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# GARDEN THYME



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PURDUE EXTENSION PORTER COUNTY 155 INDIANA AVENUE, SUITE 301 VALPARAISO, IN 46383

# — *In this Issue*

# Table of Contents



In this Issue	01
Our Favs: Shrubs Edition	02
2026 Gardening Show	04
Perennial of the Year	09
Winter Sowing   The Snail Method	11
Invasive Trees   Tree of Heaven	12
2025 Volunteer Awards	13

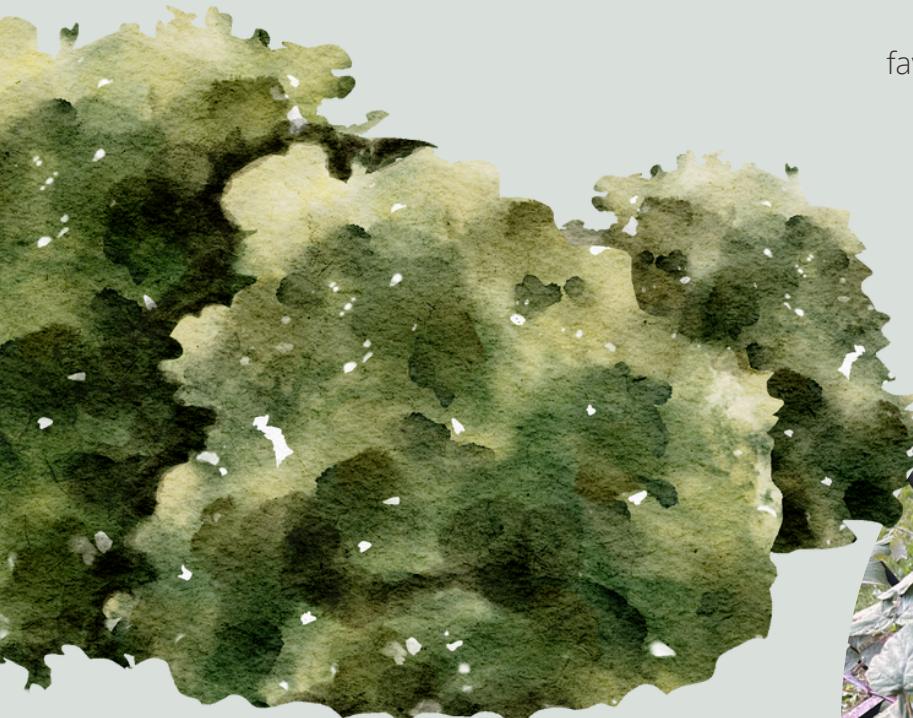


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The Porter County Master Gardeners Association (PCMGA) is a not-for-profit corporation that promotes the education and pleasure of gardening in cooperation with Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service in Porter County, Indiana.



## — *My Plant, My Project*



**Kayla Tracy** goes gastronomic with her favorite **Black Raspberries**. The vines produce "yummy berries" that have all of us salivating for summer. These hardy shrubs attract pollinators. Different from red and yellow raspberries, black raspberries are easier to control their spread.



# Our Favs: Shrub Edition

BY GREG CARTER, PCMG CLASS OF 2011

Ever feel overlooked? You're not alone. Welcome to the land of shrubs!

They don't possess quite as many varied colors as flowers, nor do they enjoy the stature (pun intended) of trees. But in their own right they have an important part of any well-designed landscaping plan. Shrubs and hedges are truly workhorses providing traffic control, creating private places, and can hide unsightly views, all while offering color and beauty. Best of all, maintenance is often minimal. There are thousands of varieties in every size and shape imaginable, many that thrive in our zone 6 in Porter County.

What are some of Porter County Extension Master Gardener's favorite shrubs? Our 2025 survey revealed a nice selection that may interest you, especially if you are considering a landscape rejuvenation this spring.

(continued on page 03)

Photography Credit: Kayla Tracy



**Wilma Willard** appreciates **St. John's Wort** for its "dainty yellow flowers, followed by red berries that look great on the shrub, but also in bouquets." Though she does caution that, "in my yard, I have to share them with Japanese Beetles for a few weeks a year!"



