telecommunications technology to the people of Abbeville, Anderson and McCormick counties.

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UTILITY RESOURCES

On the Cover:



Summertime events at Lake Greenwood and Lake Russell are a popular way to spend a weekend.
See story Page 8.

Photo courtesy of Robert Vance

Darius Rucker to headline fundraising concert

The Upcountry Fiber Foundation is turning to a famous face to boost its effort to better the community.

"We are thrilled to announce that musician and philanthropist Darius Rucker will be headlining our very own Southern Fried Circuit, a charity concert benefiting the Upcountry Fiber Foundation," says Mary Miller, marketing manager for Upcountry Fiber and WCFIBER.

For more information, or to purchase tickets, go to southernfriedcircuit.com.



FRIDAY, JULY 28

WILLIAM A. FLOYD AMPHITHEATER AT THE ANDERSON CIVIC CENTER

Doors open: 6 p.m. • Opening Act: 7:30 p.m.

Darius Rucker takes the stage: 8:45 p.m.

Introducing WiFi X

The need for a managed WiFi service is always evolving. WCTEL is introducing WiFi X to let you take control of your internet experience. WiFi X enables a seamless home WiFi connection that gives you peace of mind and hands-on control for only \$7.95 per month.

With WiFi X you get:

- Installation of a commercial-grade WiFi 6 wireless router
- Password protection of your wireless network
- Set up of select devices at the time of installation
- A single point of contact for tech support, available 24/7

WiFi X also comes with a mobile app that connects directly to your router and puts control of your WiFi network in your hands.

The WiFi X app allows you to:

- Troubleshoot with ease
- Monitor all WiFi connections
- Automatically block threats, intrusions and viruses
- Set up enhanced parental controls

To learn more, contact us at 864-446-2111 or go to wcfiber.net/wifix.

Say hello to WiFi X
Your total home WiFi experience

- Protect your network
- Run speed tests
- Prioritize access by device
- Update passwords
- Set time limits
- Create guest networks

Connect. Protect. Control.

Visit wcfiber.net/wifix to download the app
844-30-FIBER

Some restrictions apply. Residential only. One-year agreement.

Local outreach missions of the Christian churches of Abbeville County



UCMAC
101 Center St.
(behind the Abbeville Nursing Home)
P.O. Box 502
Abbeville, SC 29620

Find us online at:
ucmac.net
Emergency assistance
864-366-6526
ucmac@wctel.net

Free medical clinic
864-828-0987
ucmacfmc@wctel.net

ROAD TRIP

Revival

YOU'LL GET THERE, EVENT-UALLY!

Story by ANNE BRALY

From a celebration of Moon Pies in Tennessee to glorifying okra pods in South Carolina, the South is famous for the funk it puts in festivals.

“Funky festivals allow folks to do a deep dive into niche interests in a way that generalized, traditional festivals don’t allow,” says Jamie McCormick, operations manager for the Southeast Festivals &

Events Association. “Maybe you can get lucky and find shrimp and grits or banana pudding at your standard festival, but can you compare 14 different recipes and flavor profiles, or find strawberry banana pudding or shrimp and grits pizza? Offbeat festivals allow us to celebrate the weirdest things about ourselves — the things we think only we like — and in the process,

find out that quite a lot of other people like them, too!”

Here’s a look at festivals across the South that celebrate the love of offbeat fun.

Hula hooping is hard enough on its own, but have you ever tried it while eating a MoonPie and drinking an RC Cola? It’s not as easy as it looks, but you can give it a try at the annual **RC Cola-MoonPie Festival Festival** held the third week of June in the charming, historic town of Bell Buckle, Tennessee.

Folks have come from near and far — England and Australia and up to 17 states — to sample small-town life and see what this quirky festival is all about, says Jenny Hunt, public relations director for festival sponsor Bell Buckle Chamber of Commerce. The event kicks off with marathons on certified courses before transitioning into a full day of fun for all, with a grand parade and the crowning of the RC Cola-MoonPie Festival King and Queen; hula-hooping; and a test of skill to see just how many cans of RC Cola



ABOVE: The RC Cola-MoonPie festival features a can-balancing contest.

