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TIME IS RIPE FOR PAIR TO MOVE ON

Author(s): MIKE CASSIDY, column **Date:** May 28, 2000 **Section:** Front

IT'S BEEN a good run for Virginia and Louis Saso.

Thirty-eight years on Fruitvale Avenue in Saratoga, raising eight kids and more plants than anyone could ever count. Nearly four decades of love and grandchildren and tending to the souls of Silicon Valley hard-chargers who sought just an hour's peace in their herb garden.

But it is time to move on. Time to leave their home and the Saso Herb Garden, a valley institution of their own making.

Louis is 84. Virginia is 75. And they have their whole lives ahead of them.

"God, I don't want to part with it." Louis last week was taking maybe his millionth walk through the acre of exotic herbs, grafted fruit trees and flowers. "But I've got to use common sense and say, 'I did my part.' "

He did it. He did it beautifully. But he can't do it anymore.

Virginia remembers the day, it was a hot one this spring, when she realized that. The couple were working in the garden, wrestling with plants and weeds and soil and they sat to rest.

"You know, Louis," Virginia said then. "I can't do this anymore. You can't do this anymore. I think it's time."

Time to sell their house and their acre. Time to move to Santa Cruz County to a smaller place, closer to their children. Virginia always said that she and Louis would die on their land on Fruitvale, but she didn't mean she wanted the land to kill them.

Louis' legs aren't what they used to be. They get tired. Caring for the 500 varieties of plants is a labor of love, but it is labor. Daily labor.

"Mentally, I think like I'm 29," says Louis. "I come out here and I do like a 29-year-old. Then I go in the house and I'm worn out."

The garden has been much more than the Sasos' back yard. For years they sold plants and herbs as a business. They gradually cut back the hours and then the days and then closed up the retail operation altogether four years ago. Louis and Virginia both gave classes at the garden on herbs and grafting and crafts. They led monthly tours, and they plan to continue until they move out this summer or fall.

They've hosted sunrise worship, workshops and a memorial service for one of their sons under the big oak in front of their 1918 Craftsman home. About five years ago, they started an apprentice program, where would-be gardeners came to work one day a week for eight weeks.

Andrew Mount is a recent apprentice who so fell for the place that he worked to find a wealthy individual or individuals to buy the house and garden and run it as a community healing center.

That seems unlikely now. The Sasos have a serious offer from a local family looking for a new home.

Some apprentices refused to quit when their classes were finished. They became volunteers, helping Virginia and Louis run the place.

"Louis and Virginia have been my family," says Lonni Goldman, 35, who became an apprentice right after she moved from Maryland about five years ago. "It makes me cry when I think about it."

Goldman still volunteers at the herb garden, sometimes bringing her 21-month-old daughter, Rebecca, who calls the Sasos "Noni and Popi."

"I'm really going to miss that place."

Not as much, of course, as Virginia and Louis.

Louis walks through the garden now knowing that he has a finite number of walks through it left. He points out the exotic fruit trees -- an avocado grafted to bear fruit in winter, spring, summer and fall; a tree growing peaches, plums and apricots. He points out the herbs that prevent pulmonarydisease, the 30 kinds of oregano, the ginkgo.

"This is what I wanted in my life," he says.

He and Virginia bought the place across from West Valley College for \$31,500. They've listed it for \$2.5 million and have a potential buyer willing to pay in that neighborhood. The Sasos haven't had a chance to ask the prospective buyers about publicity and so they are keeping their names secret for now.

Most important, Louis says, the buyers have said they plan to maintain the garden.

To the Sasos, that is as important as all the money in the world.

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