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Locals get some advice on growing a garden from K-State Extension agent Kylee Harrison Thursday at the Liberal Rec Center. Master gardener Joe Stoddard also talked to the audience about dealing with cold weather such has been seen this spring in Southwest Kansas. L&T photo/Robert Pierce

By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times Despite some below average temperatures, it is officially still spring in Southwest Kansas, and many people have or will be taking advantage of the conditions to make gardens, as well as other plants, grow in their yard.

Local K-State Extension agent Kylee Harrison, with some help from master gardener Joe Stoddard, gave some advice on making that happen Thursday evening at Liberal's Rec Center.

Harrison started by talking about first taking soil samples to see what kind of dirt is in the ground being considered for planting. She also discussed steps for planting a garden, such as picking the right spot, proper watering and sunlight, fertilizing practices and choosing healthy plants from greenhouses or other local vendors.

Harrison said she is hosting a master gardener program next winter, and she invites anyone to participate.

"I've got a form, and they can give me their contact info," she said.

Harrison then talked about proper ways to water a garden, and she said with the unusual spring weather this year, growers need to take care to also prevent freeze damage.

With soil sampling, Harrison said experts recommended at least four samples from a garden, lawn or flower pot.

“Put them into a clean container,” she said. “Mix them up. Take out the leaves or any other organic material. You’d like to sample at least 6 to 8 inches deep. Avoid sampling in old fence rows, low spots or areas where there could’ve been any feeding going on that could alter the effect of the soil sample.”

Harrison said bags are available at the Seward County Extension office at 1081 Stadium Road in Liberal to use for soil samples.

“They can pick those up,” she said. “They’re free. Fill it up to the stated line that’s on the bag. Fill out the form. Send it in. Just the basic sample which test for pH, phosphorous, potassium, nitrates and organic matter is \$6 plus shipping. It usually takes about two weeks to get that back.”

Plant growers can use an auger to sample soil, and Harrison said the Extension office has one on hand for use.

“They can check it out if they need to,” she said.

As for where to send soil samples, Harrison said that information is on the sheet given out with the bag soils are gathered in.

“The address is on the sheet that they have to fill out and send with it, but its to the soils lab on campus at K-State in Manhattan,” she said. “Either they can send it themselves and pay their own shipping, or they can bring it to me and I can send it. I will charge shipping though.”

Harrison said some common planting mistakes people make include not taking soil samples and watering adequately.

“They’re just pouring fertilizer on the ground, but they don’t know if that’s the right amount,” she said.

Stoddard said many in Southwest Kansas likewise mistakenly put lime in the soil before planting.

“We don’t need lime in this part of the country,” he said. “Our soil’s alkali already. Back east, they put lime on their soil because they’ve got acidic soil. The people don’t know that sort of stuff.”

Harrison said pH levels of about 6 to 7 are recommended for soils, but area soils usually around 8.

Stoddard said growers also need to be careful when selecting a fertilizer.

“It doesn’t always state on the sack what percentage of what it is, but if anybody just goes with good sulfate here, they’re going to be in good shape,” he said.

The winterlike conditions of the spring season have understandably created some adverse conditions for planting, according to Stoddard.

“This time last year, I had tomatoes on the vine,” he said. “I haven’t even planted anything this year. It’s just the coldest we’ve ever had it this late in the year, and there’s nothing you can do about it. You can cover up a few things. You’re not going to cover up that 60-foot tree.”

Stoddard said trees can grow new leaves up to six times a year with little, if any, harm.

“I have some trees that have frozen on the leaves,” he said. “They’re going to turn black and fall off, and they’ll get new leaves.”

Stoddard said last summer’s hot dry conditions also created stress for many area plants, and he said with more recent cold conditions, this could be really hard on a plant.

“We’ve got a town full of trees in the older part of town that people don’t water,” he said. “They haven’t had any water for the last two summers, and there are going to be a bunch of dead trees in this town. A lot of people aren’t going to know it until that tree’s dead.”

As with water, 32 degrees is a guideline temperature for freezing conditions, but Stoddard said those conditions need to exist for many hours before damage can happen.

Harrison said the amount damage also depends on what type of plant a person is dealing with.

“There’s some plants that are more hardy than others,” she said. “All plants aren’t going to be instant. The day after the freeze, you’re not going to be tell if it’s dead or not. You kind of have to wait.”

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