LEFT: Hula hooping while eating a Moon Pie and drinking an RC Cola isn’t as easy as it may look.

Photos courtesy of Bell Buckle Chamber of Commerce

you can stack on your head and walk across the festival stage.

The festival culminates with the cutting of the world's largest Moon Pie to be shared with all.

- ▶ Date: June 17
- ▶ Information: bellbucklechamber.com

The Original Gullah Festival in Beaufort, South Carolina, celebrates the history, customs, cultures and accomplishments of African Americans who carved remarkable lives in the Lowcountry. The festival is like none other, highlighting the culture and history of the Gullah people — their art, crafts, music, dance and yes, their food. This isn't your typical festival fare — it's platters of fried catfish, bowls of shrimp and grits and soul food by the plateful. It's a family-friendly weekend that brings in travelers from around the world.

- ▶ Date: May 26-28.
- ▶ Information: originalgullahfestival.org.



Don't want to commit to an entire day or week of festival fun, but still want to experience the unusual? Here are some places around the South that offer something a little different from your typical sightseeing experience.

It's not often a restroom is a major attraction, but such is the case for the men's room at **Nashville's historic Hermitage Hotel**. The restroom features a spectacular and memorable design, with lime green and black glass tiles, lime green fixtures and a shoe-shine



Photo courtesy of Town of Irmo

No town celebrates okra the way Irmo, South Carolina, does. In fact, there's no other okra festival in the world, other than **Irmo Okra Strut**, a chance for townfolk and others to showcase the often-unappreciated pods. The festival has been growing strong for more than 50 years and commences with live bands on Friday night. Then the fun begins Saturday morning with a parade — the largest in the state — before opening up to thousands of festivalgoers who come for magic shows, demonstrations and the okra-eating contest.

- ▶ Date: Sept. 29-30.
- ▶ Information: okrastrut.com.

Whether you call him Bigfoot, Sasquatch or Yeti, the **Smoky Mountain Bigfoot Festival** in Townsend, Tennessee, is the

station right in the middle of the room. The men's room has been the setting of many business deals in the past, as well as movies and music videos in current times. Note to families: Have a man check it out first to make sure the room is empty.

- ▶ Information: thehermitagehotel.com

Clayton City Cemetery in Clayton, Alabama, is home to a tombstone with a story. Both the headstone and footstone are shaped like whiskey bottles, designed by an extremely frustrated woman who reportedly told her husband, William T. Mullen, that she'd make him a tombstone shaped like a whiskey bottle if he didn't stop drinking. It seems as though she kept her word.

- ▶ Address: 41 N. Midway St.

Read my lips. Fort Mitchell, Kentucky, is home to the world's only museum



Photo courtesy of Blount Partnership

ABOVE LEFT: Celebrate okra at the annual Irmo Okra Strut.

ABOVE RIGHT: Live music is part of the fun at Smoky Mountain Bigfoot Festival.

place to celebrate the big guy. There's Bigfoot wrestling, Bigfoot calling, a wood-carving challenge and other Squatchy competitions. Visitors will also find food vendors and live music, along with Bigfoot hunters and researchers. Do you believe?

- ▶ Date: May 6.
- ▶ Information: exploretownsend.com/event/smoky-mountain-bigfoot-festival-2023. 🗨️

dedicated to the art of ventriloquism, the **Vent Haven Museum**. If you love little wooden people, this museum is a must-see. Renovations to the museum are near completion, and it will reopen on May 9.

- ▶ Information: venthaven.org

The Harry and Harry Too restaurant in Bishopville, South Carolina, takes most of its interior decor cues from pop culture — The Three Stooges, Elvis and Tomb Raider, among others. What sets it apart is its colorful handmade outdoor sign promoting its connection to a local monster, the terrifying, car-chomping Lizard Man. The restaurant displays replicas of the monster's footprint casts — the originals are in the town museum — and serves Lizard Man sandwiches.

- ▶ Online: Check out the menu and more on Harry and Harry Too's Facebook page.

Making a Splash



Communities plan for summer fun on the water

Story by JAMIE BIESIADA

Calhoun Falls and Lake Greenwood are ready to welcome locals and visitors alike this summer with activities that will celebrate beautiful local lakes, educate children about water safety and above all, entertain.

