A CUT ABOVE THE REST

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Whether you’re hosting a houseful of family members or heading back to where you grew up, the holiday season celebrates the idea of home. As we enter into the fall season, pumpkins, gourds and pumpkin-flavored everything is all the rage. Specialty pumpkins and gourds are sold all over Nebraska. In this issue, we highlight farmer Brett Nunnenkamp, who owns The Country Pumpkin near Sutton. He grows over 50 varieties of pumpkins, squash, and gourds. Check out his story on page 4.

You will see how farmers and ranchers are putting the main course in your holiday meal this season. On page 5 look at what foods can decorate your holiday table this year!

Cookie swaps are also a part of the season, and in our recipes section on page 6, you’ll find the best way to start a cookie swap this Christmas season and pick up our top cookie recipe. This holiday tradition makes wonderful memories with family and friends and these treats make perfect presents to satisfy any sweet tooth.

Finally, we share how to pick the perfect Christmas tree for your home. Learn more in our cover story on page 8-9.

Thanks for reading, and we wish you a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year from all of us at Nebraska Farm Bureau and Nebraska Living Magazine.

Nebraska Living for the Holidays

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What You Need To Know About Gourds And Pumpkins

Summer officially transitions into fall when you see people requesting their favorite things about the fall season: pumpkin spice lattes, comfort foods, and holiday cookies. At The Country Pumpkin, a produce store near Sutton, the spotlight is on gourds, squash, and pumpkins. “Gourds are technically fruits because they are part of the flowering plants that contain the seeds—like grapes or melons, they’re the fruit that grows on a vine,” farmer and Clay County Farm Bureau member Brett Nunnenkamp said. Brett is the owner of The Country Pumpkin where he grows more than 50 varieties of pumpkins, squash, gourds, and ornamental corn including many heirloom types. He started growing pumpkins at age 13.

“Some gourds have hard shells that turn a brownish-tan as they age; others come in a variety of deep greens, burnt oranges, and goldenrod yellows. Some are lopsided and riddled with bumps; others are elongated and smooth. So, a collection of different types of gourds can add a festive element to centerpieces and mantle displays in any home,” Brett said.

Pumpkins fall under the squash umbrella, and they’re multifunctional—ornamental and edible. Many people associate pumpkins with jack-o-lanterns or use them as decorations on front stoops or decks. You can get the traditional orange pumpkins, but there’s more to pumpkins than what meets the eye. Pumpkins come in a variety of shapes, colors, sizes, and textures and serve a multitude of different purposes.

“We sell the traditional orange pumpkins, but there is the Porcelain Doll, which appears as a unique pink color with deep ribs. The Valenciano, which is a white pumpkin that tends to keep their ghostly white appearance. A Cinderella pumpkin which gets its name after the carriage of the fairy-tale princess. This French heirloom has a flat appearance and is a scarlet orange. Or the Knucklehead, which gets its name from its naturally warty skin. The fruit is orange, but warts are green. We also raise Jarradale pumpkins which are the color blue,” Brett said. Large and small, you’ll see a wide variety at their store in Sutton.

As we enter into the Christmas season, pumpkins and gourds can also be used to decorate as Santas, Christmas trees, or snowmen. Gourds and pumpkins are versatile throughout Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Nebraska Farmers and Ranchers Providing the Main Course for Your Holiday Meal!

Cattle outnumber people in Nebraska 4 to 1
Nebraska has the top 3 beef cow counties in the U.S. (#1 Cherry, #2 Custer, #3 Holt)
For a medium rare steak the temperature should be 145°

Pork is the world’s most widely eaten meat
There are 3.6 million pigs in Nebraska
Ham should be cooked 20 minutes per pound and reach an internal temperature of 140°

On average, 46 million turkeys are eaten each Thanksgiving in the U.S.
A small number of Nebraska commercial turkey producers raise birds that are exported to Iowa and Minnesota for processing
A whole turkey should be cooked to a minimum internal temperature of 165°

The Nebraska Farm Bureau Foundation’s mission is to engage youth, educators, and the general public to promote an understanding of the vital importance of agriculture in the lives of all Nebraskans.
Learn more at www.nefbfoundation.org.

