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SHARING BOUNTY OF TWILIGHT YEARS IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND PLENTY

Author(s): MIKE CASSIDY column **Date:** December 6, 1998 **Section:** Silicon Valley Life

LOUIS and **Virginia Saso** have spent half a lifetime growing a garden of herbs to feed the stomach and heal the body.

But what they've ended up with is an oasis where a lucky few tend to their own souls as fervently as they care for the Saso's plants.

One by one, after hearing by word of mouth, they come to serve as apprentices at the one-acre Saratoga garden. They learn pruning and grafting. They learn about organic farming and herbology. But they take home much more.

"I'm creating more of a life I want," says Carol Barbieri, who left Apple's R&D machine after 13 years. "I'm much happier. I don't have to get into that rat race."

Now, she consults half time, sells blue-green algae as a nutritional supplement and volunteers to help keep the Saso garden healthy.

"It's not just about money, money, money," she says. "For me, it's a very peaceful place.

The Sasos think so, too. It's a landmark, across from West Valley College, where for more than 30 years, the couple has grown herbs for cooking, healing and even home decorating. They've all but quit retailing, but like many Silicon Valley success stories, the Sasos can't walk away even after all they've accomplished.

The work will ease in the winter months, and the volunteers will take a break until February. But the Sasos will tend the winter plants, and the load will pick up again in the spring.

"When you're 82 years old, you're supposed to retire -- 15 years ago," Louis Saso says.

But the garden surrounds the couple's 65-year-old Craftsman. And old customers, they beg them to keep supplying hard-to-find herbs. And there are Louis' own needs.

"You've got to keep exercising your mind," he says, "as well as your body."

And so, about three years ago, the Sasos started inviting the apprentices. They help care for the garlic, ornamental oregano, Fever Few, Grecian Bay Leaf, collards, peppers, lettuce, gingko, thyme, sage and hundreds of other plants.

Learning by doing

Once a week, for about two months, a half dozen or so apprentices spend a morning a week, working and learning. When the formal education ends, some like Barbieri keep coming.

For many of them, digging into the dirt is like unearthing an entirely new world. One far away from Silicon Valley.

"Not everyone here is an engineer," says Dawn Martin Kruetzfeldt, 31, a volunteer and Hewlett Packard product development leader.

In the garden, products mature at their own pace. There is no speed-up. No way to rush.

What counts

"I'm kind of at the stage in life where I realize there is more to life than work," Martin Kruetzfeldt says.

The garden is a place where staying put is valued, where old ways are sometimes the best.

"After 35 to 40 years, you begin to learn," is how Louis puts it. "It's a lifetime thing."

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