

NEBRASKA

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Magazine

March 2021

Spring Beauty in the Sandhills

Inside:

- Helping Our Neighbors • Celebrating St. Patrick's Day
- Can I Recycle That? • Smart Home Technology

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Wayne Price

Don't be distracted when driving

You might put on a blindfold to take a swing at a piñata during a birthday party. Or when you were trying to sleep during the day. But you would never drive down the highway while wearing a blindfold, would you? Probably not. But if you are texting on your phone while driving 60 miles per hour on a highway, that's basically what you're doing.

The average time a person takes their eyes off the road while texting is five seconds. At speeds between 55 and 60 miles per hour, that's like driving the distance of a football field while blindfolded. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, each day in the U.S., more than nine people are killed and more than 1,100 people are injured in crashes that are reported to involve a distracted driver.

Using a cellphone behind the wheel takes your eyes off the road, your hands off the wheel and your focus off driving. This puts you, the driver, and others in danger, including passengers, pedestrians and others on the road. Your actions could also impact the victim's families, friends, co-workers and community.

Drivers can miss seeing up to half of the things around them—traffic lights, stop signs, pedestrians—when talking on a cellphone, according to the National Safety Council.

These days people feel pressure to remain in constant contact, even when driving. As mobile technology use increases, distracted driving is a growing threat to community safety. We have all seen distracted drivers, and most likely, we have each used a phone while driving. Drivers don't realize the dangers they are creating when they take their eyes or attention off the road.

Safety is a priority with Nebraska's public power districts and electric cooperatives. We want to raise awareness about the dangers of distracted driving. Next time you're in a car with friends and family, remind them how talking on the phone while driving quadruples the risk of an accident, about the same as if you were driving drunk.

You can help keep families, friends and neighbors safe by putting down the phone and focusing on the road. Together we can put the brakes on distracted driving.

A Note from the CEO



Dennis Houston

Celebrating our heritage

Top o' the mornin' to ya! I am 100% Irish. The Houston clan hails from County Mayo and County Cork in Ireland. Our last name, Houston, is actually pronounced "how-stun", which is the Irish pronunciation. My thoughts this month have a bit of an Irish theme. Those thoughts also jump around a bit as our clan tends to do at times. So please bear with me as I saunter down that Irish memory lane.

We all know the first few words of a couple Irish songs. . . "When Irish eyes are smiling, sure it's like a morn in spring," or "O Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling." You can hear the sound of bagpipes in the air at special occasions and parades.

We all know a few famous people with an Irish ancestry. John F Kennedy, Ed Sheeran, Conan O'Brien, Grace Kelly, George Clooney, Spencer Tracy, Harrison Ford, Alec Baldwin, Mel Gibson and many others. Did you know that Irish architect James Hoban designed The White House in Washington, D.C. and was also the supervising architect on the United States Capitol building?

We all like to wear green and be Irish when we enjoy corned beef, cabbage, rye bread and a cold green beer on St. Patrick's Day every March. A fish fry at a local church is a tradition in many towns across Nebraska. When our own boys were young, we often made green eggs and ham for breakfast on March 17th.

We all want the luck of the Irish as we enjoy the first sign of spring when farmers are getting ready for planting season. Many of us enjoy watching a fun St. Patrick's Day parade. I actually dressed up as St. Patrick years ago and marched in a parade with my Irish family.

All of these things are a sign that spring and warmer temperatures are just around the corner. We all long to hopefully gather together again with family and friends later this summer. Spring just shows us that we are one step closer to getting back to "normal" with group gatherings and maybe even a community festival or two.

In closing, I'd like to leave you with this - An Old Irish Blessing.

May the road rise up to meet you. May the wind be always at your back. May the sun shine warm upon your face; the rains fall soft upon your fields and until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of His hand.

Cheers to all of the Irish and to those who wish they were!

Dennis Houston
dhouston@nrea.org



Helping Our Neighbors

by Wayne Price

The idea of neighbors helping neighbors across Nebraska isn't new. Some public power districts and electric cooperatives in Nebraska have found a way to put a little extra change from their customers' monthly electric bills to good use. By signing up to be part of Operation Round Up, customers are voluntarily helping their neighbors and local communities.

Operation Round Up allows public power consumers to work together to make a difference in their communities. By rounding up the monthly electric bill to the nearest whole dollar, that extra change adds up and is used to fund requests by local charitable organizations.

Operation Round Up was started by Palmetto Electric Cooperative, in South Carolina, in 1989. Since then over two hundred rural electric utilities nationwide have chosen to adopt the program. The Nebraska Rural Electric Association member-systems that participate include Cornhusker PPD, Cuming County PPD, Elkhorn RPPD, KBR RPPD, Norris PPD, Northeast Power, Niobrara Valley EMC, High West Energy, and Wyrulec Company.

Niobrara Valley EMC was the first rural electric utility to begin the Operation Round Up program in Nebraska.

The Niobrara Valley Electric Goodwill Fund was incorporated in June of 1996 by the directors of Niobrara Valley Electric Membership Corporation, so members could voluntarily raise funds for community projects through the Operation Round Up Goodwill Fund.

"Rounding your bill to the next whole dollar is an easy, painless way for our members to help each other by funding local projects," said John Hoke, Niobrara Valley EMC General Manager. "Because donations are voluntary, we are not using ratepayer funds for local projects. This helps us keep rates down for those who are struggling and allow those blessed with a better financial position to voluntarily provide financial help to others."