For more information go to www.thecountrypumpkin.com.
How to Host a Christmas Cookie Exchange Party

Step 1: Send Out Invitations
Invite guests three to four weeks in advance. Seven or eight people are ideal—manageable, yet enough for a good variety of cookies. Have each person bring along copies of her recipe as well as some supplies for packaging, such as ribbons, tags, or boxes.

Step 2: Choose Cookies to Bake
Ask each guest to make a dozen cookies for every person in attendance, plus an extra dozen for sampling; you do the same. This way, everybody will go home with several dozen in different flavors to give as gifts. If that seems daunting, scale back; if seven of you have six dozen to swap, you will take a few less of each kind but will still have an ample number. Decide who will make what, coordinating ahead of time to avoid duplicates. Sturdy cookies are best (very thin or delicate varieties won’t pack well).

Step 3: Create Display Cards
At the swap, label each cookie. Write or print the name of the cookie and the baker on a card: “Italian Biscotti cookies, from Tina.”

Step 4: Set Up a Packaging Station
Ask guests to bring boxes and wrapping materials; you might also keep some on hand in case any are overlooked. Set everything out on large worktables. Consider stocking the station with tags or sticky labels, ribbons, twine, cardboard boxes, sturdy paper plates, baking papers, scissors, hole punches, tissue paper, cellophane, and other trimmings.

Step 5: Prepare for the Swap
On the day of the party, brew plenty of coffee and tea, or maybe some wine and clear a few tables for sampling, swapping, and packaging cookies. Provide several platters and cake stands, and have each guest put out a plate of cookies for tasting, with stacks of recipes alongside if you like. Let everyone sample the treats—and maybe even take a vote on the best one. When it’s time to trade, set out the remaining cookies and let each person walk around the table to pick up their share of each. Or, have people take only what they need to package one gift at a time, and return to the table for more as they wish.

Invite a group of friends, and have each person make enough of one kind of cookie to share. At the party, sample the treats, then trade and package them in appealing assortments. Everyone leaves with finished gifts—and plenty of new recipes.
A Cut Above the Rest

Picking out the perfect Christmas tree is a yearly family tradition. But with all the different types of trees out there, it’s hard to know which one is right for your holiday display. And knowing how to keep it green and fragrant once you deck it out is important.

Andy Campbell, a Lancaster County Farm Bureau member and manager of Campbell’s Nurseries Landscape Department in Lincoln, shares a few tips on how to pick the right tree and make sure it lasts through your Christmas celebrations, and maybe into the New Year.

“Before you head out to a nursery or tree farm, make sure you know just what size tree you can fit in your house,” Andy says. Measure the height of your ceiling but remember to subtract the height of your stand and the tree topper to get the maximum tree height you can fit. Also, clear the space where you’ll put the tree and see how deep it is.

Smell and Touch Test

Once you find a place to buy your tree give it the smell and touch test. Grab any branch on the tree between your thumb and forefinger, gently clamp down and pull toward yourself. If you end up with a handful of needles, the tree is already past its prime. Crush the needles in your hand and then check the scent. “If the tree doesn’t smell enough, don’t buy it,” Andy says. Next bounce the tree by holding it a few inches above the ground and dropping it. Needles that fall off from the interior of the tree are normal. But if the exterior needles fall off, it’s a sure sign of a dry tree.

Make a Fresh Cut

Cutting the end off the trunk is critical to opening up the veins that will deliver water to the branches, Andy says. “Many places selling Christmas trees will cut your tree and place it in your compost pile or through a chipper to make mulch. If you don’t have a use for it, drop it off at a Christmas tree recycling location near you.”