For **Oakleaf Hydrangea**, **Susan Spelde** points out the "foliage has a beautiful oak leaf shape and has great fall color. In the winter it shows off its shaggy bark and cool structure. The flowers are huge and change colors as they age. They can grow in sun or shade and take very little pruning."



**Laura Hrusovsky** especially loves that **Weigela** are "fast-growing, they bloom from spring through summer, and they are disease and deer resistant." **Lois Peterman** adds that the blooms are so pretty. These beautiful shrubs are low-maintenance and attract pollinators.



"**Ninebark** is hearty, no matter the pruning or the weather. They keep coming back," says **Christine Schrey**. Nowadays, there are many varieties including dwarfs. After ninebark is established, it is highly drought tolerant.

## Our Favorite Shrubs:

**Jack Steffen** loves his **Boxwoods** because they are green year round, grow slowly, and are easily pruned. **Hydrangeas** have many fans. **Arborescens** scores big with **Zann Wilson** being a native plant and producing bold white flowers. **Greg Carter** says **Hydrangea Paniculata** have gorgeous blooms. In **Melinda Bateman's** yard the **Yew** stands out for its adaptability as it can be easily shaped to fit a space. Both **Marlene Vanderlin** and **Gordana Gerbick** pronounced the humble **Lilac** as their favorite, noting the great color and heavenly fragrance in the spring. Amen to that heavenly smell!





20<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL  
**PCMGA  
GARDENING SHOW**  
**JANUARY 31, 2026**  
8 a.m. to 4 p.m. CST (Chicago Time)  
Porter County Expo Center - 215 E Division Rd, Valparaiso, Ind.  
**YEARS AND STILL GROWING**

— *Highlights from the Gardening Show*  
**A Blooming Success**

**BY CHRISTINE SCHREY, PCMG CLASS OF 2012**

If you've been looking for an antidote to deal with the snow and the cold, the 20th Annual PCMGA Gardening Show was it. Just walking in the door on the cold Saturday morning, leaving the snowy streets and gray skies behind, seeing fresh flowers growing in their pots, dried flowers in bouquets, art work, crafts, woodwork, jewelry, with flowers, birds, butterflies and more, was enough to bring a smile of joy. The Gardening Show turned the cold into a hope for spring!



## Thank you, Volunteers!

The 20th Gardening Show was led by Co-chairs Gail Kemper and Margaret Mudd, a crew of 117 volunteers on Saturday and 52 on Friday for set-up. In addition, volunteers came from nearby counties to volunteer along with families of Master Gardeners. People rise to the occasion. It was estimated there were about 1400 attendees, including 80 children. The numbers aren't as high as in the past, but when the snow stopped and the sun came out, there was a steady stream of guests coming in the door. Vendors were pleased and have made plans to come back next year.



## Growing Opportunities

Guests could be seen intently heading for the Seed and Bulb Exchange. Over 11,000 seed packets were available, about 30% of which were commercial with the rest prepared by Master Gardeners. There were also a greater variety of bulbs this year. And the leftover seeds were free for the taking – after 3 PM. Speakers provided education for all guests. This year there were workshops on Dried Flowers, Winter Sowing, and Plant Propagation. Participants got to take home a creation made in the workshop. Smiles were seen as guests left having experienced the hope of Spring to come.











# — *Perennial of the Year* **Perennial** **Showstopper** **of 2026**

BY WILMA WILLARD, PCMG CLASS OF 2011

It's awards season for the entertainment industry, whether it be the Oscars, Emmys, Grammys, Tonys or Golden Globes. The top honors will be announced with great fanfare, "And the winner is...!" Then people will scurry to the theatre, music store, or favorite streaming platform to see what great piece of entertainment they have missed.

As gardeners, we can do the same - with plants, of course, because the **2026 Perennial Plant of the Year** has been announced with great fanfare and the winner is...**Andropogon gerardii 'Blackhawks'**. Why did the Blackhawks big bluestem (common name) receive top honors as chosen by the Perennial Plant Association? Let's read a "review" to find out if you will scurry to get what you've missed!

