

Once-in-a-Lifetime Trip for One Teen!

One lucky Wood County EC teen will win an all-expense-paid trip to our nation's capital to experience a guided tour of Washington, D.C., from June 13-21. WCEC is calling all eligible teens, high school students enrolled as a sophomore, junior or senior, to apply for the 48th Annual Government-in-Action Youth Tour. The trip will include airfare, transportation while in Washington, hotel rooms, food costs and tours of many exciting, educational and inspiring sites. Parents or guardians will be responsible for transporting the teen to and from Irving.

It's simple to enter. Candidates must submit a 450- to 500-word essay (about one typed page), which will be judged by an independent panel. This year's topic is devoted to "Life Before Rural Electricity." Essayists should write about the value that electricity brought to the rural farmers of the 1930s. The essays will be judged on composition, neatness, originality and knowledge of the subject.

The winner will travel with students from across Texas to Washington, D.C. This group will ultimately join approximately 1,200 other Youth Tour participants from across the country. This tremendous learning opportunity will include tours of Mount Vernon, the Smithsonian museums, a boat cruise on the Potomac River and visits to other historical sites and memorials. Additionally, one day will be dedicated to congressional visits and Capitol tours.

For more information about the tour and to see pictures and videos from past annual tours, visit youthtour.org.

2013 Eligibility and Rules

Submit an essay, not to exceed 500 words, that describes "Life Before Rural Electricity."

Essays should be mailed to:
Wood County Electric Cooperative, Inc.
Attention: Youth Tour 2013
P.O. Box 1827
Quitman, TX 75783

▶ Essays must arrive at WCEC on or before February 28, 2013. Entries received after that date will be disqualified.

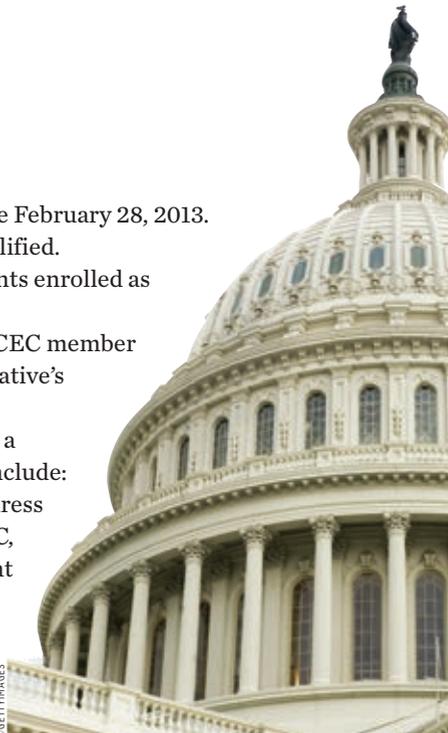
▶ The contest is open to high school students enrolled as sophomores, juniors or seniors.

▶ Contestants must be dependents of a WCEC member with permanent resident status in the cooperative's service area.

▶ No name should appear on the essay. On a separate cover sheet, the contestant should include: Student essayist name and age, name and address of parent/guardian who is a member of WCEC, contact telephone number and WCEC account number.

▶ Reference materials from various sources including libraries and the Internet may be used. However, the essay should be in the student's own words.

GETTY IMAGES



ISTOCKPHOTO

Even the simplest repair can go dangerously awry if you don't do it safely.

DIY? HERE'S THE

4-1-1

Working with electricity requires thorough planning and extreme care, and cutting corners can be a costly and dangerous mistake. Whether you are a first-time do-it-yourselfer or a "weekend warrior," practicing safe habits can prevent electrical fires, injuries and fatalities.