The Lake Russell Recreation and Tourism Coalition will bring back two popular events for 2023 — Paddle Fest on May 27, and its marquee event, Freedom Blast, on July 1. Lake Greenwood's popular Lights on the Lake also returns on July 1 for its 10th year.

PADDLE FEST GETS KIDS MOVING

A group of 10 volunteers, including president Elaine Barrett, formed the Lake Russell Recreation and Tourism Coalition more than a decade ago. "The Lake Russell Coalition was born because we have this beautiful Lake Russell," Barrett says. "It is a pristine lake. It is gorgeous. And there wasn't anything here to help promote the lake."

The coalition's inaugural event was Paddle Fest, which encourages attendees, mostly children, to get out on the lake. Paddle Fest began with just kayaks, but the coalition has steadily added paddleboards and paddleboats to the mix, as well as food and other attractions.

"We try, and are still trying, to promote the recreation part of Lake Russell," Barrett says. "Especially to the young people, to show them that you can do things at the lake other than just come down here and just sit and play in the water — there's other things, too."

Children learn how to safely use kayaks at the event. "We focus on the kids learning the safe way to handle them," Barrett says. "It's safety on the lake."

Barrett was born and raised in Calhoun Falls. After school, she moved away for some time, but has been a local again since 2003. While she's enjoyed a 15-year career as an electrician and worked in food service, she currently drives a school bus, something of a return to her roots.

When Barrett was in high school, it was common for students to drive the buses. They would end their routes at their own homes and keep the buses parked in their yards until the next morning, when they'd do it all over again.

Now, Barrett has driven the same route for 12 years, which gives her a chance to get to know the students, their parents and the community even better. It's helpful in her role as the coalition's president, a post she assumed in December. "There are a lot of things that are done behind the scenes,

so I'm having to learn all about that," she says. "So far, it's been fun."

LIGHT UP LAKE GREENWOOD

Ten years ago, grassroots organization Connect Lake Greenwood formed to promote its eponymous lake and the local area.

Its first event, a Fourth of July fireworks show, has grown into an annual celebration on the Camp Fellowship shoreline, says Tony Curreri of Lakelands Realty in Lake Greenwood. "The first year we did it, we expected a couple hundred cars. We were hoping to maybe get 1,000 people or so out by boat," Curreri says. "We stopped counting at 600 cars, and the lake was a sea of green and red lights."

The event has remained a popular one since then and returns July 1. Gates open around 4:30 p.m. and attendees are charged a minimal parking fee. Once on-site, visitors are treated to live music, and a number of food vendors will also be on hand. The fireworks display begins at 9:30 p.m. For those who attend Lights on the Lake via boat, Greenwood-based radio station WSSL 100.5 will broadcast the show's music so mariners can listen live.

Attendees are asked to register via connectlakegreenwood.org and follow Connect Lake Greenwood on Facebook for updates.



Photo courtesy of Lake Russell Recreation and Tourism



Photo courtesy of Robert Vance



Photo courtesy of Robert Vance

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Kayaking is a focus during Paddle Fest on Lake Russell.

Boaters enjoy the rapid-fire fireworks finale over Lake Greenwood.

Fireworks are a spectacular way to celebrate Independence Day, especially on Lake Greenwood.

Families gather for an afternoon of fun on the banks of Lake Greenwood as they await the Lights on the Lake fireworks display.

The Jake Bartley Band performs as part of the Lights on the Lake celebration.

FREEDOM BLAST SHOWCASES LAKE RUSSELL

About two years after the Lake Russell Recreation and Tourism Coalition started Paddle Fest, the group introduced Freedom Blast, a Fourth of July fireworks display that started out on the smaller side.

“It was a huge success,” Barrett says. “The next year we added a band and now, we have water slides, we have games, we have kayaks, we have vendors.” Last year, she says, Freedom Blast, which carries a \$10-per-car parking fee, drew close to 900 people. “It was a madhouse, but it was so much fun.”

