

Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association: Presents annual industry awards

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In addition to its annual Hall of Fame induction, the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) presented several other annual Industry Awards during a banquet on February 4, 2026, in Stevens Point.

The WPVGA Associate Division Business Person of the Year Award was presented to Penney Hammer of Progressive Ag Risk Management Specialists. As a 25-year WPVGA Associate Division member and crop insurance agent, Hammer has helped growers recover losses from plant diseases and extreme weather and catastrophic events. She and business partner Ray Grabanski attend and support the annual Putt-Tato Open golf outing, the largest fundraiser for the Associate Division, and are event sponsors of the annual Industry Show in Stevens Point. Penney has been the secretary/treasurer of her local chamber of commerce and is involved in non-profits. It's a passion of hers to help the underserved of her community.

Brittany Bula was named the WPVGA Volunteer of the Year. Brittany grew up working on her family's second-generation farm, Bula Land Company, LLC, of Plainfield, a grower of potatoes, corn, peas and beans, with a trucking arm primarily focused on the safe transport of Midwest potato crops. Brittany manages all office operations for the farming and trucking divisions. She has been an active member of the Wisconsin Potato Growers Auxiliary for more than 10 years, serving for six years on the Auxiliary Board, including one year as president. Brittany has enjoyed volunteer work with the Spudmobile and hosting Harvest Parties for students at the schools where the mobile educational unit visits. She helped kickstart the "Potatoes in the Classroom" program five years ago and has sold baked potatoes at the annual WPS Farm Shows, in Oshkosh, and Harvest Fairs, in Milwaukee. Brittany is

also a member of the WPVGA Promotions Committee.

This year's WPVGA Young Grower of the Year Award went to Joe Seis, owner and manager of Sterling Farms, LLC, a first-generation potato, vegetable, and grain farm located in Grand Marsh. Sterling Farms raises around 350 acres of russet, yellow, and creamer potatoes, plus canning crops and grain. Joe performs and directs the main day-to-day operations of the 1,500-acre farm, and in 2022, he was invited to be a grower-member of Farmers of the Roche-A-Cri, one of Wisconsin's producer-led watershed groups that focuses on cooperation and education between farmers and their non-farming neighbors. Last year, Joe was elected to the Wisconsin Potato Industry Board, and in 2025, he and his family were featured on PBS's "Wisconsin Foodie" to help promote Healthy Grown potatoes.

The WPVGA Researcher of the Year Award was presented to Dr. Yi Wang, who has been actively engaged with the potato and vegetable growers of Wisconsin for over seven years since she joined UW-Madison as a faculty member and a state extension specialist. She specializes in sustainable vegetable production and precision agriculture. Her research and extension efforts have encouraged the adoption of variable rate irrigation by growers to save as much as a million gallons of water per acre. More recently, Dr. Wang conducted several years of research on innovative AI-driven technologies such as drones, robots, and machine learning to develop new decision support tools that precisely apply the right amount of fertilizer at the right time, reducing nitrate leaching in vegetable cropping systems.

As the out-going WPVGA board president, John Bustamante of Wysocki Family Farms, in Bancroft, presented the President's Award to his father-in-law, Kirk Wille, in grateful appreciation for his dedication to the industry and impact on mentoring future generations.

Joe Kertzman, managing editor of the Badger Common'Tater, received the Agri-Communicator Award for excellence in communication and outstanding service to the potato and vegetable industry. He publishes an outstanding monthly magazine while generating advertising revenue above projections for the WPVGA. Joe attends and covers all major industry events and assists with the WPVGA's export expansion effort by helping Wisconsin host reverse trade missions for Canadian and Mexican buyers and attending trade shows in Mexico and Canada. Joe also attended the National Potato Council's Washington Summit, in 2025, lobbying members of Congress. Joe has outstanding communication skills.

Special Industry Appreciation Awards went to Brian Bushman and Trisha Grezenski of Bushman Trucking LLC, in Galloway. More than a year ago, the WPVGA lost a valuable member of its team when Spudmobile driver George Neuber sadly passed away. After several months of searching for the ideal candidate to drive the Spudmobile, Brian and Trisha stepped forward. Brian is a lifelong potato farmer whose 68-year career reflects the grit, pride, and evolution of Wisconsin's potato industry. He loves farming, shipping, and the trucking side of the business. Trisha brings a strong background in trucking and a growing passion for agriculture. Trisha hauled potatoes for 12 years, gaining firsthand experience with the logistics of moving crops from farms to their destinations. Most recently, Brian and Trisha have been sharing their knowledge, answering questions, and educating the public about potatoes and farming as interim drivers of the Spudmobile mobile education unit.

A third Industry Appreciation Award was presented to Dr. Russell Groves, a Professor and Extension Specialist in the Department of Entomology at the University of Wisconsin (UW)-Madison, and a trusted partner and advocate for Wisconsin's potato and vegetable growers. His work is grounded in listening to growers, understanding their challenges, and delivering practical, research-based solutions that improve pest management decisions while supporting the long-term sustainability of Wisconsin agriculture. He develops and expands insect pest management tools within the UW Vegetable Disease and Insect Forecasting Network to help producers proactively manage insect and disease risks across Wisconsin and beyond. Russ is the driving force behind the annual Grower Education Conference, identifying speakers and topics and finalizing the agenda for what has become the best potato show in the country.

A fourth and final Industry Appreciation Award was presented at Tuesday's Industry Show luncheon to Jerry Pierce of the Hancock Ag Research Station.