



: MELINDA MYERS

Buttonbush *Cephalanthus* has flowers that turn into spherical fruit that persist through winter.

North American native shrubs for the garden

By Melinda Myers

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Here are a few of the many North American shrubs you may want to include in your landscape.

As always, make sure each is suitable for the growing conditions, hardy for your location and will fit the available space once mature.

Support a wide range of pollinators and songbirds with buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*) which is native to much of North and Central America. It grows 5 to 8 feet tall, prefers full to part sun, moist to wet soil and is tolerant of heat and compaction. It is late to leaf out but your patience is rewarded when the 1-inch diameter, fragrant white flowers appear in summer, attracting a variety of pollinators. The flower heads mature to red and the round seed heads provide food for songbirds.

Consider including one or more of the North American native roses to your landscape. Look for those species native to your area and ones that complement your garden design. Grow them in a sunny location with plenty of space and good air circulation for the best flowering and fewest disease problems. Enjoy the flowers and many pollinators that visit and the colorful fruit (rose hips) that songbirds enjoy.

When looking for a drought tolerant shrub consider ninebark, *Physocarpus opulifolius*. Watch for white or pinkish flowers and visiting pollinators and songbirds dining on the seeds. Place the plant where you can appreciate the exfoliating bark which reveals layers of reddish to light brown inner bark and looks great against a winter sky. Hardy in zones 2 to 8, it prefers full sun in northern locations and benefits from a bit of afternoon shade in the south.

Plant common elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*) if you need a vigorous plant to control erosion, support pollinators and songbirds and naturalize large spaces. Hardy in zones 4 to 8, it tolerates both wet and dry soil and is often included in rain gardens. The fragrant white flowers appear in summer and are used to make elderflower water. The purple-black fruit is used to make jams, jellies and wine and is eaten by birds.

The fruit of another native elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*) is also black and not considered as tasty as those of the common elderberry. Always cook or ferment the fruit of both as eating uncooked fruit can cause nausea, diarrhea and vomiting. The flowers are edible and can be eaten raw or cooked.

Give elderberries plenty of space as they quickly grow and spread. Regularly remove suckers and seedlings if you need to contain the size of these vigorous plants.

Add year-round greenery along with shelter and food for songbirds by growing one of the North

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STOCK PHOTO

A study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association Pediatrics* found nearly on in five adolescents use chatbots for mental health advice.

How AI is changing and challenging healthcare

More people are consulting bots in place of physicians, therapists

By Cameron Williams

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Artificial intelligence is changing society and medicine.

A new study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association Pediatrics* shows that approximately one out of every five adolescents are resorting to chatbots for mental health advice. The research also indicates most don't tell anyone they are consulting AI.

Novant Health therapist Jaren Doby said while the overall number of people using chatbots can be alarming, understanding why it's being using it as well as listening to their concerns without judging is paramount.

"First and foremost, we have to understand and recognize that this is the technology age," he said. "AI is meeting a need. Young people can access these AI chatbots 24 hours a day. It's free, it's immediate and there is no fear of being judged in any way or ridiculed. Being available 24 hours, if

a teenager is up in the summer at 2 o'clock in the morning, they can just open an app and start talking to that instantly. And another thing we've found is that many feel that it is easier than telling a parent, friend or even therapist about how they are feeling."

While convenience is a pathway to using AI, Doby said there are limitations when it comes to getting real help to people.

"We have to remember that AI truly doesn't understand human suffering," he said. "Despite what you tell it, it cannot truly understand your history the way a human can. It doesn't recognize your body language and can't always flush through all the trauma that you've been through, your family dynamics or even understand risk level the way a trained professional can. So, it is important to be very careful with those limitations. I don't want to completely dump on it because I believe there are some benefits to AI, but it can put you in some hot

water in relation to its lack of understanding of human suffering."

There are other benefits to AI, Doby said.

"I honestly feel like AI can really help people organize their thoughts and learn coping skills, practice that self-reflection, and of course, being able to access that type of information immediately," he said. "The studies also are showing that ... 90%, if I'm not mistaken, of those young people in that age group find that advice somewhat or very helpful ... within that realm of the coping skills and organizing those thoughts and practicing self-reflection."

The JAMA findings also indicate that a higher percentage of females use AI as a means of mental health advice.

"Women are usually more comfortable in being able to express their emotions," Doby said. "It is why this is also a female-dominated industry. ... Then just with

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UV rays pose risks to skin of all types

By Jaslynn Vorachith

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

A hidden danger that the summer season can bring is sunburns and long-term effects of extended exposure to UV rays.

According to the Cleveland Clinic, "Multiple sunburns can lead to premature skin aging and skin cancer." No matter how much melanin you have, everyone is susceptible to sunburn.

A 2017 study published in *JAMA Dermatology* found that 78% of participants who spent three and a half hours under an umbrella had gotten sunburned, while 25% used only sunscreen. The clinical study states, "Neither shade nor sunscreen alone completely prevented sunburn."

According to the Cleveland Clinic, sunburn is caused by ultraviolet rays such as UVA and UVB, both of which can cause skin cancer. UVB are midday



ADOBE STOCK

Sun screen and hydration can limit the damage extended exposure to the sun's UV rays pose to skin.

burning rays, the most intense and quickest kinds of burns, which can cause melanoma over time. UVA is whenever you're in constant contact with light and with enough exposure, can lead to burns. These are often associated with basal cell and squamous cell car-

cinoma.