The best way to protect your family and your home against the risk of electrical fires or electrocution is to hire a qualified, licensed electrician to perform any electrical work. If you do decide to undertake a home electrical project yourself, consider the following safety tips:

- ▶ Make an effort to learn about your home electrical system so that you are able to safely navigate and maintain it.
- ▶ Never attempt a project that is beyond your skill level. Know when to call a professional.
- ▶ Always turn off the power to the circuit that you plan to work on by switching off the circuit breaker.
- ▶ Test the wires with a voltage meter before you touch them to make sure that the power has been turned off.
- ▶ Be sure to unplug any lamp or appliance before working on it.
- ▶ Use a ground-fault circuit interrupter with every power tool to protect against electric shock.
- ▶ Never stand on damp ground when working directly on or near electricity.
- ▶ Always have your work inspected upon completion to ensure that it has been done correctly.

Move Your Furniture, Save Energy

If you feel a draft while you're curled up on the sofa with a good book or your favorite TV show, don't crank up the thermostat. Move the sofa.

The chilliest places in your home during the winter are right next to the windows. So move your furniture away from them.

Here are six other ways to stay warm by rearranging the furniture when it gets cold outside:

1. Locate your bookcases against an outside wall, and fill them with as many books as you can. The wood, paper and cardboard will absorb some of the cold air that seeps through the walls so it won't make it into your heated room.

2. Similarly, hanging your favorite quilt or tapestry on an exterior wall will help keep heat indoors and the cold from seeping into the room.

3. Find the air-supply and return registers in every room. Sometimes they are on walls, and sometimes they are on the floor. Move furniture and carpet away from floor registers and scoot bookshelves far from wall grids so your furnace gets the air-flow it needs to operate efficiently. And if you've covered an ugly wall register with a poster or painting, it's got to go. That register needs to "breathe" for your heating and cooling systems to work properly.

4. Likewise, clear sofas, chairs, beds and carpets away from heating vents. Fabric-covered furniture will not only block the stream of warm air from reaching the rest of the room, but it can also absorb the heat.

5. Your computer, TV and lamps generate some heat while they're turned on, so take advantage of it. Move those electric appliances away from exterior walls so the warm air the devices generate won't exit through the walls. Also, move those pieces away from your thermostat. The extra heat can trick the thermostat into cycling the furnace off, even though the rest of the house feels cold.

6. When it's sunny outside, open the blinds and drapes so the outdoor warmth can flood your room. But on cloudy days and after dark, keep windows covered. The fabric will help keep your heated air indoors.

Did you know books are good for your mind and your pocketbook? Having full bookshelves on outside walls actually adds insulation value to your home. Replacing sheer curtains with heavy, lined drapes can also act as insulation, reducing the effect of outside temperatures indoors.



Wood County Electric Cooperative

501 S. Main St. • P.O. Box 1827
Quitman, TX 75783

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Charles and Barbara Delker grow delicious tomatoes and pick them at the peak of ripeness to offer the most flavorful fruit to people who shop at the Garden Valley Farm Store.

A Slice *of* Summer

BY PAIGE EATON

As February blusters in, the taste of a vine-ripened summer tomato is but a distant memory for most—but not in the midst of the gentle slopes and dales of East Texas in Garden Valley.

A one-stop-sign crossroads community, Garden Valley is mostly known for its quiet beauty and beautiful vistas. It's also known as the home of several large ministries for missionary and youth work. And now, you readers will know a secret about Garden Valley that the locals know.

It's also, delightfully, the home of the fat, juicy, bright-red tomato that's been handpicked at its peak. But peak time for these tomatoes happens to be smack-dab in the middle of the winter and the cooler spring months.

As many know, tomatoes naturally only grow in the warm months. So how, you might ask, does that magic happen? Well, it's with a little bit of science, a measure of design, and a whole lot of work by two industrious greenhouse farmers.

Barbara and Charles Delker are those farmers. Originally

from Kansas, near Wichita, the Delkers met at church and married when she was 17 and he was 20. Throughout their married life and Charles' career as an aviation mechanic with Boeing and Braniff, they've lived and worked in Denver, New York, Austin and Dallas. In 1968, Charles started work at Eastman Kodak and traveled to East Texas for training and service calls. From his trips through, he said "I was taken with the area." Barbara, who is the easygoing kind, was agreeable, saying, "I liked the idea of living out." And, she laughed about their eventual small business by adding a caveat, "But ... not necessarily the farming part."