Freedom Blast is the coalition’s larger event, which encourages community members to celebrate together at the Blue Hole Recreation Center, where they can find a number of picnic tables, as well as two sheltered areas with additional tables and seating. A dance floor in front of the stage provides space for attendees to cut loose.

Many bring picnics and their entire families, Barrett says. Children can enjoy activities like face painting, storytimes and clowns. “It’s just a busy time,” Barrett says. “We try to get as much in as we can.”



Photo courtesy of Connect Lake Greenwood



Photo courtesy of Connect Lake Greenwood

PADDLE FEST

May 27

10 a.m.-2 p.m.

Blue Hole Recreation Area
Calhoun Falls

lakerussellrecreation.com/paddle-fest
facebook.com/LRRTC

FREEDOM BLAST

July 1

6-9 p.m.

Blue Hole Recreation Area
Calhoun Falls

lakerussellrecreation.com/freedom-blast
facebook.com/LRRTC

LIGHTS ON THE LAKE

July 1

Gates open around 4:30 p.m.

Camp Fellowship shoreline
Greenwood

connectlakegreenwood.org
facebook.com/connectlakegreenwood

HOW DOES YOUR ONLINE GARDEN GROW?

Digital communities revolutionizing backyard agriculture

Story by SARA D. PATTERSON

Starting a garden in your own backyard isn't something you have to do alone. While you're unlikely to find help digging holes, putting in plants or moving mulch on the internet, you can find countless friends online to offer advice and support.

Online communities have revolutionized gardening, according to Adriana Copaceanu, whose 2016 gardening blog grew into the website backyardgardenlover.com. More than 100,000 gardeners also turn to its Facebook page where they can exchange tips and experiences. "By making it easier for people to find information and connect with others online, gardening communities have made gardening more accessible and appealing to a wider audience," Adriana says. "In the last few years, the amount of information online on gardening and resources has absolutely skyrocketed."

More than half the country — 55% of American households — gardens, according to findings by Scotts Miracle-Gro. The average garden measures 600 square feet, and tomatoes are the most common plant grown, appearing in about 85% of U.S. gardens. In addition to providing produce for a healthier diet, gardening has many other positive impacts including stress relief, promoting exercise, fighting dementia and staving off loneliness, to name just a few.

CULTIVATING COMMUNITIES

While gardening has always offered opportunities for interactions at garden centers and at farmers markets, the online gardening community now presents limitless forums for collaboration. "I get daily emails with questions," Adriana says. "Sometimes, it's a quick answer, and other times I need to do some research because I'm not familiar with their specific location."

More than 5 million gardening enthusiasts have forged connections with other green thumbs through Reddit, a website that's home to thousands of online communities where users can anonymously discuss their interests and hobbies, seek support and share tips. They can also post photos and find immediate answers to questions like "I just pulled this dead squirrel out of my garlic patch, can I still eat the garlic in the summer?" or "Is this snake dangerous?"

"As the size of the gardening community has grown, there are more dumb and wrong answers; unfortunately, that's the nature of a platform that encourages participation," Reddit contributor kirbs2001 says. "The flip side is that more people are gardening and want to share what they know, or think they know, with others, and that's cool."

Still others just want a place to enjoy the outdoors in a community setting. "The gardening season is pretty short where I am, so



Photo by dprodi/Adobe Stock

Photo by Diederik/Adobe Stock

ONLINE RESOURCES ARE IN FULL BLOOM

Gardening apps

- * **From Seed to Spoon Gardening** — Created by new gardeners struggling to find all the right information for growing their first gardens, this covers it all.
- * **SunCalc** — This is a sun-finder for garden placement. Enter an address and the app will tell you where to plant.
- * **Homegrown with Bonnie Plants** — America's most-trusted vegetable company provides all the answers to questions about what to grow for specific conditions.
- * **Planty** — Not sure what you've grown? This cute, simple app will identify and offer care tips for plants.
- * **Garden Answers** — This extensive identification app provides garden and horticulture experts at your fingertips. The app identifies more than 20,000 plants and answers more than 200,000 commonly asked care questions.