All donations are placed in the Niobrara Valley Goodwill Fund corporation which is administered by an



Above: Cornhusker Power Goodwill Fund Trustee Marc Swantek (right) presents \$750 to Genoa Volunteer Fire Department for a flagpole and donation board. Accepting the check is Fire Chief Shawn Strain (left).



Left: Cornhusker Power Goodwill Fund Trustee Cody Luchsinger (left) presents \$650 to Creston Rescue Unit for a defibrillator. Accepting the check is Equipment, Supply and Training Leader Linda Bachman (right).

independent Board of Directors. The board is made up of community leaders who serve on a voluntary basis. It is this board who receives the funds, evaluates all funding requests and decides how the donations to the fund will be distributed. Typically, the funding is used to address crucial needs such as medical care, emergency shelter, and life saving equipment, but it is not limited to these categories.

"Over the years, we have found the Operation Roundup program beneficial in many ways, some of them unexpected when we started the program," said Hoke. "It was a pleasant surprise to find it easy for smaller groups to apply for a grant. This has allowed us to help individual 4-H groups, local cemetery groups, and many "one-off" local community projects like playground equipment, historic building restoration, and similar projects."

Since 1996, the Goodwill Fund has paid out over \$172,000 in grants to 419 projects. and dispersed over \$151,000 to organizations and individuals within the cooperatives service territory.

“Our first grant was to Holt 4-H, and the money was used for advertising to help thank those who purchased 4-H animals at auction,” he said. “The second grant was to Spencer Volunteer Fire and Rescue to buy an Evac-U-Splint for their ambulance.”

Over the years, 12% of the funds have gone to fire and rescue, 12% for community improvement projects, and 15% to historic preservation. About 40% of the grants were used for scholarships to over 100 students going for advanced degrees.

Cornhusker Public Power District started its Operation Round Up program to allow customers to round up their monthly electric bills to benefit residents in the six counties it serves. This program funds the Cornhusker Power Goodwill Fund.

Since beginning in 1999, Cornhusker Power Goodwill Fund has been an incredibly successful way in which Cornhusker PPD customers help the less fortunate. Over the past 21 years, Cornhusker PPD customers helped replenish food supplies for local food pantries, helped support senior citizen programs, purchased supplies and equipment for rural fire and rescue departments, provided funds for community programs and helped children of all ages by supporting schools and youth programs.

The program operates with a five-member board of trustees who review applications and distribute monies quarterly.

“The funds from the Goodwill Fund have provided a great boost for projects within our service region,” said Trustee Susan Weeder.

Norris Public Power District launched the Operation Round Up program in 2001. Operation Round Up is a voluntary program that customers sign up for to have their monthly electric bills “rounded up” to the next highest dollar. The additional cents are placed in the Norris Power Goodwill Fund. Norris has a participation rate of over 50% of customers who contribute to the fund by rounding up their electric bill. The fund is administered by a Board of Directors made up of one Norris customer from each of the six counties served by Norris Public Power District. The board meets quarterly to consider grant applications.

The fund intends to support as many qualified non-

profit organizations as possible and enjoys contributing to projects which otherwise could not be completed without Operation Round Up funds. The Norris Power Goodwill Fund has proudly supported community betterment organizations, volunteer fire and rescue departments, parent-teacher organizations, libraries, cemetery associations, and many other organizations.

The fund will celebrate its 20th anniversary in 2021 and will also reach the milestone of exceeding more than \$1 million in grants issued to organizations within the Norris Public Power District service territory.

High West Energy serves communities in Colorado, Nebraska and Wyoming, and many in those communities are feeling the consequences of the economic uncertainty created by the COVID-19 crisis. High West has been able to help many of those dealing with financial struggles through its Operation Round Up program.

Since High West began the program in 2014, participating members have donated more than a quarter of a million dollars. In 2019, nearly 6,000 members contributed a total of \$44,113 to help 55 members through the voluntary Operation Round Up program. By comparison, in 2020 Operation Round Up helped 83 members with a total of \$63,577.

Members can apply for assistance from the program, or refer someone else who might need help but is not aware of the program. All applications and referrals are confidential, and filling out the form only takes a couple of minutes.

An individual or a family can receive up to \$800 from the program. A local organization can receive up to \$2,500.

Elkhorn Rural Public Power District's board of directors incorporated the Elkhorn Rural Public Power District Community Development Fund in 2018. Monies for the fund are provided through the Operation Round Up program. This change collected from customers adds up to huge benefits for local communities.

From August 2018 to November 2020, the Elkhorn RPPD Community Development Fund has awarded \$72,760 in funds to 67 different organizations.

Show & Tell project shares family history

by **Wayne Price**

Cuming County Public Power District has found a unique way to help others. The Operation Round Up program, started in 1999, lets customers round up their electric bill to the next highest dollar amount, with the spare change going to a host of individuals and organizations that apply for funding.

It's a small price to pay. The most it can cost in a given month is \$.99 cents, though it could be as little as a penny. The average amount is \$.45 cents, and most customers will pay around \$6 a year.

These nickels and dimes make a huge impact. A five-member board volunteers their time and decides where the money is distributed.



Since the program was founded, over \$240,000 has been awarded to area organizations and individuals. Randy Dunn, of Pender, Neb., is one of those individuals. He visits local schools to share his family history and hopefully spark an interest in young students.

