

Bluestem Is Perennial Plant Of The Year

Since its launch in 1990, the Perennial Plant of the Year (PPOY) program has showcased standout garden varieties. Winners tend to be low-maintenance, suitable for a range of climates, provide multi-seasonal interest, and be relatively pest and disease-free.

Each year's winner is chosen by a vote of hundreds of horticulture professionals across the United States and Canada. The PPOY committee reviews the nominated perennials—often more than 400—and selects three or four to place on the ballot. Perennial Plant Association (PPA) members vote for a winner each summer and may submit up to two nominations for upcoming years. The Association has no commercial interest in the winners; instead, it recognizes them solely on the basis of their performance.

The 2026 winner, Blackhawks big bluestem, was announced at the 2025 Symposium in Des Moines, Iowa, in July. It's a subcategory of big bluestem, one of the dominant perennial grasses in North America's tallgrass prairies.

Bluestem grows in dense, single clumps but can reseed in suitable soil. It has few, if any, pest or disease problems and requires no maintenance except cutting the stems back to the ground for winter. Once established—which may take a few years—the plants are highly drought-tolerant.

Blackhawks big bluestem originated as a seedling from *Andropogon gerardii* "Red October" and was introduced by Brent Horvath of Intrinsic Perennial Gardens in Hebron, Ill. This grass stands out for its striking appearance and resilience. It's more compact than other bluestem varieties, growing to just 5 ft. tall by 2 ft. wide. The near-black coloration and upright growth habit create a striking presence, especially in fall gardens.

Dark green leaves sprout in spring and gradually develop reddish-purple tips as summer heat intensifies. By August, it forms a three-part "turkeyfoot" inflorescence that turns entirely purple in September. Late in the season, tall flower spikes add texture and movement.



Photo courtesy of cultivar413 via Flickr

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The 2026 winner is an ideal choice for adding color, texture and movement to small garden spaces where a full-sized bluestem might be overwhelming. The PPA suggests pairing the Blackhawks big bluestem with companion plants like asters, tall stonecrops and black-eyed Susans, or combining it with contrasting textures and movement patterns. This makes it well-suited for native, naturalistic and cottage-style gardens. The striking plant also provides nesting space for birds and serves as a food source for the larvae of several skipper butterfly species.

While Blackhawks big bluestem is best suited to average, dry-to-medium, well-drained soils, it's adaptable to a wide range of conditions, except fertile, moist soils. Expect it to grow well in USDA Zones 3 to 9.

We found Blackhawks big bluestem available online from Garden Goods Direct, Bluestone Perennials, American Meadows and several others.

Collectible Antique Farm Calculators

Farm calculators offer a unique glimpse into a bygone era—one with highly specific tools that solved problems before smartphones.

Popular from the 1920s through the 1950s, farm calculators come in a variety of designs. Many feature interconnected dials that turn together, calculating everything from livestock grain allotments and land value to gallons of milk in a known weight, livestock gestation periods, and even the value of a standard 30-dozen case of eggs. They could help farmers determine, for example, whether current market conditions made it better to feed livestock for additional weight gain or to sell them at their current weight.

Other farm calculators include simple cards printed with charts of a truck's miles per gallon, slide or dial calculators made of cardboard or tin to determine harvest rates and yields, and electric calculators sized for pockets or desktops and marked with the company's logo—making them an effective form of advertising.

These tools were likely unintuitive, even for their intended users. For instance, the 1948 Vernon Farm Calculator, sold exclusively by the Vernon Company of Newton, Iowa, includes detailed instructions for use. The back of the calculator explains that it functions similarly to multiplying or dividing, like converting pounds of grain to bushels using pencil and paper, but much



Photo courtesy of danz.attie and cyan101 on eBay

Instead of writing down the two numbers to be calculated, they're lined up on the inner and outer disks, and the answer appears in the rectangular slot.

faster and more accurately. Instead of writing down the two numbers to be calculated, they're lined up on the inner and outer disks, and the result appears in the rectangular slot.

These calculators don't use decimal points in their figures, so a number like 100 could represent 1, 10, 100 or 1,000, depending on context. For example, it should be clear where the decimal point goes, as a 225-pound hog selling for \$24 per hundred pounds would be worth \$54, not \$540 or \$5.40.

Vintage farming calculators like these fell



McEachren has documented his tractors with the colors they had when they left the factory. In addition to green and highway-use yellow, there are brown, white, and a recorded total of eight that were red.

Deere Collection Reaches Nearly 15,000 Items

Dave McEachren has had John Deere green in his thoughts since he was a boy. He started collecting Deere toys at age 10, and by 16, he was into Deere literature and memorabilia. At 18, he bought his first 2-cylinder. The south-east Ontario native specializes in Canadian-related Deere items and 2-cyl. Deere tractors built from 1947 to 1960.

"I have somewhere over 40 2-cyl. Deeres, all built at the Dubuque, Iowa, plant, as well as some yard art tractors from the 1920s and 1930s," says McEachren.

Tractors might be the largest items he has collected, but they're not the most numerous. The McEachren Collection at Forty-87 is nearing 15,000 items, including a complete set of bound Furrow magazines. It's all available for viewing upon request.

"I don't have set hours," says McEachren. "If I'm home, I'm open. I encourage people to call or email me if they're in the area. I've had people come and spend a couple of days with the collection."

It's easy to understand why people visit more than once. The main building measures 40 by 80 ft. and has an old-fashioned storefront look. It mainly displays farm toys, literature and memorabilia. A 60 by 90-ft. building houses his collection of over 40 tractors, while a 40 by 72-ft. building is nearly filled with snowmobiles, bikes and more tractors.

He owns several thousand pieces of literature and thousands of toys dating from the 1930s to the present. Some are from Europe and South America.

He also owns a unique collection of service pins.

"Employees received pins for every five years of employment, from 5 years to 50," says McEachren. "I'm only missing about half a dozen years. I have two fairly aged 50-year pins."

Having everything cataloged, especially the bound Furrow magazines, makes visiting even more interesting for many. The Furrow collection includes every issue published in every country for each year the magazine was published, from the 1900s to 1970. At one time, there were as many as 42 editions of each issue.

"I've collected them for years. Last year, I had an opportunity to acquire the complete set," says McEachren. "Because they're all catalogued, a visitor can mention that a neighbor or relative was featured in a certain

year, and I can go to the collection and dig out that issue."

Of course, no Deere collection would be complete without tractors. Unlike his Furrow magazines, his tractor collection is not yet complete. Nearly every 20 and 30-series model had seven different chassis types. They ranged from crawlers to trike and single-wheel front ends, as well as row-crop and gas, propane or all-fuel options.

"The sky's the limit on how many you could collect," says McEachren. "Then there are the colors. I've documented mine with the color they had when they left the factory. In addition to green and highway-use yellow, there are brown, white, and a recorded total of eight that were red. I chase after non-green, often yellow, designed for highway use with a low center of gravity for roadside mowing."

McEachren continues to search for them or other items for his collections. Facebook, eBay and online auctions have made collecting both easier and more time-consuming. The good news for Deere fans is that this likely means there will be even more to see in the future.

"Every time people come, they see something different," he says. "I'm passionate about the history of John Deere and just want to share it with other people."

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out of favor after the advent of calculating machines in the early 1960s. As calculators evolved from large, expensive machines to portable handheld devices, the market for these farming tools disappeared.

Farming calculators can be found in

antique shops, on eBay, and through online retailers. Prices vary by size and condition, but a typical range is \$40 to \$60. Recently, a vintage International Harvester calculator sold at Chupp Auctions & Real Estate for \$120.