Websites

- * The National Gardening Association's **garden.com** offers courses, gardening guides, a database and much more.
- * The Old Farmer's Almanac has tips, daily facts and information, and other tried-and-true suggestions at **almanac.com**.
- * Through its website **ahsgardening.org**, the American Horticulture Society promotes healthy, sustainable gardening practices and the critical role of plants.

“In the last few years, the amount of information online on gardening and resources has absolutely skyrocketed.”

— Adriana Copaceanu, founder of backyardgardenlover.com

I like to live vicariously through other people's gardens to get me through winter, lol,” says Calamity 0o0, another Reddit member who's active in the site's garden community.

Other gardening websites — including gardening-forums.com, gardenweb.com and gardenstew.com — offer all kinds of answers to all kinds of questions. Gardeners can also find like-minded friends on Twitter, and if it's easier to learn from videos, YouTube is for you.

The holy book of gardening and all things outdoors-related, The Old Farmer's Almanac, now offers a comprehensive website, almanac.com, full of valuable tips, along with a daily newsletter. The National Gardening Association formed in 1971 simply to promote gardening, and is now the largest

social media website dedicated exclusively to gardening. The group's garden.org offers online tools “to help gardeners connect, teach, share and trade with each other.”

Websites are great resources, but apps truly can be a gardener's best friend. First-time gardeners will find everything they need to start their plots through the Seed to Spoon app. Based on a home address, the SunCalc app designates the perfect location for plants to thrive, and Homegrown with Bonnie Plants has a “Help Me Choose” section to help gardeners determine which plants to grow, as well as one to help schedule tasks like sowing, watering, weeding and fertilizing.

So, while you may be on your own physically, you'll never lack for company along your gardening journey. 📱



WCTEL Spotlight: Board of Directors

The WCTEL Board of Directors is made up of nine members, elected from areas in our service territory. In the next few editions of Connected, we'll share the stories of each of these leaders.



WCTEL Board Vice President
Mike Thomas

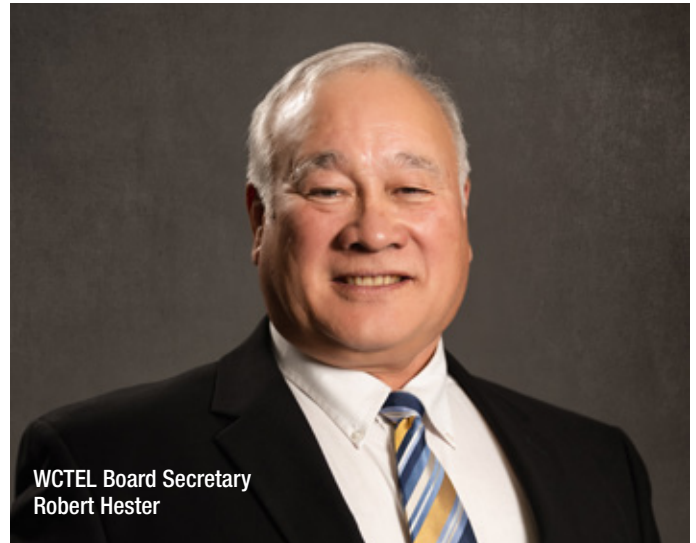
MIKE THOMAS is currently the vice president of the WCTEL board of directors and the executive committee. He also serves on the Starr-Iva Alliance Committee, and he is chairman of Starr-Iva Water Board, which was named the 2021 Rural Water System of the Year by the South Carolina Rural Water Association.

Mike has an associate degree in business administration. He worked in the family business, J.B. Thomas and Son Hardware in Iva, for over 40 years and started Thomas Vending over 30 years ago. "WCTEL's services are imperative to ordering products, improving communication and upgrading service to our community," Mike says.

He married Lisa Stamey in 1988, and they have three daughters: Griffin Thomas Henry, 30; Drake Ellen Thomas, 28; and Emery Kathleen Thomas, 23.

Mike's hobbies include working with cows on the farm, where he helps his daughter, Emery, with the horses she uses in rodeos. He enjoys hosting family events and cooking for friends. Mike and Lisa enjoy streaming movies, listening to music and traveling whenever possible. The Thomases' streaming recommendations include "1923," "1883" and "Yellowstone," from Mike. Lisa recommends "Virgin River," "Hart of Dixie" and "Heartland."