It was 1983, with their three children grown, when they built their current house in Garden Valley in Smith County. It sits on more than 30 acres, and it came with a peach orchard and the



The Delkers' Garden Valley tomato and cucumber plants reach skyward, eventually growing to their full potential length of 30 feet.

Delkers soon added blueberries. Charles, along with his oldest son Chris, worked the land and started growing strawberries, too, but the same thing that made the land so appealing, the sloping and rolling ground, also caused farming to be rather difficult. Charles said the difficulties of trying to plow and lay ground-cover on the uneven land was a big factor in his eventual decision to put in greenhouses, which he built himself.

When they started their greenhouse venture in 2003, Chris and Charles began tomato farming in earnest.

"It's an area that has always intrigued me," Charles said of farming, "and I'm sort of the restless kind. It's a combination of the mechanics of doing it, the science, and the sense of accomplishment of starting with a tiny seed and in four months having a vine that is over 8 feet tall. And then, you are selling fruit off of it."

Chris has since left full-time farming but does sometime come out on the weekends, or when he is able, to help with the operation. But now, the bulk of the work falls to Charles, with help from Barbara.

The Delkers use hydroponics to grow their plants. In nature, soil acts as a reservoir for the nutrients and minerals that plants need. But the soil is actually not necessary for the plants. The nutrients are the important part. In hydroponics, the nutrients are added to a plant's water supply, and many types of plants are

suitable for this technique.

The Delkers plant their tomatoes (and now cucumbers, too) in perlite. The tomatoes are fed a very controlled mix of nutrients to ensure continued vigorous growth of both the plant and the fruit. This food is all delivered through a directed irrigation system that Charles has designed. In addition, the climate is also extremely important and continuously monitored to ensure that the temperature inside the houses never reaches less than 60 degrees.

When the Delkers' tomato house is full, there are more than 600 plants in there. Eventually, and amazingly, each vine will grow to be up to 30 feet long. To accommodate the plants, each one grows vertically, about 6 feet up, along a string. That string slides along a rod that runs the length of the greenhouse. Once the tomato plant grows tall enough to reach near the rod, the string is let out and moved horizontally along the rod to accommodate the growth.

As the plant grows longer and longer, the tomatoes on the bottom of the vine ripen first. Those are then harvested while the vine continues to grow. And the Delkers, inch by inch, lower and lean the plant to make way for the new growth. As they pluck the fruit from the bottom of the vine, they also remove the leaves, so all the nutrients from the irrigation process go directly to the part of the plant that is producing fruit. This always keeps the last part, or newest part of the vine in a vigorous state. Charles says, "If you

control the nutrient level very tightly, you can have a direct and major impact on the quality of the fruit."

While the greenhouse and hydroponics help control features of the environment, such as food intake and temperature, there are still a few other aspects of nature that the Delkers must tend to. For a plant to bear fruit, it must be pollinated. And while tomatoes do have their own male and female organs, they still need a little help from the wind or insects to shake enough pollen to offer sufficient pollination of the flowers. So the Delkers use a small electronic tool that gently vibrates. To pollinate, they pick a time when the humidity is not too high, so the pollen will shed easily. Then, they gently touch the vibrating tool to the plant to send bits of pollen to each tomato flower's stigma, which will eventually produce a tomato.

