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By RACHEL COLEMAN

- Leader & Times

After several years of drought-like conditions, Liberal has looked greener this month, thanks to a week of intermittent rains. However, lusher lawns and brighter flowers don't mean things are back to normal in the garden.

"Everything looks so beautiful," said Liberal resident Ronna Stump, "but that doesn't mean I'm getting much produce out of my garden." Stump said of the Community Garden, which she supervises as part of her job at Liberal Parks and Recreation Department, is equally nice-looking.

"It seems like they're doing really well, but of course, a lot of the folks out there have been doing this for years and years," she said.

The Community Garden, operated by the city on an empty lot at the corner of Clay Ave. and Pine Street, offers 37 plots, 30-by-30-feet each, for Liberal residents who want to grow gardens but don't have space to do so at home. A \$15 fee secures the lot, and the city provides free water from April 1 to late October.

Overall, gardens have fared better this summer than trees and grass, said K-State Extension/Agricultural Agent Kylee Harrison.

“I haven’t gotten a lot of calls about garden questions,” she said. “It’s mostly trees and yards that have people worried. Almost every time, it turns out to be caused by environmental disturbance — drought.”

Master Gardener Joe Stoddard agreed.

“The trees and shrubs had a hard time this year. Those two late freezes we had took a toll. Some of the trees had leaves in the formation stage, and while the freeze didn’t kill them, it stunted them. They just don’t look right,” he said. “I’m afraid that with a dry summer overall, which we ought to be used to but we’re not, some of the trees might not make it through the next winter.”

Stoddard said applying fertilizer to struggling trees is a bad idea.

“If you do that, there will be lots of tender new growth which, when winter comes, can be damaged even more,” he said. The best choice is to “make sure they get plenty of water, and then next spring, once the freezes have stopped, fertilize them heavily.”

Stoddard is less concerned about his garden, which hasn’t suffered from the high temperatures earlier in July, nor the rainy, cool conditions afterwards.

“Everything’s doing great,” he said. “Most of gardening is about how much care you give your plants. A lot of people plant something and water a little bit, and don’t look at it again until they realize it hasn’t done much for them.” By contrast, Stoddard’s carefully-tended vegetable garden has yielded “great tomatoes, green beans, onions,” he said. “Cucumbers, not so much.”

The recent rain and cooler night temperatures should make a positive difference for gardeners whose plants are not as prolific as Stoddard’s.

“We’ve had a little break, which will help. Tomato plants especially don’t do well if the

temperature stays warm at night. If it's 80 degrees or more, they won't set on. But now that it's cooled down, everyone should have some good little green tomatoes setting on."

The unpredictability of gardening in Kansas is what makes it enjoyable, Stoddard said.

"Every year, you have some things that do better than expected, and others that don't. That's what makes it fun," he said. "We people are an impatient bunch. We want instant gratification. But with gardening, if you just give it a little time, you'd be surprised at what might happen."

Want a greener thumb?

In conjunction with Kansas State University, the Seward County Extension Office will host a series of Master Gardener classes next winter. The eight-week course of study will meet once a week in February and March of 2014, in Liberal. Kylee Harrison, local extension agent, said the class offers a rare opportunity for gardening enthusiasts. "They only have three or four class locations in the state, and it's been a long time since one was offered in Western Kansas," she said. "I hope people will take advantage of it being this close." The class will be open to about 20 members, and Harrison already has signed up a handful of people.

To add your name to the list of prospective class members, call Harrison at the Seward County Extension office, 624-5604.

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