Mike volunteered and coached with Iva Recreation for 18 years. He also mentors Crescent High School students in the School to Work program.



WCTEL Board Secretary
Robert Hester


ROBERT HESTER graduated from Calhoun Falls High School in 1975 and majored in aerospace engineering at West Point, the United States Military Academy. He joined the Army as an airborne infantryman. Robert later went to flight school, flying attack helicopters until his retirement in 1999.

"I entered the private business sector and worked as an information technology consultant in the Pentagon for 14 years and then returned home in 2013 to the family farm in Calhoun Falls to relearn all I had forgotten in raising timber, hay and cattle," Robert says.

He married Lynne Rankin Hester in 1981. They have a son, Chris Hester, and a daughter, Jennifer Geary. She is married to Eric Geary, and they have three children, Savannah, 9; Taggart, 6; and Lorelei, 3.

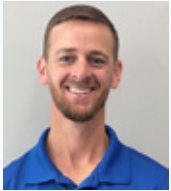
Robert has served on the WCTEL board since 2016 and is currently the governance committee chair.

"WCTEL's high-speed broadband is a game-changer that rivals any broadband provider nationwide. Moving from the Washington, D.C. area, I was able to use WCTEL's broadband to work remotely from Calhoun Falls and then complete my transition from workforce to retirement," Robert says.

"I've found that the old saying, 'I'm busier in retirement than when I was working' is true," he adds. "Farming is special for me because I like the rural country life of the farm and its aspects of working outdoors." 

Growing our team to meet the expectations of our members

In 2022, WCTEL experienced incredible growth in broadband and other residential and business services, and this expansion has brought opportunities to expand our team. Please help us welcome these new employees.



BRAD DORN

Brad is a native of Greenwood and still lives there with his wife, Mary Catherine, their son, Houston, daughter, Bradleigh Kay, and the

family dog, Millie. Brad's hobbies include working out and playing a few rounds of golf.

FUN FACT: Brad also loves doing yard work to keep his home looking good.



DEVIN GLENN

Originally from Fair Play, Devin currently lives in Seneca. He and his wife, Casey, have a bluetick coonhound named Chessy. Devin's hobbies

include hunting deer and rabbits and tinkering with his weapons collection.

FUN FACT: Devin was in the military for a total of seven years — four years on active duty in the Army and three years with the Army National Guard.



EVAN HUGHES

Evan lives in Abbeville with his fiancée, Mariah Yoder. He loves hunting, fishing and spending time with family.

FUN FACT: Evan enjoys playing the guitar and singing.



MARY MILLER

Originally from Bismarck, North Dakota, Mary moved to South Carolina in 2020. She now lives in Lexington with her husband, Brady,

and their blended family, which includes son Jack Green and daughters Grace

and Kate. The family has two miniature dachshunds, Dempsey and Dermot, who Mary says "rule the house." Mary likes writing, playing tennis, cooking, baking and hosting friends and family for dinner parties, gatherings and bonfires.

FUN FACT: Mary loves Disney World and doesn't think she could ever tire of going there!



TJ WATERS

TJ grew up in Abbeville. He and his wife, Kamee, have five kids, Madyson, Kaylee, Jaxon, Lane and Joel. The family also has two dogs, two cats and

chickens. TJ enjoys spending time with his family, traveling and golfing, along with several outdoor activities.

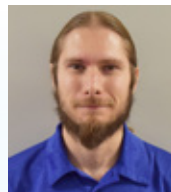
FUN FACT: TJ has been to 40 states and 25 different countries.



TIMOTHY CANN

Timothy lives in Abbeville with his wife, Megan, and 3-year-old daughter, Emily. He enjoys working in the yard and gardening.

FUN FACT: Timothy is an Eagle Scout.



CHRIS OLIVA

Chris lives in Greenwood but was born and raised in Kansas. He and his wife, Valerie, have two kittens, Cheech and Macaroni. Chris enjoys remote control cars and PC gaming.

FUN FACT: Chris has ridden a motorcycle halfway across the U.S. and would like to finish the other half one day.