The UV Index is an important factor for sun safety. Levels of 10 are common in the summer and 11 or more is considered extreme. The United States Environmental Protection Agency advises staying indoors if levels

reach 11 or higher.

According to the World Health Organization, extreme UV levels can worsen due to climate change and ozone depletion, exposing us to more UV radiation and UVB, heightening risks of skin cancer and eye dis-

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« RIDES »

2026 Chevrolet Equinox checks the boxes as a fine and affordable SUV

By Winfred Cross

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

General Motors is America's largest car manufacturer and offers the very affordable like the Chevrolet Trax to the ridiculously expensive bespoke Cadillac Celestiq.

GM is really good at both ends of the spectrum, but it also doesn't neglect the middle, which is where lots of customers shop. The Chevy Equinox is part of that middle. It's a five-seat SUV that's also available in EV form, both of which are reasonably priced and offer comfort, type and value for the money.

The Equinox was redesigned in 2025 so there

isn't much new for 2026. The redesign made it much better-looking. The grille is bigger and more modern looking, and the rest of the truck looks more like the bigger vehicles in the lineup: lots of bold lines, squarer and wider.

The interior gets a massive overhaul. There are two 11-inch screens, the first being the gauge cluster or as Chevy call it a driver's information screen. This digital display can be reconfigured to prioritize the info the driver feels is most important.

The second screen is the touch screen that takes you through apps and the entertainment system. The screen also supports Apple

CarPlay and Android Auto. Both screens are bright, with modern graphics that are sharp and easy to see. The dash is covered in a soft-touch vinyl with chrome accents and chrome HVAC vents.

My test car was an ACTIV, which is designed to be more suited for wilderness driving. It came standard with AWD, all-terrain tires and 17-inch machined-faced aluminum wheels. The engine is a 1.5-liter turbo four-cylinder engine that makes 175 horsepower. A continuously variable transmission is standard, but the AWD calls for an eight-speed transmission that manages 203 pounds-feet of torque.



CHEVROLET

The 2026 Chevrolet Equinox blends off-road strength, seating for five and affordability in a gas- or electric SUV.

The Maple Sugar-colored interior goes well with the optional Radiant Red exte-

rior paint job. The front seats are ventilated and head and covered with

sueded microfiber and vinyl. Both seats are power

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How AI is changing and challenging healthcare

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that stereotype we see men aren't truly able to be vulnerable the same way women are and address their true feelings that they are experiencing on a daily basis. That is not shocking to me, to be quite honest with you when it comes to the numbers pertaining to males versus females using AI."
To prevent AI from being the sole tool in mental health consultation, Doby said it is important to listen to young people and not dismiss their feelings. They feel more comfortable talking about their emotions if they are made to feel like their feelings matter.
"First, we need to recognize the signs of someone's mental health declining," he said. "We often see changes before we hear about them. ... It is important for folks to just be

present, opening up and being like, 'Look, I've noticed you haven't seemed like yourself lately; how are you really doing?' Assuring them that they don't have to go through whatever it may be they are dealing with alone. The goal is to not have perfect words, but to create a safe space where someone feels comfortable being able to open up."
Doby believes AI can be a good tool if used properly.
"When it comes to technology and things like that, it isn't about fighting against it," he said. "It's about educating those that are around it about the proper uses of it. A misuse of anything is where we can fall into a dangerous spot. ... Our responsibility is to make sure that the technology components don't replace the human connection."

Chevrolet Equinox checks boxes as affordable SUV

Continued from page 1B
adjustable are very comfortable. There are multiple USB ports along with a wireless charging pad. There is some storage for smaller items and a fairly deep center armrest to put bigger items.
The rear bench seat is fairly comfortable and will accommodate three adults. Two would be the most comfortable. The bottom cushion has enough padding as does the back portion. There are USB ports and air vents as well.
The Equinox is a compact vehicle that performs about what you would expect. It accelerates nicely when you need to merge with traffic and pulls off briskly from a stop light. The steering feels a bit light but not overly boasted. I'd say 0-60 miles per hour is around the 8.0 second or maybe quicker.
The Equinox ACTIV is made more for off-roading driving but it's not bad on urban streets as long as the streets are smooth. Big bumps are transmitted into

the cabin when the vehicle bounces over those bumps. That's only over really large bumps, however. There is enough sound deadening material to keep the ride quiet. Overall, the vehicle is well above livable. Handling is good and predictable. There's body roll when cornering but nothing dramatic. It's easy to keep the vehicle centered when driving and the droves of safety equipment work well.
If you want the ACTIV trim, it starts at \$35,600. As tested with destination the price goes to \$41,480. That includes a panoramic sunroof, safety and tech package and the convenience package 3.
Pros:
· Plenty of room
· Lots of tech
· Comfortable, modern interior
· Fair price
· Updated styling
Cons:
· So-so fuel economy
· Average power output

5 North American native shrubs to cultivate for garden landscape

Continued from page 1B
American native junipers. They tolerate full sun and well drained to dry soil once established. Songbirds and small mammals feast upon their fleshy cones that have also been used to flavor gin and season some foods.
Check with your local garden centers and plant nurseries as more of them are selling native plant species. You will also find

Midwest Gardener's Handbook, 2nd Edition and Small Space Gardening. She hosts The Great Courses "How to Grow Anything" streaming courses and the nationally syndicated Melinda's Garden Moment TV & radio program. Myers is a columnist and contributing editor for Birds & Blooms magazine. Her website is www.MelindaMyers.com.