"If the kids can put themselves into history, it becomes more interesting," he said. "It's a way to try and make them more interested in history."

Dunn, a retired farmer, started the show and tell project as a community service project through his Masonic Lodge. He is a member of the Rosalie Lodge, Olive Branch 274.

He has several tables of items for the students to touch and see and ask questions. The collection is made up of Native American related items and things used by people from about 1800 to the Civil War period.

"Some might say my collection is a little of everything and a lot of nothing," he noted. "But, in fact, they are all items that show how we lived and who we are."

He ties his own family history while talking about the history of the objects, and he encourages the students to talk about their own family history. One of his great-



Randy Dunn enjoys sharing his family history with local students. His show and tell project includes several tables of objects from about 1800 to the Civil War period.

grandfathers went to the West to work the gold fields and he has a small, portable scale similar to what gold miners would have used in the field.

Area organizations, foundations and individuals have donated items or financial help to the project. The funds he received from Cuming County PPD's Operation Round Up program were used to purchase a Civil War period bone saw and bleeder, a small device used to take blood from injured soldiers.

"The confidence others place in me and the interaction with the kids makes this a very worthwhile project," Dunn said.

Mary Harding elected NPPD Board Chair for 2021

Mary Harding of Plattsmouth was elected as Chair of Nebraska Public Power District's Board of Directors for 2021 following that body's annual election of officers Wednesday in Columbus, Neb.



Also elected were Jerry Chlopek of Columbus as first vice chair, Melissa Freeland of Kearney as second vice chair, and Ed Schrock of Elm Creek as secretary. NPPD Vice President and Chief Financial Officer Traci Bender was elected treasurer.

"I look forward to working with our Board, management team, and customers during 2021 as we look to the future, serving Nebraskans with low-cost, reliable and sustainable electric power," Harding stated.

Harding was recently elected in November to her

fourth term on the Board and was initially elected in November 2003. Previously she served as Vice-Chair in 2020 and as Secretary on eight other occasions. A graduate of the University of Nebraska Lincoln with a degree in Bilingual Education she also completed graduate work at the University of Colorado in Boulder in sociolinguistics.

Harding is the former Executive Director of the Nebraska Environmental Trust and Executive Director of the Nebraska League of Conservation Voters. She and her husband, Richard Erickson, have four grown children and operate a property rental business in the Lincoln area.

Harding represents Subdivision 1 which consist of Cass, Saunders, Lancaster and Seward counties.

The Board of Directors also re-appointed Donna Starzec assistant treasurer, and Christine Pillen deputy assistant treasurer. Jan Modelski was re-appointed as assistant secretary, and Sandra Keefover as deputy assistant secretary. All are from Columbus.

Governor appoints Curry to Game and Parks Commission

Governor Pete Ricketts has appointed Ken Curry of Columbus, a corporate leader in public power and customer care, to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission to represent District 3 (northeast Nebraska).

Curry is vice president of customer services and chief customer officer for Nebraska Public Power District, which sells power to customers in all or part of 86 of Nebraska's 93 counties.

"My role is to focus on the customer and to do the very best for the customers and to bring them the services they are looking for at a very affordable cost," Curry said. He sees that translating to his role on the Commission, which he said already provides outstanding customer service, in his ability to continue to improve those services with Nebraskans.

Curry was an Eagle Scout and is now the father of two Eagle Scouts. "I grew up loving the outdoors, and my dad introduced me to all kinds of great outdoor experiences. Growing up in the outdoors is beneficial to

our kids and families."

With an interest in youth outdoor activities, Curry



says his new role fits perfectly. "Supporting the outdoors, supporting new generations getting exposure to the outdoors and the youth aspects are very appealing to me," he said.

Curry's appointment, subject to approval by the Nebraska Legislature, will be effective through Jan. 15, 2025. He succeeds Jim Ernst of Columbus on the board.

"I'm truly honored to be appointed to this role by the Governor and extremely excited to serve," Curry said. "The Game and Parks Commission is a great organization, and I look forward to supporting the team and helping move the agency forward."

The Silent Killer

By Larry Oetken



Often called the “silent killer” because of its odorless, tasteless, and colorless nature,

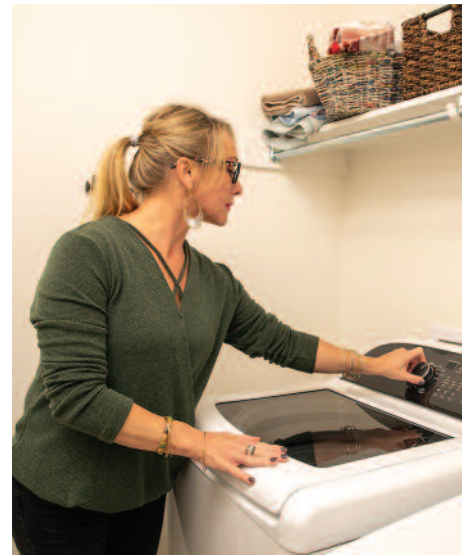
carbon monoxide remains the leading cause of accidental poisonings in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Each year, carbon monoxide poisoning claims nearly 500 lives and causes more than 15,000 visits to hospital emergency departments.

To prevent carbon monoxide

poisoning in your home, following these tips:

- Never leave your car running in the garage, even with the overhead door open. Fumes can build up quickly.
- Never use a gas oven to heat your home, even for a short time.
- Never use a charcoal grill indoors or charcoal briquettes in a fireplace.
- Do not sleep in any room with an unvented gas or kerosene space heater.
- The most important thing that you can do is to install a battery-operated carbon monoxide detector in your home.