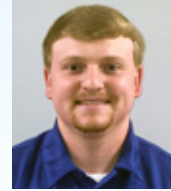


BRIAN DEAN

Brian lives in Greenwood with his wife, Mandy, and four kids, Finn, Jacob, Emma and Julia. The family has a pet cat named Chut-

ney and a pet chicken, Miss Agnes. Brian enjoys hiking, road cycling and spending time with his family.

FUN FACT: Brian sometimes rides his bike to work on good weather days.



NATE KNOX

Nate is originally from Abbeville, but now lives in Ninety Six. He and his wife, Madelyn, love going to church and spending time together.

FUN FACT: Nate enjoys hunting and fishing.



CONNOR ASHLEY

Connor lives in Abbeville and has a Labradoodle named Jackson. He likes to work on cars in his spare time.

FUN FACT: He is a volunteer at Edgewood Fire Department.

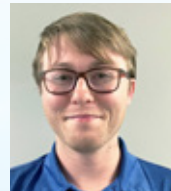


BEN STONE

Ben lives in the Donalds area. He and his fiancée, Ashstan Voyles, have two dachshunds, Ellie and Copper. Ben likes most outdoor

activities, including hunting, fishing, golfing and camping.

FUN FACT: Ben helped start the Lander University fishing team.



BRYSON POORE

Bryson lives in Level Land with his wife, Tess Poore. They like to hike and go camping. Bryson enjoys reading and online gaming.

FUN FACT: Bryson used to be a history teacher.

Bite-size brilliance

A not-so-spicy meatball!



Few foods have the versatility that meatballs offer. They're perfect for parties served with toothpicks, but they can also be your dinner tonight served over pasta or mashed potatoes.

What makes a good meatball? Some recipes call for chicken or veal while others rely solely on ground beef. Some recipes call for frying them in a skillet while others send them straight to the oven.

No matter the approach to the finished product, most everyone can agree on one thing: Meatballs are a blessing in the culinary world all wrapped up in a ball of meat.



SWEET-AND-SOUR MEATBALLS

Sauce:

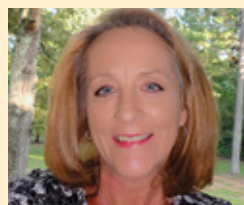
- 1/2 cup brown sugar
- 3 tablespoons white vinegar
- 2 tablespoons ketchup
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- 1/3 cup pineapple juice
- 1/4 teaspoon Chinese five-spice
- 2 teaspoons cornstarch

Place the brown sugar, vinegar, ketchup, soy sauce, pineapple juice and Chinese five spice in a saucepan over medium heat. Simmer for 5 minutes or until the sugar has dissolved. Stir in cornstarch and simmer for 2 minutes more to thicken. Remove from heat and set aside.

Meatballs:

- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 (1-pound) bag frozen meatballs
- 1 onion, sliced
- 1 red or green bell pepper, cut into bite-sized pieces
- 1 cup diced pineapple
- 4 green onions, cut into 1-inch pieces

Place a wok or large frying pan over high heat. Add the oil and the meatballs and cook, turning every minute or so, for 4-5 minutes or until almost cooked through. Add the onion and stir-fry for another 2 minutes. Add the bell pepper and stir-fry for another minute, then add the pineapple and the sweet-and-sour sauce. Stir-fry until well combined. Remove from heat and toss in the green onion.



Food Editor, Anne P. Braly
is a native of Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Photography by *Mark Gilliland*
Food Styling by *Rhonda Gilliland*

SALISBURY STEAK MEATBALLS

- 1/4 cup grated onion
- 2/3 cup panko bread crumbs
- 3/4 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon onion powder
- 2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
- 2 teaspoons soy sauce
- 2 teaspoons ground mustard
- 1 egg
- 2 tablespoons ketchup
- 1 1/4 pounds ground beef
- 1 tablespoon olive oil (plus more, if needed)

Gravy:

- 3 tablespoons butter, divided
- 6-8 medium mushrooms, chopped
- 1/2 cup onion, sliced 1/4-inch thick
- 4-6 cloves garlic, minced

- 3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 2 cups beef stock
- 2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
- 2 teaspoons Dijon mustard
- 2 teaspoons soy sauce

In a medium bowl, combine grated onions, breadcrumbs, salt and all the remaining ingredients except the ground beef and oil. Allow the mixture to stand for 5 minutes, then add the meat and mix until just combined and divide the mixture into about 20 meatballs.

