The last of the Christmas tree needles have been vacuumed out of the carpet. The holiday lights have been taken down and are stored for another year. So what is next? Tax season.

Tax payers should have received their W-2s by the end of January, so it is time to get prepared.

One of the first things consumers need to do to prepare for tax season is get organized, said Sissy Osteen, Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension resource management specialist.

"Start digging around in the drawers and shoeboxes to gather up all of your receipts," Osteen said. "Be sure to include medical bills, child care receipts and other eligible expenses that you can deduct. To get a jump start for the 2009 tax season, go ahead and set up folders now while you’re organizing all of your 2008 information. By doing so, you will save yourself a lot of time and aggravation next tax season."

It is no secret that the stock market has taken a tumble over the last several months. Individuals who have stocks that are worthless can sell them now and claim up to $3,000 personal loss on their 2008 tax return. Be sure to check with a Certified Financial Planner® or Registered Investment Advisor to make sure the stocks are worthless.

There is great news for first-time home buyers who fall within a specified income range. Those who purchased a home April 8 or after can qualify for a $7,500 tax credit. Those who qualify are individuals with an income of $75,000 or less, or couples making $150,000 or less. This credit is for actual taxes owed. This credit, which is interest free, must be repaid over 15 years or when the house sells. Repayment begins two years after the home is purchased.

"The house must be a person’s or couple’s principle residence and it is for first-time buyers only," she said. "It’s basically an interest free loan from the federal government. After two years in your home you start paying back the tax credit at a rate of $500 per year, or $41.67 per month. While the credit must be repaid, $7,500 is a good amount of money to claim this year. New homeowners are able to file this credit on their federal tax return."

For those who sell the home before the credit is repaid, the balance is due at the time of the sale.
For those who sell the home before the credit is repaid, the balance is due at the time of the sale. New homeowners who exceed the income limitations may be able to qualify for partial credit.

Osteen said taxpayers can contribute to an IRA until April 15 and deduct it on their 2008 returns.

"Something else to keep in mind is your modified adjusted gross income for next year," she said. "Come up with strategies that can help you lower your taxable income."

A flexible spending plan is a great way to reduce taxable income. Flex money is deducted before taxes and can be used for out-of-pocket expenses such as medical deductibles, co-pays, over-the-counter medication, eyeglasses and other allowable expenses.

"One thing to keep in mind is if your tax issues are complicated, or if you're not sure what tax credits you qualify for, it's very important to see a tax professional," Osteen said. "Even though it costs money to see a professional, you could likely make that money back through deductions that you would have otherwise overlooked."

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**Slow Cooker Meals Require Proper Food Safety**

At any time of the year, a slow cooker can make life a little less hectic because by planning ahead, you save time later.

The direct heat from the pot, lengthy cooking time and steam created within a tightly covered container combine to destroy bacteria and make a slow cooker a safe process for cooking foods.

Arriving home after a long day at the office and smelling the wonderful aroma of a home cooked meal can be a great feeling, especially knowing that there will be little prep work to complete before putting the meal on the table.

Slow cookers generally use less electricity than an oven. In addition, the low heat helps less expensive, leaner cuts of meat become tender and shrink less.

Start with a clean cooker, clean utensils and a clean work area. Perishable items should be kept refrigerated until ready to use.

Foods should be cut into chunks or small pieces to ensure thorough cooking. If meat and vegetables are cut up in advance, store them separately in the refrigerator. Also, it's not a good idea to use the slow cooker for large pieces of meat such as a roast or whole chicken because the food will cook so slowly it could remain in the "danger zone" too long.

Keep in mind that foods take different times to cook depending on the setting used. If possible, turn the cooker to the highest setting for the first hour, and then adjust to a lower setting for the remainder. It is safe to cook foods on low the entire time. This is handy for those who may need to start the cooking process as they leave for work.

Do not use a slow cooker to reheat leftovers. However, cooked food can be brought to steaming on the stovetop or oven, then put into a pre-heated slow cooker to keep hot for serving.

To check your slow cooker's ability to reach and maintain a safe temperature to kill bacteria, fill it two-thirds full with water. Cover the cooker and turn temperature setting on high. Use a thermometer to check the temperature of the water two hours later. If the temperature is 160°F. or higher, the cooker is safe to use.
Apple Salsa with Cinnamon Chips

Salsa
2 apples, tart, medium, chopped
1 cup strawberries, chopped
2 Kiwi, medium, peeled, chopped
1 orange, small (used for zest and juice)
2 Tablespoons brown sugar
2 Tablespoons apple jelly, melted

Chips
8 whole wheat tortillas
1 Tablespoon water or cooking spray
1/2 cup sugar
2 Tablespoons cinnamon

Directions
1. In a bowl combine apples, strawberries and kiwi.
2. Grate orange, using the zest from the entire orange.
3. Squeeze juice from orange. Add peel and juice to apple mixture.
4. Stir in brown sugar and jelly.
5. For the chips, brush tortillas lightly with water or cooking spray. Combine sugar and cinnamon. Sprinkle over tortillas.
6. Cut each tortilla into 8 wedges. Place in a single layer on ungreased baking sheet.
7. Bake at 400 degrees, for 6-8 minutes or until lightly browned. Cool and serve with salsa.