Larry Oetken is the Job Training & Safety Coordinator for the Nebraska Rural Electric Association.



Laundry tips for maximum energy savings

There are a number of easy ways to save energy with laundry, even if you are still using older appliances. Whenever possible, follow these suggestions to keep energy use to a minimum. In most cases, practices that save energy also extend the life of your clothes.

- Wash clothes in cold water when possible.
- Replace old washers with an EnergyStar-rated system. They provide great savings from lower water use and fast spins that reduce the need for drying.
- Don't over-dry your clothes. If 40 minutes works, don't set to 60 minutes.
- Make sure to clean the inside lint filter before each drying cycle.
- Periodically check your flexible metal dryer vent hose to ensure it is still tightly connected and not kinked.
- Dryers with service problems should be replaced with an EnergyStar-rated machine.

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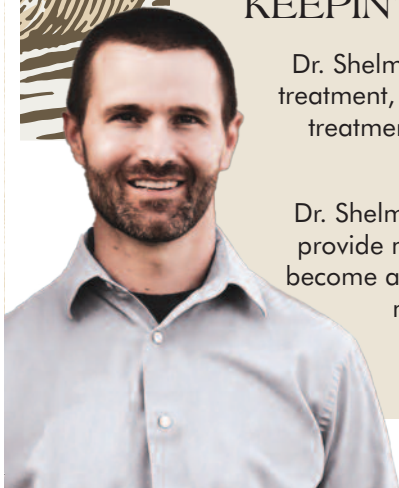
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St. Patrick's Day in "Nebraska's Irish Capital"

Residents in O'Neill, Nebraska prepare each year for the St. Patrick's Day celebration in March honoring the patron saint of Ireland. The celebrations have doubled the population of the "Irish Capital of Nebraska" annually for the past several years.

O'Neill, Neb., which was founded by an Irish native and proclaimed the "Irish Capital of Nebraska" by the governor in 1969, is home to the world's largest shamrock.

City officials began by painting the giant shape at the intersection of Highways 20 and 281 in the middle of town, but decided to make it permanent in concrete in 1993. (You can even see its outline on Google Maps.)

These days, the giant shamrock is a big tourist attraction, with people coming all year to see it. There have even been proposals and weddings at the site of the shamrock.

On St. Patrick's Day, the city of about 4,000 doubles its population, with visitors flocking to see the painting of the shamrock. It gets a fresh coat of paint every year just before March 17th. O'Neill's celebration includes the grand parade, Green Eggs and Ham -- a children's breakfast that features green scrambled eggs -- and other activities.

A hat tip to the fine Irish men, women and kids of O'Neill who organize this amazing St. Patrick's Day Festival each year!



Photographs by Mike Peterson



Nebraska Legislature tackles broadband issues

As the Nebraska Rural Electric Association looks to update the look and feel of our magazine, we are also looking to reach out to our readers and engage them more on the federal and state issues that impact the electric industry. We plan to use this space in Nebraska Magazine to provide legislative updates during the Nebraska Unicameral Legislative Session and bring rural Nebraskans up to speed on some of the issues that impact your electric rates.

This year's legislative session is moving at a breakneck speed. With the COVID pandemic looming on senator's minds, they are working as quickly as possible to schedule bill hearings and to begin floor debate. This way, if they do have to adjourn early, they will have done as much work as possible and will have passed the state's budget before they are forced to adjourn.

The NREA is following more than 90 of the 684 bills that were introduced this year. We track each of these bills because, in some way, they could have an impact on our industry. A few of the key issues we will be weighing in on this year include, public power governance issues, rural broadband development, and renewable energy development.

Thus far, the spotlight for this session has been on rural broadband development. Electric suppliers in Nebraska are effectively prohibited from delivering retail broadband service. We do believe, however, that rural electric power districts may play an important role in broadband delivery. We believe that electric utilities, fiber internet companies, wireless internet providers, as well as other interested parties can come together in a partnership model. Companies that have historically competed with one another can share risk and expertise entering into an agreement that allows every party to profit.

If you have been able to follow along with the broadband committee hearings, you would get the feeling that something big is about to happen. The COVID pandemic has clearly highlighted the importance of, and the need for, rural broadband. The Legislature has taken note and has introduced 10 separate broadband bills. As we follow the hearings on these bills you can see the senators asking questions and getting answers on the

James Dukesherer named Interim Director of Government Relations

James Dukesherer has been named the new Interim Director of Government Relations for the Nebraska Rural Electric Association effective January 28, 2021. He has been with the association for nearly thirteen years, since March 1, 2008. In his role at NREA, he has served as our Assistant Director of Government Relations and Grassroots Coordinator.

Dukesherer has played an integral role in NREA for many years as a member of



our leadership team in Government Relations. As Assistant Director of Government Relations, he has been analyzing bills and their impact on the rural electric industry, writing bill summaries and tracking legislation.

record they will be able to use later during floor debate. Will this lead to enhanced broadband service across rural Nebraska? Stay tuned...

NREA has always been an avid supporter of bringing the issues that impact rural Nebraska to you. Our Association often works to mobilizes our member-systems and consumers around the issues that impact our electric rates. If you are interested in learning more about the issues the NREA is working on, please visit the grassroots section of our website at www.nrea.org. By bringing these issues to you through our magazine and website, it is our hope that rural Nebraskans will become more aware and ultimately, we will see more favorable policy outcomes.

