

## Low Maintenance Gardening Strategies

Marji Hess, Garden Manager  
Gary Comer Youth Center Rooftop Garden  
[mhess@gcyhome.org](mailto:mhess@gcyhome.org)  
tel 773.358.4070

- Low-maintenance/cover crops/layering/companion planting: **Make Your Plants Work for You!**
- Replace weeds with plants that do something for you, feed your soil and have plants work together to keep disease/insects under control.
- **Layering / intensive / combination planting**
  - Good combinations:
    - Tomatoes with basil (globe variety) and marigolds (mounding, planted close together)
    - Potatoes with sunflowers
    - Okra with turnips
    - Strawberries as natural mat
    - Summer flowers (cosmos, snapdragons, sunflowers) provide shade for low-growing leafy vegetables
- **Bridge Plants: Grow across the seasons**
  - Head lettuce: Plant 6 inches apart; Harvest every other head in about 30 days (during spring term); let other heads keep growing to full size (ready for early summer garden).
  - Cabbage: Grow small headed varieties in spring and again in fall
  - Tomato 'Glacier': Determinate tomato, bears early (58 days) and continues throughout season
  - Summer seeded plants: gourds, pumpkins, watermelon, popcorn, peanuts, sunflower seed;
  - Potatoes: plant in spring/early summer, harvest in summer or even fall, depending on variety.
  - Snapdragons: grow from spring through frost; Select from mounding, dwarf and tall (18" – 3'). Makes nice cut flower, keeps producing throughout summer and fall
  - Sunflowers: pick variety based on height, color and maturity; end spring and summer session by planting a row of sunflowers; can grow pole beans and climbing flower vines on sunflowers (morning glories and moonflowers)
  - Plant flowers good for drying (Everlastings): strawflowers, Gomphrena (purple and red varieties), Irish bells, Money plant
  - Herbs such as basil, oregano and dill are versatile. They are ideal fresh but can also be easily dried by just hanging them in bunches. Once they have dried (a week or two), take a large zipper-lock bag and use your hands to gently rub the leaves off the stems right into the bag. Viola! Fresh dried herbs. We purchased small bottles and labels and made them into gifts for the youth, seniors and visitors – they were a big hit!
- **Perennials / Grasses provide seasonal-interest:**
  - Grasses on the rooftop:

Calamagrostis 'Karl Foerster' Feather Reed Grass: A columnar, cool season, medium-sized, early-blooming ornamental grass, known for its late spring green-pink-purple inflorescence, winter effect, and vertical architectural lines. It is one of the first grasses to come out of winter dormancy. It is very winter hardy to zone 4a which makes this plant a winner for most residents of the USA.)

- Eragrostis spectabilis / Purple Love Grass: (red-purple flowers in June-August and cover the plant in a reddish cloud; foliage turns reddish in the fall.
  - Molinia Moorflame: (compact mounds of green foliage developing rich purple autumn hues with upright dark flower stems turning a wonderful orange in winter).
  - Sesleria autumnalis /Autumn Moor Grass: (semi-evergreen; sun or partial shade, tufted mound, held erect late summer to fall, becomes silvery white, lime green foliage)
  - Sesleria heufleriana / Blue-green Moor Grass (semi-evergreen; sun; early spring flowers are black with cream yellow pollen sacs; leaves are mostly green in early spring; becomes blue by early summer, remains blue in winter.)
- **Cover crops:**
    - winter rye (plant September, not too thick!) Makes a green compost for your soil. Turn under before rye gets more than an inch or two high. Allow 2 to 3 weeks until planting.
    - Johnny's Select Seed catalog has an informative section.