But, just like outdoors, problems of nature can creep in, even in a controlled greenhouse environment. These include white flies, aphids and spider mites, which can cause much damage to a tomato crop. The Delkers, rather than use pesticides, like to use the more natural approach. While they are not an organic operation (because they use fertilizers), their fruit and vegetables are pesticide-free. To rid of pests, they turn to natural controls, including such measures as releasing small parasitic wasps into the greenhouse. These wasps, which are only about the size of a gnat, are the natural predators of



In addition to designing and building the greenhouses, Charles Delker also designed a special air system to keep his plants happy. Warm air blows along the “feet” of the plants and rises under the canopy to gently warm the plants.

aphids and white flies. They can usually quickly take care of any problems. In addition to the wasps, the Delkers also employ ladybugs to help when needed.

One other technique (this one developed by Charles) is something he’s done to help keep his plants just a little bit happier. In many greenhouses, heated air blows down on the plants to keep them warm. Charles has developed a plenum to offer a more direct heat source that blows on the roots of the plants, and then the warm air rises, flowing under the canopy of the plants.

While in most of this article we’ve celebrated the tomato, the Delkers also grow two varieties of cucumbers, a European and an Israeli, in their greenhouse. These were developed for greenhouses in Holland and have thinner skins than the more commonly found cucumber, and the Delkers say they are just as delicious. And in a separate greenhouse, the Delkers are hydroponically growing three varieties of lettuce. Once the summer months are upon us, they will also sell their orchard-grown blueberries and locally grown peaches.

Many of the Delkers’ techniques are those used by standard greenhouse growers. But most will agree that even so, most greenhouse-grown off-season tomatoes are just never as good as a summertime fruit. But the Delkers’ tomatoes have become a well-known exception. Charles says, “A lot of people have told me that they have never tasted a better tomato.” Much of

that comes from the careful balancing during the growing process. But, as important as that all is, Charles says the main thing is to not pick the tomato before it’s ripe. For transport to groceries and markets, most growers must pick their tomatoes just as they begin or even before they turn red, so they will be firm for transport. These will continue to color and soften off of the vine, but the sugars and acids that flavor the fruit will not intensify after picking. These tomatoes just won’t taste as good as those left to ripen on the vine and picked right at their prime. Vine-ripened tomatoes are also softer so they can become bruised or damaged in transport. That’s why they remain somewhat elusive.

However, the Delkers’ tomatoes are always in demand. When Chris worked with his parents, they sold their tomatoes to Whole Foods in Dallas, but there was much extra work in transporting. Now that it’s just Charles and Barbara, they mostly sell their tomatoes at their Garden Valley Farm Store. The store itself is a pretty simple operation. They’ve built a small wooden store with easy access right on FM 16 in Garden Valley. What’s pretty amazing is that they run this store on the honor system.

Barbara says their trust is not misplaced: “98 percent of the people are honest, good people. We may lose a little, but with low overhead and the long store hours without paying someone to be there, we usually do OK.”



In addition to their coveted off-season tomatoes, the Delkers have added cucumbers and a variety of lettuce to their hydroponically greenhouse-grown produce.

She also said there was a notebook in the shop for people to leave questions or requests, but customers just started jotting down what they took and paid for automatically. She said it is very common to see a note that says, “I owe you \$4.” Or, even, “I overpaid by \$2 but will make up for it next visit.”

While Charles does most of the hard labor and the “engineering,” Barbara is just as involved with bookkeeping, and she also does a little pollinating, a little leaf pruning, some mowing and some store stocking.

When not involved in their farming work, Barbara enjoys reading, and Charles, an accomplished musician, enjoys building dulcimers and performing with them. They both enjoy spending time with their three grown children and two granddaughters.

In all, for a couple of “retired” people, the Delkers lead pretty full lives. And they look forward to serving their customers a little slice of summer. Charles says, “If you can work with nature rather than working against it, you will always have a better end result.” Whether you say to-MAY-toe or to-MAH-toe, Charles is right. A bite of a Garden Valley tomato could just make you want to go barefoot, even if it is only February.

The Delkers are members of Wood County Electric Cooperative and their Garden Valley Farm store is located at 21909 FM 16 West in Garden Valley. Call (903) 258-1288 with questions or visit their website at gardenvalleytomatoes.com.