Add oil in a large skillet and heat to medium-high. Add the meatballs in a single layer and cook for about 10 minutes, flipping halfway through, until all sides brown evenly. Remove to a plate. If needed, add additional oil and cook any

remaining meatballs the same way.

For the gravy, add 1 tablespoon of butter to the skillet. When melted, add mushrooms and cook 3-4 minutes. Add the onions and saute for 3 minutes, add the garlic and let cook for 30 seconds or until fragrant. Add the remaining butter to the skillet. When melted, add the flour and stir to combine and cook for 1 minute, stirring constantly. Gradually pour in the beef stock, still stirring constantly. Stir in Worcestershire sauce, Dijon and soy sauce and simmer for 3 minutes or until it thickens slightly. Add the meatballs to the skillet along with any juices that may have collected on the plate and cook for 4 minutes. If the gravy thickens too much, add a splash of water. Taste and adjust seasonings as desired.

BUTTERY CHICKEN MEATBALLS

- 1/2 medium onion, grated
- 1/2 cup panko breadcrumbs
- 1 1/2 pounds ground chicken
- 1 egg
- 2 teaspoons garam masala
- 2 tablespoons freshly chopped parsley
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon pepper
- 1 tablespoon olive oil

Butter sauce:

- 1/2 cup butter
- 5 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 1/2 teaspoons ground ginger
- 1 cup tomato sauce
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1 tablespoon garam masala
- 1 tablespoon smoked paprika
- 1 teaspoon turmeric
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon ground coriander
- 1 cup chicken broth
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1 tablespoon freshly chopped parsley

Mix the onion and bread-crumbs together in a large

mixing bowl. Let the mixture sit for 2-3 minutes. Add the rest of the meatball ingredients, excluding the oil, to the bowl. Mix everything together well. Form the mixture into meatballs.

Heat the olive oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add the meatballs, working in batches if needed. Cook for 2-3 minutes per side until well browned. Transfer the cooked meatballs to a plate and set aside.

For the sauce, add the butter to the skillet, then stir in garlic and ginger and cook for 1 minute. Add the tomato sauce, tomato paste, garam masala, smoked paprika, turmeric, cumin, coriander and chicken broth. Bring the sauce to a boil, then reduce to a simmer and cook for 10 minutes or until slightly thickens. Stir in the cream. Return meatballs to skillet and let them simmer in the sauce until heated through. Garnish with parsley and serve. 🍴



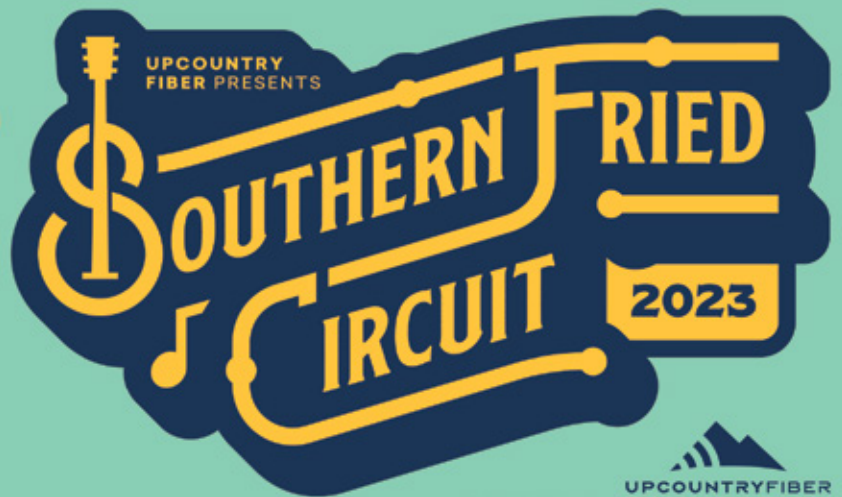


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