

9/30/2025

Preparing for 2026

Ellen C. Wells



The Perennial Plant Association's National Symposium (PPA) is always right on the heels of Cultivate and every year it's where the organization announces its upcoming Perennial Plant of the Year. For 2026, the honor goes to *Andropogon gerardii* Blackhawks, also known as Blackhawks big bluestem.

Why did PPA's membership vote for this variety? It certainly stands out in a landscape with its dark-colored foliage and strong, upright, yet compact (5-ft. tall and wide), growth habit. While other bluestems can overwhelm gardens with their larger size, Blackhawks is ideal for the smaller garden—and there's a lot more of those nowadays (in fact, we have a whole story about it on page 34!).



Plus, it provides interest throughout the seasons, emerging with dark-green leaves in spring, turning reddish-purple in summer and becoming deep purple by September just as its inflorescences appear. For habitat and wildlife lovers, Blackhawks big bluestem's dense foliage and sturdy stems offer nesting sites and cover for birds, and they're also a larval food source for several skipper butterfly species.

The PPA press release on the announcement calls this variety "remarkably low maintenance, with no major pest or disease concerns." It just needs cutting down in late winter. Also, while it does form a single clump, it may reseed in the garden—so keep an eye on it. They also suggest pairing it with stunning fall-blooming perennials such as black-eyed Susans, tall stonecrops and asters—Blackhawks' dark foliage sure would help those perennials pop.

If you're a PPA member, you'll have access to several marketing resources that'll help you promote Blackhawks big bluestem to your customers next year. Want more information? Visit perennialplant.org/page/2026PPOY. There's also a consumer-facing website at perennialplantoftheyear.com. **GP**