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Weatherstrip or caulk doors and windows.

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Can I Recycle That?

by Paul Wesslund

Can I recycle my mail with the stapled paper and plastic envelope windows? Do I need to break down cardboard boxes before putting them in the recycling bin? Or should I just give up on recycling because it's way too complicated?

Three of every five U.S. households have curbside recycling pickup, according to a study by the Sustainable Packaging Coalition. Another 14% have curbside service available but do not subscribe.

Reasons to recycle are both environmental and financial. Recycling 10 plastic bottles, for example, saves enough energy to power a laptop computer for more than 25 hours, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Recycling can also help out with your tax bill. Local governments pay for disposing home and office waste, traditionally by burying it in a landfill. But if some of that waste could be sold for reuse, the income would reduce the cost of the waste management program.

The list of recycling rules is long and complicated, but a way to help master them is to try three different types of thinking:

Think like a sorter: When your curbside bin gets emptied, it's taken to a Materials Recovery Facility where it is dumped onto a conveyor belt where workers pull off items that will gum up the next step in the process, a large screen that jiggles items into a different bin. Think about items that might cause problems with sorting.

Think local: There are about 300 Materials Recovery Facilities around the country, and many of them have different equipment, meaning every community has its own set of rules for what can be recycled. Find out who handles recycling in your community, and they will have a list of what can be recycled. And of course, there's an app for that. Two popular apps are Recycle Coach and ReCollect. Just type in your zip code to learn how your local recycling program treats



individual items.

Think like an accountant: You might be thinking, it sounds like I'm doing the work for the recycling program. And you are. You could just dump anything and everything in your recycling bin and let the workers sort it out. They would do that—for a price. You can help keep recycling costs low by following the rules.

Here are some of the most-wondered-about recycling rules:

- **Mail:** With one exception, all mail can go in the bin. Staples and plastic windows get sorted out by the machinery. The exception is magazines wrapped in plastic—that kind of shrink wrap is better handled by supermarkets, which specialize in recycling bags and other plastic “stretch wrap” around food, paper towels and other products.



Photograph by Bill Smith

Litter Reduction and Recycling Grant Program

The Litter Reduction and Recycling Grant Program has been in existence since 1979. Its purpose is to provide funds to support programs to reduce litter, provide education, and promote recycling in Nebraska. Funds from this program are provided from an annual fee assessed to manufacturers. Grants may be awarded to both public and private entities.

Approximately \$1.5 million is available annually through this fund.

Who's Eligible: Grants may be awarded to both public and private entities.

Who to Contact: NDEQ's Litter Reduction and Recycling Program, (402) 471-4242.

The Litter Reduction and Recycling Program Priority System will be used for evaluation and ranking of the grant applications.

Allocation Percentage: Litter Reduction and Recycling funds are awarded in three categories: public education, cleanup, and recycling. Each year, the Environmental Quality Council establishes the percentages for allocation of funds for each category.

- **Food containers:** When you're done with the peanut butter jar, no need to rinse it out. It can go right in the bin.

- **Cardboard boxes:** The only reason to break them down is to save space in your bin. They'll get well crushed in the truck that picks them up.

- **Pizza cartons:** Don't leave crusts or garlic butter containers in them, but recycling equipment can handle a greasy pizza box just fine.

- **Plastic bottle caps:** Screw the lid back on, and recycle both the bottle and cap.

- **Labels:** You don't need to remove them.

- **Plastic straws:** Can be recycled, but smaller items tend to fall off the conveyor or through the screen sorters and onto the floor, where they get swept up and hauled off to a normal landfill.

Spring Beauty in the Sandhills





Left: A Nebraska Sandhills morning along Highway 83 near Thedford, Neb.

Top: Sunrise dawns over the Dismal River near Thedford, Neb.

Above: A quiet spring pasture in the Nebraska Sandhills.

If you had a new fence to install at home, you would likely research property lines, ordinances, and fence types. Then you would get to the point of purchasing, prepping, and assembling materials to get work started. However, you would still not be ready to dig. There is a very important step missing—calling 811.

811 is a free service that will have buried public utilities marked on your property so that you can safely dig around them. Just call 811, or submit an online request at call811.com at least a few business days before you plan to dig.

Digging without having utility lines marked can result in damage to gas, electric, communications, water, and sewer systems. Checking the safety of a location before you begin digging is important for both professionals and homeowners. It helps prevent accidents on projects of all sizes and scopes.

When contacting 811, make sure that you have clearly identified your planned digging area and outline it in white paint if possible. The service uses ground-penetrating radar to search for and locate the buried public utility lines that are on your property. Lines will be marked with flags or paint. The color indicates the

type of utility located. After the area has been marked, the CGA reports that you have less than 1 percent chance of causing damage if you respect the markings.

If you have any private utilities, you will need to hire a private utility locator. Some examples of private utilities include: underground sprinkler system, invisible fences, data communication systems, private water systems, or gas piping to a garage.

If you do not know what facilities are on the property, look for clues to tell you what might be underground, like a propane storage tank, gas meters, a detached garage or outbuilding with lights, a grill or pool on the property, manhole lids, storm drains, and pavement patches.