Summer UV rays pose health risks to skin of all types

Continued from page 1B
ease.
Healthcare providers group sunburn severity based on the three layers of skin that are affected.
First-degree sunburn:
· Affects the outer layer of your skin such as the epidermal layer.
· Takes a few days to a week to heal.
· You may experience tenderness, discomfort, and peeling of the skin.
· Symptoms usually peak around 24-35 hours.
Second-degree sunburn:
· Affects the dermis layer, a more serious damage that goes through the middle of your skin.
· Takes weeks to heal.
· Symptoms include severe blisters, dehydration, heat stroke, and heat exhaustion.
· May need medical care treatment or hospitalization.
Third-degree sunburn:
Though rare, it severely affects entire layers of skin which may cause nerve damage. This is a medical emergency and should be treated promptly.
According to the Cleveland Clinic, the long-term effects of frequent sunburns increase your risk of:
· Premature aging.
· Skin cancer including precancerous

skin lesions.
· Eye damage such as cataracts causing loss of vision.
· Cancer that can spread to internal organs.
Often, sunburns can be treated at home. Cleveland Clinic suggests home treatment and care. It's advisable to:
· Cover burns when heading outside.
· Use cooling and hydrating gels such as hydrocortisone and aloe vera. (you may put them in the refrigerator for a more cooling effect)
· Apply ointment and petroleum jelly to prevent scarring.
· Take cool showers or baths with oatmeal or baking soda for sore skin.
· Use NSAIDs medication for pain such as ibuprofen, naproxen, and aspirin.
To prevent future sunburns and heat exhaustion, here are ways to protect yourself:
· UPF 50-plus gear is a kind of textile that is tightly woven and blocks 98% of UV rays. This can come in forms of clothing and umbrellas.
· Broad-spectrum SPF 30-plus sunscreen protects you from both UVB and UVA. Make sure you reapply every two hours and don't forget about lips and scalp protection. Wait 15-30 minutes before sun exposure and heading into the water.

Summer safety risks homeowners overlook

FEATURE IMPACT

Summer is the perfect season for gathering outdoors with friends and family, but if you're a homeowner planning to host barbecues, pool parties or holiday celebrations this year, it's important to consider the potential safety and liability risks that may be affecting your own backyard.
A little advance planning can help you ensure that your guests enjoy safe, healthy experiences at your home and leave with only happy memories.
According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, thousands of injuries each year are linked to fireworks, grills and swimming pools. While most summer gatherings end without incident, Mercury Insurance is encouraging homeowners to remember that smart preparation can help you avoid unfortunate accidents and costly damage.
"A few simple safety checks can help homeowners create a safer environment for everyone while protecting the property they've worked hard to build," said Larry Anderson, underwriting operations director at Mercury Insurance.
Set your summer up for success by paying special attention to these five often-overlooked seasonal safety risks.
Guest injuries and liability risks
Since summer gatherings naturally increase foot traffic around a property, it should be safe to walk around. Uneven walkways, loose decking, poor lighting and pet-related incidents can all lead to injuries that homeowners may not anticipate.
Before hosting events, audit your property to repair trip hazards and ensure walkways and outdoor gathering areas are well-lit. If you have pets that may become stressed around large groups, secure them before guests arrive. Since unforeseen events can still occur despite your best efforts, review your liability coverage to understand available protections.
Unsupervised pool areas
Swimming pools can provide endless summer fun, but they also present one of the most serious safety risks around the home. Drowning remains a leading cause of accidental death for young children, making active supervision essential whenever children are near water.
If your backyard includes a pool, ensure that gates and barriers are functioning

properly, keep rescue equipment nearby and consider pool alarms and self-closing gates for additional protection. Most importantly, never leave children unattended around water.
Backyard grill fires
Grilling is a summer tradition, but outdoor cooking equipment can quickly become a fire hazard if used improperly. Placing your grill too close to flammable objects, letting grease build up and leaving the grill unattended can all increase the risk of property damage.
Start by making sure your grill is set up at least 10 feet away from homes, fences and overhangs before you fire it up. Clean grease trays regularly, never leave a grill unattended while cooking and keep a fire extinguisher accessible during outdoor cooking.
Fireworks too close to homes
Fireworks-related fires increase significantly during summer, particularly in dry climates where even one stray spark can ignite vegetation or nearby structures.
The safest option, when possible, is to attend professional displays rather than hosting your own. However, if you're planning on lighting up your skies this summer, follow all local laws and restrictions regarding fireworks and keep your launch site well away from homes, vehicles and dry landscaping. Have a water source readily available when using legal consumer fireworks.
Outdoor electrical hazards
Extension cords, decorative lighting, outdoor speakers and fans often receive extra use during summer gatherings. Damaged cords or overloaded outlets can create shock and fire hazards. As you set up your summer entertainment systems, check your equipment to be sure it's rated for outdoor use.
Keep electrical connections away from pools and water features, avoid overloading electrical outlets and take a few extra minutes before each gathering to inspect outdoor cords for wear and damage.
"Most homeowners focus on making their gatherings enjoyable, but safety should be part of the preparation process," Anderson said. "Taking a few minutes to identify potential hazards before guests arrive can help prevent accidents and allow everyone to focus on enjoying the season."
On the Net:
[MercuryInsurance.com/resources](https://www.mercuryinsurance.com/resources)



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SHUTTERSTOCK

Chocolate-Dipped Frozen California Grape and Yogurt Clusters.

