

# Transforming Touch

## *The Potter and the Wheel*

One could say that the career path that led Les Mitchell to becoming a master potter was shaped at an early age by both his environment and circumstances. His parents, Glynn and Ruth Mitchell, now of Mineola, were one major influence. Les says of growing up in Dallas' Oak Cliff that he was blessed with creative parents who

were both appreciators and producers of various art forms. So, when the Ideal Pottery Factory came up for sale, his parents bought it to help preserve the historic 1922 factory.

With his family's acquisition, Mitchell became interested in the "hows" of pottery making. So when his high school years approached, he

chased the muse and was accepted at Dallas' premier magnet school, Booker T. Washington High School for the Visual and Performing Arts. Here, he was exposed to many artistic pursuits, such as drawing and painting. He was even pretty active in dance, though he laughingly says today, "I still have two left feet." But, along with the toe tapping, this is also the place where he learned the basic techniques and began to feel drawn to pottery.

After high school, Mitchell apprenticed under Michael Obranovich. He attended Cedar Valley College, where he immersed himself in various pottery classes and developed his skill of throwing on the wheel. And, as a bonus, this is also where he met the love of his life, Muna, his wife of 25 years. Following Cedar Valley, he continued working under Randy Brodnax and Obranovich, learning and cultivating a fondness for a pottery glazing technique called raku.

In 1982, Mitchell opened his own Dallas studio and began to formulate his exclusive style. After 10 years, and building a successful following, Les and Muna felt a pull for the country life. Muna, who had grown up in the small town of Carthage, especially hoped for that type of childhood for their children, Abby, Sarah and Skylar. Together, as they'd visit Mineola, where Les' parents had a time-share, they started looking around for property. Initially, they looked near Edom and Van, but they also decided to see a place just outside Mineola. Les said when Muna saw it, "She just knew this was the place for us." So, 16 years ago they bought it, and Towne Potter Studio got a Mineola address. Since then, Les Mitchell's work has become nationally well known, and it is exhibited in art forums and galleries throughout the country.

Mitchell likes all the various types



**Les Mitchell enjoys hosting guests in his showroom, where there are examples of his many pottery and stoneware creations.**

of pottery techniques, but raku is his favorite. The process requires the pottery to be fired at an intense heat of 1,800 degrees. Still hot from the kiln, the pieces are then taken out and placed in a covered container filled with a combustible material. Mitchell mainly uses newspaper but has employed hay, leaves or other materials. Because the pottery is so hot when it's placed into the bed of materials, the materials immediately burst into flame. Those flames and smoke licking the glazed pottery, and the reaction of the powdered metals in the glaze, such as iron, copper, cobalt and tin, paint the pottery with brilliantly colored free-form designs as the oxides are pulled to the surface.

Mitchell says he really enjoys raku because the results are quite unpredictable. The artist has control of the form but not the glazed colors, which always burst forth as a unique surprise. When metal is used in the glaze, each piece is bold with variations of vibrant colors, much like a once-in-a-lifetime sunset captured in time. These particular pieces are not for the timid. However, if a collector is looking for more subtle raku, Mitchell also uses a crackle glaze with the raku process that leaves random impressions that trickle over the ceramic in random river-like patterns, etched into a solid-colored glaze like white or turquoise green.

Mitchell is also a master at another technique, called saggar, which also leaves much of the control of the decorations up to nature. In making a saggar piece, he takes a hot piece out of the kiln and lays it in a special container filled with combustible material

such as horse hair, wood chips or copper wire. Then, the whole shebang is put right back into the kiln. The combustible material sings, wiggles and scribbles intricate designs along the pottery's outer surface.

Traditional stoneware is another offering by this artist, and his pieces have amazing uniformity among the wheel-thrown bowls, cups, saucers and pitchers. Finished designs range from more abstract washes of color patterns, to florals such as morning glories and patriotic or Texas themes. Mitchell also makes larger companion pieces such as casserole dishes and crafts flat oblong and rectangular pieces using the "slam" technique, where he rolls out wet clay and throws it very hard into a form. This shapes and molds the clay, while giving it a uniform thickness. Then, he just cleans up any clay that overhangs the edge of the mold.

To market all of his fabulous wares takes quite an effort. Once a year, he attends a wholesale show in Philadelphia. This is where he connects with gallery and shop owners across the nation and picks up orders to fill for the year. He also attends regional art shows such as Edom's Art Festival and is represented in showrooms such as Frame Up in Mount Vernon and the Winnsboro Gallery in Winnsboro, as well as Mineola's Fall Farm Bed and Breakfast.