Nutrition information: 160 calories, 1 g fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 170 mg sodium, 43 g carbohydrates, 5 g dietary fiber, 4 g protein.

Source: Chickasaw Nation Nutrition Services.

Cheese Straws

Ingredients
1 1/2 cup cheddar cheese, grated, low fat
4 Tablespoons margarine
3/4 cup all purpose flour
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes
4 Tablespoons evaporated milk, skim

Directions
1. Preheat oven to 350 F degrees.
2. In a bowl combine cheese, margarine, flour, salt and red pepper and mix until it resembles coarse crumbs.
3. Add evaporated milk and stir until dough forms a ball.
4. On a lightly floured surface, using a rolling pin, roll dough into an 8 x 10-inch rectangle that is 1/8 inch thick.
5. With a sharp knife, cut dough into long, thick strips, 1/4 to 1/3-inch wide (dipping the knife in flour after every few inches ensures a clean cut).
6. Gently transfer the strips to an ungreased cookie sheet. The straws can be any length.
7. Bake the straws for 12-15 minutes, or until ends are starting to brown.

Nutrition information per straw: 25 calories, 1 g fat, 5 mg cholesterol, 75 mg sodium, 2 g carbohydrates, 0 g dietary fiber, 1 g protein.

Source: Chickasaw Nation Nutrition Services.
Experience the Past in Route 66 — Southwest District
Meeting — Oklahoma Home & Community Education
March 24, 2009—Elk City, OK
First Baptist Church, 1600 W. Country Club
Registration is due by February 23 to Peggy Howard;
1613 North Judy; Purcell, OK 73080.

Registration opens at 8:00 a.m. with light refreshments.
Business meeting will begin in the church auditorium at
9:00 a.m. There will be special seating for award nominees,
voting delegates and 50+ members. We will not be pre-
registering for workshops this year. Attendance in work-
shops will be determined by size of the room and attendance will be deter-
mined on a first come-first serve basis. The luncheon meal will be catered
by Klein's Catering.

There will be an activity the evening before at the Old Town Museum at
2717 West Third Street in Elk City. The event is free to all who wish to
attend. Please note on the registration form which of your members will
also attend the event on March 23rd. The Elk City Chamber of Com-
erce Tourism Department is sponsoring this event. You may tour the
museum complex from 1:00-5:00 p.m. on Monday evening and then at
5:00 p.m. we will move to the Opera House for light refreshments and
to be entertained by a cowboy poet and singer. The reception will end
around 6:30 p.m.

The designated hotel for the event is the Holiday Inn located on Hwy 6
just south of the I-40 exit 38 in Elk City. Upstairs double rooms are
$95.00, downstairs rooms are $105.00 and Atrium Rooms are $114.00.
Phone 580-225-6637. Other area hotels: Ramada Inn, 580-225-8140,
Other than the B&B all the hotels are near the same exit off of I-40. The
Best Western, 580-225-2331, is located near the museum complex on West
Third Street.

Workshops will include the usual officer and membership sessions and
also: Quilt as You Go; Style for Seniors; Sewing Updates; Diabetic Cooking;
Ebay 101; Route 66 History; Wind Energy; Cheyenne-Arapaho Cultures;
Oklahoma Food Co-Op; History of Quilts; Birds and Butterflies; Fun with
Fondue; Container Gardening; Plants and Trees for the Southwest; Parlia-
mentary Procedure; Antiques; Photography; Cancer Patient Resources plus
the District Leader Lesson, "Money on the Bookshelf".

Please join us for a great time!
Operation Christmas Report

Operation Christmas 2008 was successful, thanks in part to McClain County OHCE. The number of people assisted included 763 total persons and 467 children. One hundred eighty-eight food baskets were given out.

For 2009, groups are asked to provide the following items:

- Blanchard: Games
- Cole: Books for ages 8-Up
- Stealey: Books for ages Baby-7
- Town & Country: Toothpaste

Leaders' Lesson February 19

The March Leaders’ Lesson will be *Vacations Close to Home* taught by Mickey Simpson. The lesson will be held in Room 111 at the Courthouse beginning at 1:30 p.m.