Sweet and cool treats

FEATURE IMPACT

Summer heat can be tough to beat without a cool, refreshing game plan. Cool off when the temperatures climb by turning to frozen make-ahead treats that can make almost any sweltering afternoon feel like a beach vacation.

Staying comfortable is simple with Grapes from California, which take “cool” to the next level. Freezing them turns each grape into its own mini sorbet – just rinse, dry and freeze for two hours, or try these easy recipes that give everyone something to enjoy.

As a naturally healthy, refreshing, juicy and hydrating solution, grapes can become your summer go-to. To find more frozen solutions, visit GrapesFromCalifornia.com.

- Chocolate-Dipped Frozen California Grape and Yogurt Clusters – Fresh grapes add a bright, juicy pop of flavor to tangy yogurt and rich chocolate in these irresistible frozen clusters that are light, refreshing and perfectly balanced for summer snacking. Make a batch and keep them ready for warm afternoons or casual backyard get-togethers.

- Frozen-Yogurt California Grape and Coconut Bites – This fun and easy snack lets grapes shine, as each bite features a sweet California grape dipped in creamy Greek yogurt and rolled in shredded coconut for a refreshing, tropical treat. Ideal for hot

summer days and made with just three ingredients, they’re a simple way to enjoy a cool, healthy snack.

- Hot Honey Frozen Yogurt, California Grape and Pecan Bark – Cool, crunchy and sweet with a pleasing touch of spicy heat, this frozen treat offers something for everyone.

Juicy grapes pair with Greek yogurt, pecans and a drizzle of hot honey for a refreshing bite with subtle sweetness and satisfying crunch.

Keep a batch in the freezer for a summer snack that feels both fun and effortless.

- Frozen California Grape-Lemon Yogurt Cups – Cool off with delectable frozen snack cups. These snacks offer the best of both frozen grapes and frozen yogurt. Layer granola, lemon yogurt, California grape halves and toasted almonds then freeze.

The grapes lend a sweet-tart freshness and bite to the mix as a natural complement to yogurt and granola, even when frozen.

- Swalty Frozen California Grapes – Frosty grapes bring together juicy sweetness, zesty lime and a hint of salty spice from Tajin for an irresistibly refreshing summer bite. Served ice-cold straight from the freezer, they’re crunchy and flavorful, perfect for cooling down on hot days.

Take one bite and they might become your new warm-weather favorite.

« BLACK BRILLIANCE »

Ella Baker a force for civil rights activism, mentoring



ELLA BAKER CENTER FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

Ella Baker, a Shaw University graduate, consulted civil rights activists who formed the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee in the 1960s.

By Herbert L. White
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Ella Baker (1903-1986) was a stalwart of the Civil Rights Movement and consulted on formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Baker rejected Martin Luther King’s charismatic leadership of civil rights advocacy in advising student activists to promote “group-centered leaders” when forming SNCC at Shaw University in Raleigh as opposed to King’s “leader-centered” style at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. It was this grassroots leadership that Baker credited for the success and longevity of the movement.

“You see, I think that, to be very honest, the movement made Martin rather than Martin making the movement,” she said in 1968. “This is not a discredit to him. This is, to me, as it should be.”

Born in Norfolk, Virginia, Baker was raised on the same land her grandparents worked as slaves. Baker’s childhood was marked early on by the activist spirit of her mother, a member of the local missionary association, who called on women to act as agents of social change in their communities.

After graduating Shaw in 1927, Baker moved to New York, where she served as national director of the Young Negroes Cooperative League. In 1938, she joined the national NAACP office as assistant

field secretary and later as director of branches. Frustrated by her inability to redirect the organization’s focus toward grassroots organizing, Baker resigned her position in 1946. She rejoined the NAACP in 1952 as president of the New York City branch. In 1956 Baker, along with Stanley Levison and Bayard Rustin, co-founded In Friendship, an organization that provided aid to local movements in the South.

In January 1958 Baker moved to Atlanta to run SCLC’s Atlanta headquarters and organized Crusade for Citizenship, an initiative to enforce voting rights for Black citizens. After SCLC Executive Director John Tilley resigned in 1959, she filled in until a permanent director was hired the following year.

Two months after the February 1960 sit-ins in Greensboro, Baker and King called a conference of student activists at Shaw to launch SNCC, a student-led organization. Already an advisor to the student movement, Baker left SCLC in August 1960.

In addition to continuing her involvement with SNCC, Baker was a consultant to the Southern Conference Education Fund throughout the mid-1960s and helped organize the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which fought for Black representation in the state’s Democratic delegation at the 1964 national convention.

Abortion pill bans won’t limit access, telehealth providers say

By Kate Wells

KFF HEALTH NEWS

Angel Foster had a backup plan.

It was the first weekend in May. A federal appeals court had just made it illegal to mail mifepristone, a pill that’s part of the most widely used abortion method in the U.S.