For more information go to www.campbellsnursery.com or find a local Christmas tree farm at www.nebraskachristmastreegrowers.com.

Know Your Trees

The variety and popularity of Christmas trees varies geographically. Here are a few that you should consider when finding the right Christmas tree.

Scotch Pine

A popular tree in the Midwest is the hardy Scotch pine. This pine has a dark green color and stiff branches that won’t buckle under heavy lighting and ornaments.

Balsam or Frasier Fir

To many the classic Christmas tree is usually a Balsam or Frasier fir They have a deep green color, excellent needle retention, and are one of the most fragrant of all the Christmas trees.

Douglas Fir

Another popular choice is the Douglas fir. It’s pithy in shape, with a paler green color, and soft needles—which make it child friendly. However, the limbs are a bit dainty and will bend under heavy ornaments.

White Pine

The white pine is a basic, inexpensive pine and one of the most popular Christmas trees, and with soft needles could be safer around small children.

Blue Spruce

The Colorado blue spruce is a local favorite. It has a rounded pyramid shape, which gives it a very full appearance. It is fragrant but has sharp needles, and a silvery or bluish color. The narrow, pyramidal shape makes it a Christmas tree favorite.
How the Holidays Can Affect Your Credit Score

Holidays can bring joy and happy memories, but they also can mean problems ahead for your credit score. Your credit score is a three-digit number that estimates how likely you are to pay debt as agreed. A good credit score is the key to a strong financial future.

Farm Bureau Bank recommends following these four tips this holiday season to keep your credit score in good standing:

1. **Watch your balances** – Paying your bills on time and keeping your credit card balance 30% under your limit is important for maintaining a good credit score.

2. **Stay away from store cards** - When a sales clerk cheerfully asks if you’d like to save 20% on your purchases today, it’s good practice to smile back and say, “No, thanks.” Store credit cards tend to have high interest rates, making them an expensive way to shop.

3. **Use reminders to avoid late payments** – A late payment fee is bad enough, but paying more than 30 days late will really bruise your credit. Your payment history has the biggest influence on your credit score and the negative mark can stay on your credit report for up to seven years.

4. **Check it twice, for fraud** - Go online at least once a week to check your credit card accounts, making sure all charges look familiar. You may want to consider checking your accounts more often during the holiday season when fraud traditionally increases. Don’t forget, you can receive your free annual credit report at www.annualcreditreport.com.

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The holidays are upon us – and many people are concerned with the expense that comes with the season of giving. Using the following holiday savings tips can help you avoid debt this year — and the stress that comes with it.

1. Go potluck style.
If you’re wondering how to save money on food during the holidays, look no further. Asking everyone to bring a dish can help you get around the huge grocery bill that often comes with hosting. Of course, if cooking is part of the fun for you, let guests pitch in with the extras like cocktail fixings, desserts or appetizer trays.

2. Get creative with gifting.
Find ways to minimize the hit to your bank account when it comes to gift-giving at gatherings. Strategies like Secret Santa work great for the office party as well as get-togethers with your extended family. Do the same with your group of friends and just enjoy the experience of hanging out.

3. Make a list … and check it twice.
For the gifts you must buy, make a plan. Think of the items you want to buy for loved ones. Then do your research online to see where and when you can get the best deal.

4. Embrace the small business.
Instead of buying the latest gadget for someone, explore local boutiques on Small Business Saturday. You might find a piece of artisan jewelry, an eco-friendly bath product or a hand-stitched backpack.

5. Use DIY decor.
Instead of splurging on new items, think of free ways to jazz up your home. If it’s in your wheelhouse, get on Pinterest and have fun creating DIY projects like pine cone wreaths or tree ornaments.

The holidays are a fun and exciting time. Don’t let budget concerns put a damper on your holiday enjoyment. Your Farm Bureau agent has budgeting tips that you can use now or any time throughout the year.
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