Even if you have had an area marked before, call to have the area checked again. Natural changes to the soil, such as

erosion or root growth, can alter the depth and location of buried lines. Once all buried lines have been marked, respect the boundaries, and dig carefully.

Keep yourself from having to dig out of trouble, and call 811 before your digging project begins. For more safety information, visit SafeElectricity.org.

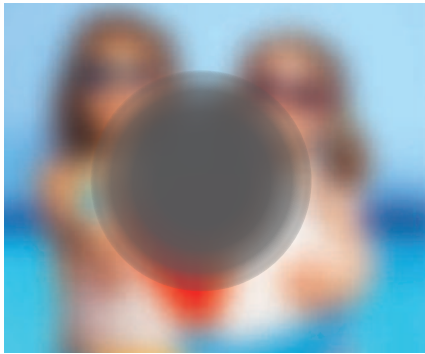


Murphy



Advanced Technology Allows Macular Degeneration Patients To See Again

And Allows Many Low Vision Patients To Drive Again



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



Same scene of Grandchildren as viewed through telescope glasses.

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

“Some of my patients consider me their last chance or people who have vision loss” said Dr. Stamm, one of only a few doctors in the world who specializes in fitting bioptic

telescopes to help those who have lost vision due to macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, and other eye diseases.

Imagine a pair of glasses that can improve your vision enough to change your life. Biopic telescopes may be the breakthrough in optical technology that will give you back your independence. Patients with vision in the 20/200 range can many times be improved to 20/50.

Biopic telescopes treat both dry and wet forms of macular degeneration as well as other vision limiting conditions.

While there is currently no cure, promising research is being done on many fronts. “My job is to figure out everything and anything possible to keep a person functioning” says Dr. Stamm “Even if it’s driving”.

“The major benefit of the biopic telescope is that the lens automatically focuses on whatever you’re looking at,” said Dr. Stamm. “It’s like a self-focusing camera, but much more precise.”

For more information and to schedule an appointment today, call:

Robert Stamm, O.D.
Low Vision Optometrist
Member IALVS

Toll Free:
(877) 393-0025



Smart Home Technology

by Maria Kanevsky

Smart home devices can add comfort and convenience to your life, but the price tag for some of these devices can be another story. Since many smart home technologies are new and cutting-edge, the cost of owning these devices can sometimes be a major barrier. Luckily, there are several inexpensive options for smart home devices that won't break the bank, while still offering nearly all the same benefits. If you're new to smart home technologies, here are three inexpensive options to get you started.

Smart home speakers provide a wide range of features such as the ability to play music, call friends or family or even locate a misplaced smart phone. One of the most useful aspects of smart home speakers is that they act as a smart home hub for your other smart devices. Each smart speaker comes with a voice assistant, like

Amazon Alexa or Google Assistant,

which can be used to control additional smart devices in your home. When choosing a smart home speaker, make sure your other smart devices are compatible with the system.

Google Assistant, for example, works best with other Google products, rather than Amazon or Apple products.

Several smart home speakers, especially smaller, entry-level types like the Amazon Echo Dot and Google Home Mini, can cost as little as \$30 or less. This makes them more affordable than the larger versions, like Amazon Echo and Google Home, while still offering nearly all the same features.

Another affordable smart home technology is the

Aside from being trendy and making life easier, smart home technologies can help members reduce their energy consumption.



smart plug. The technology works by directly inserting the smart plug into an outlet, then plugging your device into the smart plug. This can make any device “smart” by connecting it to your Wi-Fi through the smart plug. They can also be used with smart home speakers. One of the best features of a smart plug is that they can help you reduce your monthly energy use. This can be done by programming automatic shut-off times to prevent devices from drawing energy when they're not in use. There are plenty of inexpensive and well-performing smart plugs available under \$20.

Smart light bulbs are among the cheapest and the easiest smart devices to install in your home. They can be controlled through your phone or by voice if connected to your smart home speaker. Some interesting features include the ability to choose different lighting colors and shades, dimness levels and the ability to turn them on or off entirely. There is an extensive market for smart LED bulbs, but some of the less expensive options are the Wyze Bulb, the Lixf Mini



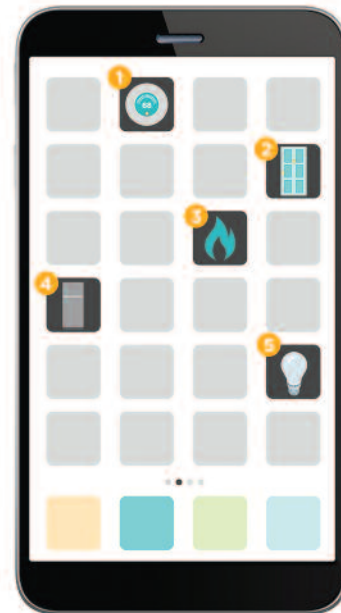
*Smart home speakers, like the Amazon Echo Dot shown here, offer a wide range of features that provide consumers convenient control of smart home devices.
Photograph by Abby Berry, NRECA*

and the Ikea Tradfri, with prices ranging from about \$8 to \$20 per bulb. For multi-bulb fixtures, an alternative to buying several smart bulbs is to buy a smart light switch to control the entire fixture. However, this option doesn't allow for different color choices and requires a bit more handiwork to manually change out the switches.