But Foster, a doctor who specializes in reproductive health, was prepared. As leader of the Massachusetts Medication Abortion Access Project, which ships abortion pills to some 3,500 patients a month nationwide, including in states with abortion bans, she told patients they had three options.

They could get a refund. They could wait to see if the legal situation changed. Or she could ship them only misoprostol — a second drug already used in most medication abortions. Combined, mifepristone and misoprostol are considered the “gold standard.” Misoprostol can be taken alone to induce an abortion, but some studies have suggested it’s less effective, Foster warned patients. Plus, it can make the process longer and more painful, with more side effects, such as nausea and vomiting.

Still, the vast majority of patients said the same thing: Just send it.

“They didn’t care,” Foster said. “Their response was: ‘Whatever can get to me the fastest.’”

Two developments often get lost in the public’s perception of the abortion wars. One is that the number of abortions in the U.S. has increased dramatically year over year since the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade in 2022, according to the Society of Family Planning’s latest #WeCount report. By December, 29% of abortions were through telehealth. The second is that, because the mailing of abortion pills has become so widespread in the post-Dobbs era, abortion opponents may simply be unable to stop it.

Massive legal battles are being waged by states with abortion bans, seeking to block the shipment of mifepristone across their borders. In a suit brought by Louisiana, the U.S. Supreme Court recently restored telehealth access to mifepristone while a lower court hears the case. And abortion opponents continue their push to get the Trump administration to crack down on the pills’ availability, either through a Food and Drug Administration safety review or more

drastic measures.

But many telehealth experts who help patients get abortions aren’t too worried. “We like to say the genie is out of the bottle,” said Elisa Wells, who co-founded and is the access director at Plan C, which provides information about accessing abortion pills online.

“Now that people know that they can get safe, fast, effective, affordable care through the mail, there’s no going back,” Wells said.

If mifepristone is restricted, many telehealth groups will immediately switch to using only misoprostol instead, they say. Misoprostol is approved by the FDA to treat ulcers and is also widely used off-label to manage miscarriages, induce labor, and end pregnancies. And while states could individually ban misoprostol, the FDA doesn’t typically regulate how a drug is used off-label, according to David Cohen, a law professor at Drexel University and a national expert on abortion law.

“There would have to be some finding that it is not safe or effective for ulcer treatment, something that there’s no argument anyone could possibly show,” Cohen said.

Some telehealth companies already used that alternative back in 2021, when the Supreme Court temporarily reinstated a requirement that mifepristone be dispensed in person. Carafem, a company that provides telehealth abortion, switched to using only misoprostol during that period “and has been prepared for this possibility ever since,” said Melissa Grant, a co-founder of the company and its chief operating officer.

Other organizations are already directing patients to mifepristone from outside the U.S., through groups such as Aid Access and online pharmacies in places like India.

Even if the Trump administration tried to enforce the Comstock Act, an 1873 law that bans the mailing of obscene matter and anything intended to produce an abortion, it would be extremely difficult to stop the flow of pills, Cohen said.

“We’ve had the ‘War on Drugs’ for what, half a century, maybe longer?” he said. “And everyone, if they wanted, could find illegal drugs within minutes, and have it probably delivered to their doorstep within hours.”

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SAMANTHA COLE

The cast of “Beehive: The ‘60s Musical” June 25-July 12 at City Stage in Greenville, S.C., is an homage to pioneering women vocal groups and solo acts that took popular music to new levels during the decade.

Final week for Uptown Live shows

By Herbert L. White
herb.l.white@thecharlottepost.com

The latest events, productions and exhibits in Charlotte and beyond:

Through July 9

The rebranded Uptown Live series, Thursdays at Truist Center Plaza from 5-9 p.m., with a DJ, live band, and food and drink for sale. The after party will continue at neighboring Fifth Street District.

The lineup:

- July 2: Sol Fusion
- July 9: Spiked featuring DJ Elixir

Through July 12

Centre Stage production of “Beehive: The ‘60s Musical,” 501 River St., Greenville, S.C. Tickets are on sale at centresstage.org or by calling the box office at (864) 233-6733. Reservations are encouraged. Tickets range from \$33-\$38. Showtimes are Thursday-Saturday at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday at 3 p.m.

The show is a musical tip of the cap to top acts from Aretha Franklin to Martha Reeves and the Vandellas, Petula Clark and The Supremes who pumped out timeless classics like “Respect,” “Be My Baby,” and “Downtown.”

July 3

Carolina Raptor Center (6000 Sample Road in Huntersville) hosts Eagle Extravaganza, 10 a.m.-3 p.m. along the Raptor Trail.

Among the activities are:

- Live bald eagle feeding (11 a.m.), bird show (1 p.m.) presentation of raptors in flight, golden eagle keeper chat (2:30 p.m.) and interactive activity stations with games, water play, and creative fun for children and families.

July 4

“An American Celebration,” a day for

Please see **USHER** | 6B

Hollywood jumps into the microdrama format market

By Jonathan Landrum
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LOS ANGELES — While much of Hollywood was consumed by the streaming wars, Issa Rae was studying a different mode of entertainment thousands of miles away: microdramas.

No stranger to creating a successful online series, the Emmy-nominated actor and producer became intrigued by China’s booming market for the short, mobile-first soap operas, seeing its potential to build audiences and intellectual property.