**TITLE:** Andropogon gerardii 'Blackhawks'  
(Blackhawks big bluestem)

**MAIN CHARACTER:** Big bluestem is one of the dominant native grasses in North America's once extensive tallgrass prairies. 'Blackhawks' steals the show as a new cultivar with foliage emerging dark green, developing reddish-purple tips during the summer and near black coloration in fall. 'Blackhawks' inflorescence displays a three-parted dramatic turkeyfoot.

**PLOT:** 'Blackhawks' is hardy in USDA Zones 3 to 9 thriving in full sun and tolerant of average, dry to medium, well-drained soils. It grows to 60 inches tall and 24 inches wide. Growing at a medium rate when in well-drained soil, 'Blackhawks' prefers being evenly moist without overwatering.

**RESOLUTION:** 'Blackhawks' leaves and stems provide cover and nesting material for birds and serve as a larval food source for several species of skippers. It will remain a single, dense clump but may reseed in the garden. Big bluestem has no major pest or disease problems. Maintenance only includes a late winter trim to the ground. Big bluestem is extremely drought tolerant once established, which may take a few years. 'Blackhawks' can be a Two Thumbs Up in your landscape!



Photography Credit: Chicago Botanic Gardens by cultivar413 (top),  
Olbrich Botanical Gardens (bottom)





— *Winter Sowing*

# A “Snail” to Welcome

BY JILL KILHEFNER, PCMG CLASS OF 2011

I'm always looking for different and interesting methods for growing plants from seed. I recently learned of the **“Snail Method” created by UK gardener, Farida Sober.** Her social media posts went viral and were shared by media, including Gardener's World and Better Homes and Gardens.

The snail method grows seeds in a compact, vertical roll of soil, using repurposed materials. Many plants can be grown in one snail versus a traditional flat, thus saving precious space on the seed-starting station. The “snail” is created by spreading a 2-inch layer of moist seed-starting mix onto a long, 5-6 inch wide strip of plastic or other durable materials. The soil strip is then rolled up like a jelly roll to form the snail and taped or banded firmly so the soil won't escape. Set the snail on one end in a waterproof tray. Seeds can be sown before rolling or after, according to the stated depth on the package directions. The snail is placed under a grow light and can be covered with plastic to maintain moist conditions until the seeds germinate. Water, light and half-strength fertilizer are provided until the seedlings are ready to be separated and potted into larger containers or planted into the garden.

I saved one of the plastic tablecloths from our November dinner meeting and plan to experiment with the snail method this year. Wilma Willard had good results growing snapdragons in snails last year. See photos. Her snails were made of cushioned mailing packages. If interested in learning more, there are several YouTube videos and articles online.

**This “snail” is one that is welcome in my garden!**

1

Roll the “snail” tightly and secure it.

2

Seed the “snail” and keep moist.

3

Snapdragons sprouted in the “snails.”



— *Invasive Trees*

# Not So Heavenly

BY SUZANNA TUDOR, PCMG CLASS OF 2004

One of the ways we can “help others grow” is the ability to spot plants and insects not native to our environment. Because these undesirable invasive species wreak environmental and financial havoc and crowd out our native species, we need to be informed and vigilant to identify, report and destroy them.

One such invasive plant is the Tree of Heaven (ToH), *Ailanthus altissima*. I recently learned more about this not-so-heavenly tree during a fall webinar hosted by Bob Bruner from Purdue’s Department of Entomology. Bruner offers periodic webinars on various topics that you can sign up for and view. Once enrolled, you can review it later via a link sent to your email.

Other names are Stink Tree, Stinking Sumac, Chinese Sumac, Varnish tree. ToH resembles our Black Walnut tree. It was introduced from China in the late 1800s. ToH has a strong, unpleasant smell, and its sap can cause heart issues in some people. When it escapes into uncultivated areas it can crowd out native trees. In addition, a new invasive species, spotted lanternfly, favors this tree and seems to be attracted to it. Spotted lanternfly is very destructive to fruit.

**For a more detailed introduction to the Tree of Heaven, how to report, treat or remove, Bruner offers the following:**

Tree of Heaven Presentation by Lenny Farlee:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rv2EjGukqy8>

Penn State materials:  
<https://extension.psu.edu/tree-of-heaven>

ReportINvasive resources:  
<https://ag.purdue.edu/reportinvasive/>



## EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES





2025 GOLD BADGE RECIPIENTS

## 2025 Volunteer Awards

### GLORIA POTTER, PCMG CLASS OF 2009

Our president, Kristine Sandrick, announced at the PCMGA Annual Meeting that the following members received the **“Volunteers of the Year Award.”** Congratulations and thank you to LuAnn Troxel, Maureen Phillips, Kathy Ruble, Marty Seroczynski, Margaret Mudd and the late Janet Magnuson!