Remember, if you're looking to buy more than one smart home device, make sure the devices are compatible with your smart home hub (Google Home Mini with Google products, or Amazon Echo Dot with Amazon products) to ensure the best performance of all devices. As with any smart home device, access to a secure and stable Wi-Fi connection will be crucial to using the technology properly. Smart home devices will almost always be more expensive than their "non-smart" counterparts, but they provide additional comfort and convenience that traditional devices simply cannot. The value of these devices is up to you, the consumer, to determine if they are truly worth the price.

SMART HOME TECH APPS

Smart home technologies are continuously improving, and companion mobile apps take the convenience to a new level. Here's some of the latest app functionalities:



- 1 Smart Thermostat Apps:** Use geofencing on your smartphone to set a boundary around your home. When you leave the boundary, the thermostat will change to away or return mode.
- 2 Smart Security Apps:** Video doorbells allow you to keep a watchful eye from anywhere, and smart security apps can send alerts to signal activity outside your home.
- 3 Smart Smoke and CO Sensor Apps:** These apps have the ability to send alerts, conduct status checks and silence alarms - even when you're away.
- 4 Smart Appliance Apps:** App functionality depends on the appliance. Refrigerator cameras allow you to see what needs to be stocked (while grocery shopping!), and smart dryers can sense when electric use is high and turn off.
- 5 Smart Lighting Apps:** Control lighting options for individual rooms. You can adjust brightness and color all from the convenience of your smartphone!



Scenic view of the Nebraska Sandhills after a spring rain.



Q : It's almost time to plant our garden, and we're wondering if there are steps we can take to save energy when planting. How can we make our home garden more efficient?

A : We're glad you asked! One approach to gardening we've been excited about lately is no-till, also known as no-dig. No-till gardens have been gaining ground with farmers in recent years, partly because of the energy savings. The principles behind no-till gardening work well for large farms, as well as smaller home gardens. No-till can be done without chemicals. Research shows that this approach can produce more fruits and vegetables within a few years, and they get better over the long term. Best of all, this approach to gardening takes less time and effort—and you won't even have to fire up the rototiller!

Two ideas are at the heart of no-till gardening. First, don't break up the soil. We usually think that by breaking up the soil and mixing it up, we keep weeds from growing. But tilling can bring weed seeds that are deep in the soil to the top where they can germinate and grow. Tilling also destroys microbes in the soil that bring nutrients to the plants.

The second idea is to spread thick layers of compost and other mulch on top of the soil. When compost and other mulch are spread on top, they feed the soil from above, the same way leaves in a forest fall to the ground, decompose and turn into rich soil over time. When you build up the soil by spreading layers of compost and other mulch on top, the weed seeds are kept dormant. Mulch keeps the soil moist, so less water is used to irrigate, which means less electricity use for pumping water from your well or community water system.

Your no-till garden can be planted at ground-level or in raised beds. Start by laying weed-blocking material on top of the old dirt. Sheets of cardboard are often used because they will decompose over time. Then spread at least 4 inches of weed-free soil or compost on top.

If the soil under the cardboard is reasonably loose, you can probably start planting right away. Your garden may be less productive the first year, but will grow healthier and have less weeds every season from then on. If the



No-till growing can be done on commercial farms as well as home gardens. Photograph provided by USDA

ground is heavily compacted or clay, you may have to till in some compost or healthy soil before laying down the cardboard and give it a year for the new mix to get looser.

In the fall, you can cut the dead plants at ground level and leave the roots in the ground to decompose over the winter. You may also want to plant a cover crop, like peas, fava beans or barley late in the growing season. Setting up a no-till garden takes a fair bit of work, but it will require less maintenance in the future and get healthier every year.

If you're ready to try your hand at planting a no-till garden, many colleges and universities offer extension classes for folks who are not enrolled as students. You can also watch a variety of videos online that can guide you through setup and long-term care.

Here are a few additional tips that can help you reduce energy use related to gardening:

- Drip systems lose less water to evaporation.
- Timers are a convenient way to control irrigation, but be sure to override the timer and shut off watering cycles when a rain shower can do the job.
- Consider purchasing a rain barrel for energy efficient watering.
- Learn how to store your produce to reduce waste.
- Make sure your freezer is energy efficient.

We hope these tips will help you prepare for a more energy efficient garden this season.

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Three Dishes to Celebrate St. Patty's Day

Even if you're not Irish, a green treat like this Luck o' the Irish Mint Pie can get you and your guests into the festive spirit. With enough seasonal flavor to go around, this recipe makes two pies, so be sure to cut every leprechaun a generous portion.

Welcome family and friends to a traditional St. Patrick's Day lunch with these Reuben Sandwich and Irish Potato Bread recipes.

Reuben Sandwich

- 2 tablespoons butter, softened**
- 4 slices rye and pumpernickel swirl bread**
- 4 slices swiss cheese**
- 6 ounces corned beef**
- 2 tablespoons, plus 2 teaspoons, Thousand Island Dressing, divided**
- 4 tablespoons sauerkraut**

Heat nonstick skillet over medium heat.

Spread 1 tablespoon butter on one side of two bread slices. Place buttered side down in heated skillet. Add two slices cheese to each bread slice. Spread 2 tablespoons dressing over cheese slices. Add 3 ounces corned beef to each bread slice.

Spread 2 teaspoons dressing over corned beef. Spread 2 tablespoons sauerkraut over corned beef.

Spread remaining butter on one side of remaining bread slices. Place buttered side up on top of sauerkraut.

Cook 4-7 minutes each side, flipping once, until golden brown and cheese is melted.