And then there are custom pieces. Ever thought of having a special memory commemorated in a very singular and inspired way? Back to the raku and saggar: Mitchell can use personal materials brought to him such as a few strands of mane from that favorite show horse, or the dried bouquet from



**Skylar Mitchell, Les' son, spends time after school helping his dad put finishing touches on many of the items that find their way to market.**

a special occasion, or maybe dried leaves from the old homestead or the feather found on a special day. These are just a few of the things he's willing to consider. However, he does stress that the process takes up to five firings in the kiln, and because he needs to fire things economically, he must have a full kiln. So, collectors thinking of a custom piece may need to plan a few months ahead or just give a gift certificate for the finished product.

For those who want to try a creative experience themselves, Mitchell also will be holding pottery lessons at his studio just outside Mineola. He'll teach both adults and children the art of throwing on the wheel and various glazing techniques. And, if you just want to see some beautiful things, and talk to the potter who makes them, you can visit his showroom.



**Depending on the process when using the raku technique, a simple bowl with a white crackle glaze can be as visually effective as its showier cousin with the peacock colors.**

*Les Mitchell and his Towne Potter Studio are served by Wood County Electric Cooperative. The studio is at 3475 CR 2330 in Mineola. Visits by appointment are best, and the telephone number is (903) 569-0203. Or, you can contact him via e-mail at [townepotter@suddenlink.net](mailto:townepotter@suddenlink.net) or see more of his work at [www.lesmitchell.com](http://www.lesmitchell.com).*



R.L. Winters' vision for his Hawkins vineyard and winery builds off the Texas wine legacy that began hundreds of years ago. He wants to offer jobs and add to the region's appeal.

## Fair Winters at Fairhaven

Nothing says winter—or “Winters” as the case may be—as much as the traditional poinsettia, and R.L. Winters & Co. makes it easy for local residents to deck the halls with Christmas cheer. This diverse Hawkins business has many irons in the fire with seven different divisions, all related to horticulture, and all branched out from the humble beginnings of a plant nursery.

Winters' Nursery was founded in 1996 after Connie and R.L. Winters moved to the region from Dallas. Their plant nursery still serves the retail market as it was set up to do, and unlike many regional plant businesses that are only open seasonally, Winters' Nursery is open all year. R.L. says they carry “one of the largest perennial assortments in the state,

with over 60 different varieties.” Now, with expansion into several other market areas, an overarching parent company, R.L. Winters & Co. has created various divisions with the help of Connie, who has degrees in horticulture, accounting and business.

In addition to the nursery division, there are now business divisions to support landscaping, irrigation, communications for remotely controlled irrigation, contractor building supplies and the newest venture, a vineyard and winery.

As for the nursery, the business can accommodate 186,000 containers in production, and it has everything from 95-gallon specimen trees to 4-inch ground cover. Most production takes place in one of five large greenhouses on the 50-plus-acre compound. As

Christmas approaches, the nursery will be the holding tank, if you will, for the phenomenal number of poinsettias that the business has shipped in to fill all of the commercial and home decorating deliveries.

R.L. says they handle approximately 4,800 poinsettias during each annual season and happily deliver any orders over 20 plants, but they also have many pickups by individuals and businesses. The poinsettia offers maximum show for a minimal investment, and R.L. ensures he acquires multistemmed plants with full bracts to sell in 4-inch and 10-inch pots. In addition to the red poinsettias, the business carries other colors including pink and white. And for playful and nontraditional Christmas decorations, he will also offer a fun new variety called Jingle

Bell that sports vibrant leaves that pass for white, pink and red variegated flowers. The business also stocks fresh evergreen wreaths as well as all the stems for do-it-yourselfers.

As the holiday season begins to wind down, R.L. also will be working toward beginning another phase of his life, as well as that of the business. He has plans for his son James, who is currently a working partner, to officially take over the nursery. That way, R.L. can devote his time and talents more fully to developing the vineyard and winery. To do that, he is earning a specialized associate's degree in enology and viticulture, the study of winemaking and grape growing, from Grayson Community College.

"I have always been looking for a way I could work with plants and conduct scientific research at the same time," R.L. said. With this latest venture, to coin a phrase, his life is a glass brimming over as another interest has come together for R.L.: his ability to incorporate a lifelong love of history into the science of his horticulture projects.