**“Long-Term Volunteer Awards”** were bestowed to Debbie McCormick, Nancy Rosene, and Maureen Phillips.

**Special mention** was given to Maureen Phillips for her involvement as the following: Founder – 2003, Gardening Show co-creator, Garden Walk Chair - 2005, President – 2006-2007, Publicity and Promotion Chair - 2009-2014 and 2017-2018 as well as Gardening Show Chair – 2014-2017.

We appreciate you all!



MAUREEN PHILLIPS



(continued on page 12-14)  
Photography Credits: Nancy Rosene

## 2025 Badges Earned

# Stepping up in Service

The following Purdue Extension Master Gardener (EMG) Program members were awarded new levels and appropriate badges at the PCMGA Annual Meeting in November. Congratulations to all and thank you for "helping us grow" through your service. -Nikki Witkowski, Porter County Extension Educator, Agriculture & Natural Resources

## Certified EMG

Linda Alessi  
Richard AmRhein  
Pamela Carpenter  
Rita Davia  
Michelle Hanson  
Hakenah Hulitt  
Gail Kemper  
Lois Peterman

## Advanced EMG

Linda Alessi  
Richard AmRhein  
Toni Bianchi  
Elaine Caporale  
Greg Carter  
Michelle Hanson  
Albert Hulitt  
Kelly Kwirosz  
Mary LaRocque  
Sarah Lively  
Debbie Marshall  
Lois Peterman  
Szu-Ping Wong

## Advanced EMG Bronze

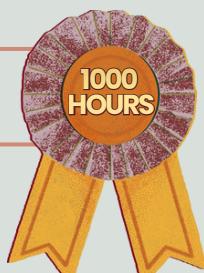
Toni Bianchi  
Gordana Gerbick  
Ann Gwin  
Gail Kemper  
Paul Pivoris

## Advanced EMG Silver

Sheri Gow  
Ronald Hermance  
Margaret Mudd  
Carol Redlin-Cooper  
Beverly Thevenin  
Marlene Vanderlin

## Advanced EMG Gold

Amy Carmody  
Terry Marsch  
Debbie McCormick



## Advanced EMG Gold

Beverly Ripley  
Kathy Ruble



## Advanced EMG Platinum

John Nash





GARDEN THYME

15

# 2025 BADGE STEP UP RECIPIENTS



Congratulations all!





# 2025 VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR



## ANN CIERNIAK

BY KRISTINE SANDRICK, PCMGA PRESIDENT

From what I've seen over the past 6 or 7 years, the volunteers of the PCMGA have several key traits in common: Knowledgeable about PCMGA; extraordinary commitment, hard working volunteer, easy to work with, won't take NO for an answer!

These traits came to my mind as I selected the 2025 Volunteer of the Year. Past president Sue Spelde presented the first award in 2019 to Janet Magnuson. Sue said she created the award for, "someone who epitomized what being a member of the PCMGA means ...who stood the test of time and year after year put PCMGA first and showed their admiration and respect for the organization in everything they did. It wasn't about being an officer or a committee chairperson necessarily or volunteering to do the most things but more about the 'get in there and get it done' attitude. The person who is not looking for accolades

but really deserves them." Past award recipients are LuAnn Troxel, Maureen Phillips, Kathy Ruble, Marty Seroczynski and Margaret Mudd. These PCMGA volunteers have at least one trait in common - a commitment to doing what's best for the organization and our mission.

This year's recipient joined in 2003, making her one of our original members. During her 23 years of service, she served two terms as president, chaired four Gardening Shows, plus three additional years managing to keep the show on track despite COVID and the Expo Center closing for renovation. This is a person who doesn't hesitate to raise her hand whenever she can help, and I for one am so grateful she stepped up this year to serve as secretary.

**Ann Cierniak, please accept The Volunteer of the Year Award for 2025!**



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