Leaders’ Lesson Scheduled March 19

The April Leaders’ Lesson will be taught on March 19, 1:30 p.m., in Room 111 at the Courthouse. The lesson on *Grief* will be taught by Phillis Cothren, Extension Educator, Garvin County.

Military Care Kits Available

The postal service has a Military Care Kit they provide free of charge. It includes a box, address label and custom forms. To get a Kit, call 1-800-610-8734. It should arrive in 7-10 business days. The kits are for any branch of the military. They are “one price boxes”—whatever fits, regardless of weight. The rate is $2.00 less than domestic shipping.

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**Operation Christmas Tour, June 11, 2009**

**Date:** June 11, 2009

**Play:** Seven Brides for Seven Brothers

**Cost:** $63.00 – includes bus fare, play, dinner and tips.

We need 40 participants for the trip to make.

**Dinner:**
- Rib Eye Steak Sandwich
- Potato Salad, Baked Beans
- Corn on the Cobb, Tomato
- Onions and Peppers
- Ice Tea
- Mud Pie or Berries ‘N Cream

**Details:**
- Depart from Purcell – 3:00 p.m., United parking lot
- Depart from Goldsby – 3:15 p.m., Goldsby Baptist Church
- Return – Approximately 12:00 a.m.
- Break stop at McDonald’s on turnpike

**Deadline:** April 20, 2009

Mail payment and registration list to: Peggy Howard; 1613 Judy; Purcell, OK 73080

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![Seven Brides for Seven Brothers](image-url)
McClain County OHCE 2008 Award Recipients

Congratulations to our 2008 McClain County OHCE Award Recipients!

Heart of HCE Award
Anita Ballard,
Town & Country HCE.

Young Member Award
Jenifer Lanzarin,
Washington HCE.

Life Story Awards:
Mary Lou Frankenberg,
Town & Country HCE.
Martha Schrader,
Stealey HCE.

Photography Awards:
1st-Bonita Brakefield,
Stealey HCE.
2nd-Mary Lou Frankenberg,
Town & Country HCE.
3rd-Evelyn Ogden, Blanchard HCE.

Outstanding Club Awards:
1st-Cole HCE.
2nd-Stealey HCE.
3rd-Town & Country HCE.

Blanchard
Inez Vandaveer 23 years

Cole
JoAnn Wood 2 years

Stealey
Bonita Brakefield 13 years
Peggy Christian 17 years
Mary Garrett 58 years
Velma Little 58 years
Bonnie McCall 10 years
Martha Schrader 4 years

Town & Country
Peggy Howard 20 years
Bert Mathis 20 years
Kay West 17 years
Anita Ballard 6 years
Joyce Perry 3 years

Washington
Phyllis Linker 1 year
Mary Isbill 1 year
Barbara Maynard 1 year
Joan Parker 1 year
**McClain County O.S.U. Cooperative Extension Calendar**

**February, 2009**

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<td>Washington Busy HCE</td>
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<td>Town &amp; Country HCE (2:00 p.m.)</td>
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<td>Annie's Project, Pauls Valley, 1:00-4:00 pm</td>
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<td>Winter HCE Council, Purcell Fire Dept., 10:00 a.m.</td>
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<td>Stealey HCE Fair Board, Room 111, 7:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Cole HCE Annie's Project, 1:00-4:00 pm</td>
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<td>Holiday, office closed</td>
<td>Blanchard HCE Annie's Project, 1:00-4:00 pm</td>
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<td>Leaders' Lesson, Room 111, 1:30 p.m.</td>
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<td>District Council Registration Due</td>
<td>Annie's Project, 1:00-4:00 pm</td>
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<td>Co-Parenting Seminar, 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.</td>
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**McClain County Cooperative Extension O.S.U. Calendar**

**March, 2009**

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<td>Stealey HCE Fair Board, Room 111, 7 pm</td>
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<td>Blanchard HCE</td>
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<td>SW District OHCE, Elk City</td>
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<td>Home Buyers Education Class, 9:00 a.m., 1st American Bank, Purcell</td>
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February “Get Fresh” Program Dates

All of the following programs will be held at the Purcell Chickasaw Nation Nutrition Services:

- February 3, 7:00 p.m., *Comfort Foods*.
- February 6, 10:00 a.m. and 12:00 p.m., *Comfort Foods*.
- February 10, 7:00 p.m., *DASH Plan*.
- February 13, 10:00 a.m. and 12:00 p.m., *DASH Plan*.

State OHCE Cookbooks Available

We have 38 State OHCE Cookbooks (green) available in the office for sale at $10.00 each.