As background, R.L. explains, "very few people realize that at one time Texas' wine export was much larger than California's." Texas established vines hundreds of years before California, when in the 1650s, Franciscan priests planted vines for Eucharist. One of R.L.'s dreams is working toward preserving the Texas heritage of one of the oldest and most prolific grape-growing states.

In large part, that history all stems from the work of one man, Thomas V. Munson, who was an internationally respected horticulturist who moved to Denison, in 1876. Munson devoted his career to the collection, study and breeding of American native grapes. His interest was in breeding for high-quality juice while building a hardy plant stock that would have resistance to pests and disease but also be tolerant of high summer temperatures,

droughts and freezing winters. During his lifetime, he developed more than 300 varieties of grapes specifically suited to the American South and Southwest.

Munson is also credited with saving the international wine industry by fighting an epidemic disease in the 19th century that nearly wiped out the world's vineyards. He did this through grafting European and Texas stock to develop resistant rootstock. This contribution to the industry earned him world acclaim and the highest honors from the French government. But, what most people are not aware of is



**Winters' Nursery will handle almost 5,000 poinsettias for the holiday season and will feature red, traditional and a newer speckled variety called Jingle Bell.**

that because of his work, grape rootstocks used throughout the world today originated from Texas native grape plants that Munson developed. But, even with all of this groundbreaking agricultural work, the winemaking industry fell out of favor in 1930s Texas when Prohibition came along. The industry did not return with any great interest until the 1970s.

In building his vineyard, R.L.'s main interest lies in Munson's historic Texas work with a focus on American hybrid grapes. To date, R.L. says, "We believe we now have the largest collec-

tion of Munson hybrids in the United States with over 2,000 vines." And, he also is convinced, after years of his own study and experiments, he can also reconstruct some lost varieties.

Even with the high-level science, the history and the labor-intensive agricultural work, R.L.'s winemaking and marketing vision is clear. He wants to introduce the world to the original American hybrids, and he's already planning how he will do that. Because of the remarkable American historical appeal, he plans to have a label called the Heritage series of wines, and he believes it will help revolutionize the Texas wine industry.

His Fairhaven Vineyard already has 11 developed acres of vines and is expanding. "First crush," or production of wine, will begin in July 2009, and it's expected to yield about 5,000 gallons of juice. Ultimately, R.L. expects to produce about 19,800 bottles of wine a year.

And just in time for next year's Christmas season, the Fairhaven winery and tasting facility is expected to open. R.L.'s main goal, in addition to providing good local jobs and a superior product, is to enhance the region. He says, "One of the things we wanted in the Hawkins area is a nice subdued place—an integral part of what you call the good life."

They plan to build a place to seat about 80 and will host wedding and corporate receptions along with wine tastings. So, if you want to raise a glass of Christmas cheer, Fairhaven winery can help you set the tone. Or if your mind is simply on decking your own halls, the humble Winters' Nursery, which was the catalyst to establish all of the other thriving enterprises, can help in that regard.

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*Served by Wood County Electric, R.L. Winters & Co., LLC, is at 5362 S. FM 2869, Hawkins, TX 75765. They can be contacted at (903) 769-3214 or by e-mail to Office Manager Cortney Barton at [cbarton@suddenlinkmail.com](mailto:cbarton@suddenlinkmail.com).*

# Have a Jolly and Safe Holiday Season

**D**ecorating the home for the holiday season is a great tradition, but an essential part of stringing the lights and putting up the tree is keeping an eye on electrical safety. Here are simple steps that everyone can take to enjoy a safe and happy holiday season.



**Carefully checking (and untangling) every string of lights before you hang them is an important safety step.**

**DON'T OVERLOAD YOUR ELECTRIC CIRCUITS.** Check fuses or circuit-breaker panels to see what your home can handle and stay well within the limits.

**AVOID PUTTING TOO MANY STRINGS OF LIGHTS TOGETHER** and plugging them into a single outlet.

**WATCH FOR FLICKERING LIGHTS,** sparks from appliances or wall outlets, warm switchplates, plugs or outlets, and dimming lights or TV screens. These signal potential danger spots that could cause an electrical fire.

**MAKE SURE THERE'S A BULB IN EACH SOCKET.** If a bulb is burned out, leave it in until you have a replacement. Immediately replace any broken bulbs that have exposed filaments.