In May, Rae’s Hoorae Media released the thriller “Screen Time,” one of the first major studio-quality microdrama projects developed by an established Hollywood production company. The TikTok-backed series drew nearly 75 million views during its first week.

Rae believes the format offers advantages traditional media often cannot.

“Because the price point is lower than TV and film, there’s an opportunity to take risks,” she told The Associated Press. “The turnaround time is also a lot quicker than TV and film, which allows us the opportunity to be more topical and relevant.”

With vertically shot episodes often running one to three minutes, microdramas have emerged as one of entertainment’s fastest-growing formats. That’s drawing interest from celebrities, creators and major media companies looking for new ways to reach audiences who increasingly consume

Please see **HOLLYWOOD** | 6B



LAMAR RICHARDSON\

Lamar Richardson, who grew up in Mint Hill, earned the Tony Award as producer of “Ragtime” as Best Revival of a Musical. Richardson, 33, an Independence High School alumnus, is the youngest Black producer to win the award.

Tony winner took a chance on himself to make history

Independence High alumnus Lamar Richardson earns producer prize

By Herbert L. White
herb.l.white@thecharlottepost.com

Lamar Richardson’s bet on himself earned him another slice of theater history.

Richardson, an Independence High School alumnus, is the youngest Black lead producer to earn a Tony Award in a top production category when “Ragtime” took the prize last month for Best Revival of a Musical. Richardson, 33, is two years younger than Ken Harper, who won a Tony as producer of “The Wiz” in 1975.

Before “Ragtime,” Richardson already owned a pair of Tonys as co-producer of “Merrily We Roll Along”

as Best Revival of a Musical and “Appropriate” as Best Revival of a Play.

In an interview with The Post, Richardson discussed his road to success, formative years in North Carolina and how collaboration paved the way to advancing his rise. Responses are edited for brevity and clarity.

CP: Three Tonys, you’re 33 years old, that’s one for every 11 years that you’ve been around, including the most recent win for “Ragtime,” which was named the best revival of a musical – that’s the one that puts you in historic company. Has it sunk in yet?

LR: Truthfully, no. I’m just so used to always being laser focused with

my blinders on and just moving forward and hustling and grinding, so I’m trying to give myself the permission to take space and to really process everything, but it’s really been a work in progress for sure.

CP: You took all kinds of gigs in New York to support yourself to give yourself enough runway to make an impact in the performing arts. You drove rideshares, you played bar mitzvahs, all this other stuff.

LR: This has been a 12-year journey. I went to Columbia for undergrad, and there was a pivotal moment in my career where I was

Please see **TONY** | 6B

« APPRECIATION »

Eddie Ray, developer of top music talent

By Herbert L. White
herb.l.white@thecharlottepost.com

Eddie Ray, a pioneering music executive, songwriter, and the North Carolina Music Hall of Fame’s first executive director, died June 21 at age 99.

Mr. Ray, who was born on December 21, 1926, in Franklin, N.C., a mountain town near the Tennessee border, rose from stock boy at Decca Records to one of the first Black senior executives at a major record label, during a career that spanned more than 60 years at companies like Capitol Records, Cream/Hi Records, Imperial Records, and MGM Records.

Mr. Ray left Franklin to attend Laurinburg Institute in Laurinburg, N.C., because his segregated hometown didn’t have a high school for Black students. After graduating in 1944, he was accepted into an Army Reserve training program at Howard University in Washington, D.C. and at 18 was inducted into the Army.

After a few months of service, Mr. Ray was discharged and in early 1945 moved to Milwaukee, where he got his first job in the music industry as a stock boy at Decca’s distribution center.

As a talent evaluator and executive, Mr. Ray’s knack for building and nurturing careers crossed music genres. His roster of artists included Al Green, Fats Domino, Rick Nelson, Mike Curb, Allen Toussaint, Sammy Davis, Jr., the Osmonds, Donny & Marie Osmond, Pink Floyd, Lou Rawls and Hank Williams Jr. He pushed the music of R&B star Ray Charles and blues standout B.B. King to mainstream audiences. And his rock bona fides were confirmed as the executive at Capitol Records who brought the English band



NORTH CAROLINA MUSIC HALL OF FAME

Eddie Ray, a music executive, songwriter and poet who became the North Carolina Music Hall of Fame’s first executive director, died June 21 at age 99. As one of the first Black executives at a major mainstream label, he oversaw the careers of artists like Al Green, B.B. King and Lew Rawls as well as the Osmonds, Pink Floyd and Hank Williams Jr.

Pink Floyd to the U.S.

As a songwriter, Mr. Ray’s “Hearts of Stone” was a pop, R&B, and country charting hit that’s been recorded by more than 30 artists, including Elvis Presley, John Fogerty, and the McGuire Sisters and included on the “Goodfellas” soundtrack. Mr. Ray was also a published poet and author whose credits include his memoir “Against All Odds” and five published books of poetry.

Mr. Ray also was a public servant. He

was appointed commissioner of the U.S. Copyright Royalty Tribunal by President Ronald Reagan and spent four years as its chairman. He also founded the Tennessee College of Recording Arts & Sciences.

In 2009, Mr. Ray was inducted to the North Carolina Music Hall of Fame and later appointed executive director, where he built the organization’s operational foundation from scratch. The hall named its lifetime achievement award in his honor.