Luck o' the Irish Mint Pie

- 3 3/4 cups heavy whipped cream, divided**
- 8 ounces cream cheese, softened**
- 1 1/4 cups, plus 2 tablespoons, powdered sugar, divided**
- 5 drops green food coloring**
- 1 1/4 teaspoons vanilla extract, divided**
- 1/4 teaspoon mint extract**
- 1 bag mint chocolate candies, chopped, divided**
- 2 chocolate cookie crusts (9 inches each)**
- 1 bag mint chocolate candies**

Makes 2 pies.

To make filling: In bowl of stand mixer, whisk 2 1/2 cups heavy cream until stiff peaks form. Transfer to bowl.

In separate stand mixer bowl, beat cream cheese on high 2 minutes. Gradually add 1 1/4 cups powdered sugar and green food coloring; mix until smooth. Add 1/4 teaspoon

vanilla and mint extract; mix well.

Fold prepared whipped cream into cream cheese mixture. Fold 1 cup chopped mint chocolate candies into filling.

To make frosting: In bowl of stand mixer, whisk remaining heavy cream and remaining powdered sugar. Add remaining vanilla extract and mix until stiff peaks form.

Pour filling into crusts and smooth tops.

Fill decorating bag with frosting and pipe thick band around edges of pies. Then pipe circle dollops evenly around edges of pies.

Scatter 1 cup chopped mint chocolate candies in middle of pies. Place whole mint chocolate candies into each dollop of frosting around edges of pies.

Refrigerate until firm, 5-6 hours.



Irish Potato Bread

- 2 medium or large russet potatoes
- 1 egg
- 1 egg white
- 1/3 cup canola oil
- 3/4 cup milk
- 2 tablespoons green onion, minced
- 1/2 teaspoon caraway seeds
- 3 1/4 cups all-purpose flour, plus additional for dusting and kneading
- 1 1/2 tablespoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt

Heat oven to 375 F.

Peel potatoes. Slice one potato and boil in saucepan 15 minutes, or until tender. Remove potato from saucepan into large bowl. Mash potato then set aside.

Grate second potato onto cloth. Wring potato in cloth to remove excess water. Add grated potato to mashed potato in large bowl. Add egg, egg white, oil, milk, onion, caraway seeds, 3 1/4 cups flour, baking powder and salt. Stir with wooden spoon until mixture is soft and sticky.

Turn dough onto floured surface. Adding flour as needed, knead dough to form 8-inch round shape with slight dome. Place dough onto baking sheet lined with parchment paper. Cut large "X" on top of dough about 1/2 inch deep.

Bake 55 minutes until golden brown. Cool on wire rack 1 hour before serving.

Reuben Meat Balls

- | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1 1/2 lbs. hamburger | 2/3 cup breadcrumbs or cracker crumbs |
| 1 cup Minute Rice | 1 teaspoon salt |
| 1 small onion | 1/2 teaspoon pepper |
| 1 egg | |
| 2 tablespoons parsley | |

Mix above ingredients, shape into small meatballs and place in a greased 9" X 13" baking dish.

- | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------|
| 1 can (16 oz.) sauerkraut | 1 can mushroom soup |
| 1 cup salad dressing | 1 cup grated cheese |

Cover meatballs with kraut. Mix dressing and soup, pour over top of kraut. Top with grated cheese. Bake at 350 degrees for about one hour.

Mary Kral, Hastings, Nebraska

Seafood Bisque

- | | |
|--|-----------------------------|
| 1 cup shrimp, coarsely chopped | 2 oz. cream cheese |
| 1 cup crab, coarsely chopped | 1 cup half & half |
| 1 stick real butter | 1 cup milk |
| 1 tablespoon flour | 1/2 teaspoon salt |
| 1 11 oz. can Campbell's Tomato Bisque soup | 1/2 teaspoon pepper |
| | 1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper |

Sauté shrimp and crab in the real butter. Stir in rest of ingredients and cook slowly for 15 – 20 minutes to melt cream cheese. (Salt, pepper, and cayenne pepper can be adjusted to your liking.) Enjoy!

Kim Due, Friend, Nebraska

Crockpot Bread Pudding

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| 8 cups cubed bread | 1 teaspoon cinnamon, can use more to taste |
| 1/2 cup raisins | 1/2 teaspoon vanilla |
| 2 cups milk | 1/4 teaspoon nutmeg |
| 4 eggs | 1/2 teaspoon salt |
| 1 cup sugar | |
| 1/4 cup butter, melted | |

Mix all ingredients together, except the bread. Put bread in large bowl and then add liquid mixture; mix till moist. Put in crockpot and cook on low for 2 1/2 hours. Serve with cool whip on top.

Deanie Wagner, Culbertson, Nebraska

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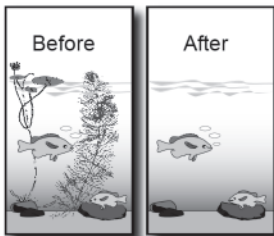
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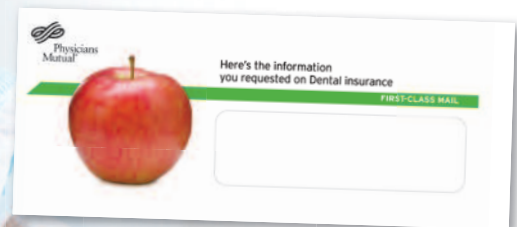
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