**USE ONLY UL-LISTED EQUIPMENT.** Check for frayed cords, cracked insulation and damaged plugs.

**SURGE PROTECTOR STRIPS ARE A SAFE OPTION** if you need more outlets.

**MATCH PLUGS WITH OUTLETS.** Never force a three-pronged plug into a two-hole outlet or extension cord.

**DON'T RUN EXTENSION CORDS UNDER RUGS,** around furniture legs or across doorways.

**USE SAFETY CAPS TO COVER OUTLETS.** If you have children in the house or are expecting young visitors, inspect your home for cracked or missing outlet covers.

**KEEP YOUR NATURAL TREE WELL WATERED** to prevent bulbs from igniting dry branches. Check to make sure an artificial tree is nonflammable.

**FASTEN OUTDOOR LIGHTS SECURELY** to trees, house walls or other firm supports using insulated staples, or run them through hooks to protect lights from wind damage. Do not nail, tack, pinch, nick or stress wiring.

**OUTDOOR LIGHTING SHOULD HAVE INSULATED ELECTRICAL CORDS** and be plugged into a ground-fault circuit interrupter-protected receptacle only. Keep all plugs and connectors off the ground, away from puddles and snow.

**NEVER USE ELECTRIC LIGHTS ON A METALLIC TREE.** The tree can become charged with electricity from faulty lights, and a person touching a branch could be electrocuted. Instead, place colored spotlights beside or above the tree.

**NEVER USE LIGHTED CANDLES ON A TREE** or near other evergreens. Always use nonflammable holders and place candles where there is no risk of them being knocked down.

## Is Your Home Bundled Up for Winter?

### *Proper Insulation Is Key to Efficiency*

One of the simplest ways to reduce your home's heating and cooling costs—and improve comfort—involves installing proper insulation. Doing so provides resistance to heat flow. The more heat-flow resistance your insulation provides, the lower your heating and cooling costs.

Heat flows naturally from a warmer to a cooler space. In winter, heat moves directly from heated living spaces to adjacent unheated areas and even outdoors. It can also travel indirectly through interior ceilings, walls and floors—wherever there is a difference in temperature.

To maintain comfort, heat lost in the winter must be replaced by your heating system. Proper insulation decreases heat loss.

Heat flow resistance is measured or rated in terms of its R-value. The higher the R-value, the greater the insulation's effectiveness.

When calculating the R-value of multilayered insulation, add R-values of individual layers. Installing more insulation in your home increases the R-value.

The effectiveness of insulation also depends on how and where it's installed. For example, insulation that gets compressed will not provide its full rated R-value. The overall R-value of a wall or ceiling will be somewhat different from the R-value of the insulation because some heat flows around the insulation through studs and joists. Therefore, it's important to properly install your insulation to achieve the maximum R-value.

# WOOD COUNTY ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE TO DISBURSE \$1 MILLION IN CAPITAL CREDIT CHECKS

The Wood County Electric Cooperative Board of Directors unanimously voted to retire \$1 million in capital credits for 2008. That means WCEC will return \$1 million to members. The board's policy is to annually review financial ratios, system growth and interest rates to determine whether any credit retirements can be paid to members. The annual amount allocated to each member is revenue over expenses, and each account will be credited with .0417 or 4.17 percent of WCEC's total margins for 2007.

Checks will be mailed no later than

December 14. Check amounts will be different for each member, based on that member's accumulated patronage. They represent each member's ownership stake in the cooperative. Those with higher electricity usage and longer memberships will receive larger checks, and these checks can range anywhere from \$10 upward.

However, no checks for less than \$10 will be sent out. Any amount less than \$10 will be retained by the cooperative for disbursement the next time capital credits are retired and the amount the member has accrued exceeds the \$10 minimum.

Usually, it takes new members several years to build up enough credit for an amount sufficient for a check to be generated. So, it is important to note that not all members will receive a check. Other reasons members may not receive a check include debt owed or insufficient address information. Those believing they should have received a check, but did not, should call the cooperative after January 1 to make an inquiry.

Members wanting to inquire about their capital credit balance may call the cooperative between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. weekdays at (903) 763-2203.



*Blessed is the season which  
engages the whole world  
in a conspiracy of love.*

Hamilton Wright Mabie

**BEST WISHES**  
for a merry Christmas  
and a joyous holiday season from  
Wood County Electric Cooperative

Our offices will be closed December 24-25  
and January 1 in observance of the holidays.