Tony winner bet on self to make theater history

Continued from page 5B
going into my junior year, and I had just completed internships at MetLife, my sophomore summer, and I was going into an internship at Barclays Investment Bank for my junior summer. I had just did a boot camp, I was awarded a \$10,000 scholarship, housing stipend, and this internship, and I just decided I want to take a stand on myself, and I shut down and literally denied that internship, and spent that summer survival job working as a cater waiter, doing off-off-off-off-Broadway, doing films, background work, and that kind of kick started this whole thing, and from that moment, 12 years ago, there's been tons of jobs.

I've driven for Uber and Lyft. I was a bar mitzvah dancer, which is basically like a hype man, you know? You interact with the kids and with their families to really make the party fun. I was a host at a steak house in Beverly Hills, and I'll never forget there was a moment where, you know, I was running bread up and down the three stories, essentially, and my manager pulled me aside and said, "You didn't go to Columbia University to be running bread in this restaurant," but I never thought of it that way. It was always just a means to an end, and really just hustling and taking a sacrifice and taking a chance on myself.

CP: Talk a little bit about your Charlotte time. You graduated Independence High School.

LR: I was at Independence, and I left Independence after my sophomore year to go to the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics in Durham for my junior and senior year. I'm originally from New Jersey, and we moved to Charlotte when I was in the middle of fifth grade in 2003, so depending on who I'm talking to, I'll say I'm from Charlotte, because Charlotte was literally a part of my formative years of growing up. I grew up in the Mint Hill area. My family is still there to this day, and I went to Northeast Middle School on Lawyers Road. I went to Independence. I was in the Academy of International Studies for two years before I left to go to Science and Math.

Charlotte was just such a culturally rich experience in terms of exposing me to different cultures and communities, and really giving me the framework and the wonderful school system out there to really challenge myself both academically, while also feeling empowered enough to believe that as the son of immigrants and as a first-generation Caribbean American ... I was always encouraged and lifted up by all of my teachers and my colleagues.

I always look back on that time really, really fondly, because I don't think I'd be where I am today had I not had such a strong support system in my early days.

CP: You mentioned that you started off on the path to acting as an actor and a performer. When did you make the pivot, and when did you know that the pivot was where you needed to be?

LR: Susan Batson, who's a world-renowned acting coach, actress, producer, director, and so many other things, gave me my start in this business. Right after school I was working as her assistant at her studio and training with her, and taking classes, and I met Phylicia Rashad through her studio. I'll never forget, on my birthday in 2015 we did a reading together for a screenplay, and I was starring in

it, and she was starring in it, and basically from that moment she saw what she needed to see in me to then offer me the role of Sylvester in her production of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," that was going to happen in the Mark Taper Forum in LA in 2016 and that was my first major job as an actor, starring alongside Lillias White, Keith David, Glynn Turman, Nija Okoro, Jason Dirden, and Damon Gupton, and then from there I had pretty much a six-year journey as just an actor working.

I did "New Amsterdam," "FBI," "Blue Bloods," lots of TV. Did theater, did film, and then COVID happened. COVID shut down the industry, and that was a real a-ha moment where I saw this is scary, like there can literally be no work, and it was at that moment I said, "OK, what else can I do in the industry aside from being an actor to be able to have longevity, should this happen again? I knew I wasn't a writer or a director, and my wife had always said look into producing, and other people had mentioned it as well.

I was extremely resistant at first, but then I went back to Columbia and did a fellowship, the Front Row Productions Fellowship, through Stephen Byrd and Alia Jones-Harvey, who are prolific Black producers as well, and they had this fellowship as a way to usher in the newer generation, so I did that program alongside the Columbia MFA program in theater management and producing that was in 2022.

My first show [was] Wendell Pierce's "Death of a Salesman," that was my first show as a co-producer in 2022 and from that point to now I've done 10 productions on Broadway.

"Ragtime" was my first as a lead producer, and it's just kind of been ... a grind and a hustle, and really just opportunity meeting the moment, and we're just rising to the occasion.

CP: "Ragtime" was your solo producership. Talk about winning Tonys as a collaborator versus getting it on your own.

LR: As a co-producer, you're a part of a team that helps to finance a production to support the lead producer's lead producer's vision. And my first two Tonys were for "Merrily, We Roll Along" as a co-producer, and for "Appropriate" as a co-producer, and now to step into this lead producer position alongside my colleagues Tom Kirdahy, who gave me this opportunity, Bob Greenblatt and Kevin Ryan, in partnership with Lincoln Center Theater.

This whole thing has just been just truly a blessing. It's the most wonderful team of creatives, of collaborators, and this cast, and this material is iconic.

It's history meeting craft, meeting collaboration, meeting prestige, and to have this be my first foray as a lead producer, it's overwhelming in a way, because it's just like we always joke that the bar is just set so high now. Where do I go from here?

CP: Will you ever go back to acting, or is producing the lane to stick with?

LR: I still audition. I had a live audition yesterday. I'm no one-trick pony. I'm open to all of it, and I believe that I'm a vessel, and whether I'm a vessel through me being the person telling the story myself or me being the champion ushering in someone else's story and hiring friends and creatives and artists that I believe in, I receive and welcome both.

Hollywood eyes attention in the microdrama market

Continued from page 5B

stories on their phones.

Beyond speed and cost, Rae said microdramas foster a more interactive viewing experience between creators and audiences.

"The communal experience is also amazing," said Rae, whose web series "The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl" helped launch her career. "You can see what other viewers think and engage with their commentary in real time."

Microdramas catch the attention of Hollywood

At first glance, the formula seems deceptively simple: smartphone-friendly bingeable miniepisodes featuring tales of romance, betrayal and redemption with titles like "The Double Life of My Billionaire Husband." The first few episodes are generally free and viewers have to pay to unlock more.

The model that first emerged in China during the pandemic has exploded — global microdrama revenues will hit \$14 billion by the end of 2026, technology research and advisory group Omdia estimates — and the U.S. entertainment industry is taking note.

Peacock recently launched a dedicated microdrama hub. Fox Entertainment invested in microdrama producer Holywater and committed to producing hundreds of vertical titles, while TelevisaUnivision is producing serialized short-form dramas for ViX.

Kevin Hart's HartBeat has expanded into vertical comedy, Kim Kardashian is backing scripted mobile-first content through her investment in microdrama platform ReelShort, Taye Diggs has starred in vertical series aimed at the growing audience consuming serialized stories on smartphones, and filmmaker Deon Taylor is developing the sports-focused vertical series "I Am Hoop."

At this year's MIP London television market, executives said some of the largest microdrama platforms are spending as much as 90% of their budgets on marketing as competition for audiences intensifies.

Phones provide direct access to audiences

Hoorae Media spent more than two years researching the format before launching "Screen Time." The company became convinced microdramas represented more than a passing trend after studying how audiences were consuming entertainment on their phones.

"The connective tissue being the phone, and how much time people are already spending on their phone," said Dzifa Yador, head of digital at Hoorae Media.

"We're meeting audiences where they are."

Yador believes the format gives creators something increasingly difficult to find in traditional Hollywood: Instead of waiting years for a studio decision, creators can test ideas, build an audience and retain ownership.

"You definitely get rid of the gatekeepers," she said. "You can greenlight your own show."

Independent creators helped build the audience first

Long before Hollywood began paying attention, creators were already proving audiences would spend hours following serialized stories online.

Among the most successful is Kountry Wayne, who transitioned from the comedy sketches that made him famous to a universe of interconnected relationship dramas after noting those had a longer shelf life.

The Georgia native, whose Amazon Prime Video stand-up special "Kountry Wayne: Nostalgia" debuted this year, said he now releases 50 episodes a day.

Wayne recently posted that his content generated about 1.4 billion views on Facebook and another 100 million on YouTube over the previous month. Meta and YouTube declined to independently verify those figures.

As Hollywood's interest in vertical storytelling accelerated, the comedian said, he turned down eight-figure deals to license or acquire his content, choosing instead to keep ownership as his audience grew.

"If they get in, they're going try to control it," he said. "I knew it was growing."

The format offers a new proving ground for filmmakers

The American Black Film Festival, one of the nation's leading showcases for Black film and television, is giving the next generation of storytellers an entry point through the format.

The festival launched its first microdrama showcase this year, selecting eight finalists from hundreds of submissions.

Festival programmer Bobbi Broome said the response underscored how quickly creators are embracing the format.

"At least two or three of them said that they decided to try doing a microdrama because they saw the ABFF competition start," Broome told AP.

For many filmmakers, she said, the showcase was more than producing short-form content. It gave them an opportunity to test ideas that could eventually evolve into larger projects.



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Usher, Chris Brown at Bank of America Stadium on July 17-18

Continued from page 5B
family fun, food and music 12-2 p.m. at Gaston County Museum of Art & History, 131 W. Main St., on the court square in Dallas, N.C.

The event is free and open to the public as the lead-in to Gaston County's 4th of July parade at 2 p.m. The celebration will include arts and crafts for children, a foam party play area, hot dogs and free Tony's ice cream, Karma cakes sale, a cooling down spray station, music by DJ Alfredo, and the Great American Apple Pie Bake-Off.

For information, visit www.gaston-countymuseum.org.

July 17-18

Usher and Chris Brown, Bank of America Stadium.

Grammy winners Chris Brown and Usher have a pair of Charlotte dates on their North American stadium tour. The tour follows record-breaking accomplishments for both artists.

At the end of 2024, the North American leg of Usher: Past, Present, Future sold over 1.1 million tickets. In October, Brown's Breezy Bowl XX World Tour was his highest-grossing and the highest-grossing tour ever by a solo Black American male, earning nearly \$300 million

and drawing 2 million fans in North America, Europe, and the United Kingdom.

Tickets available at: raymondandbrown.com.

July 25

Fetty Wap, The Fillmore. The double-Diamond-selling and Grammy nominated hip hop artist ("Trap Queen," "679," "My Way") brings the Nostalgia Tour to Charlotte. Tickets: livenation.com.

Aug. 12

P.J. Morton, Carolina Theatre, 7:30 p.m. New Orleans-based Morton is a soul singer, songwriter, performer and producer who has earned six Grammy awards and 22 nominations while selling out venues around the world.

Tickets are \$82-\$135 and available at thecarolina.com.

Sept. 19

Emmy award-winning journalist *Don Lemon* and comedian and radio host *D.L. Hughley* extend their DL + DL 'Anything Goes' tour to Owens Auditorium at 7 p.m. Tickets range from \$55 to \$197 and are available at Ticketmaster.

Together, the pair delivers a comedy-meets-politics live experience where no topic is off limits.