

Santa Cruz County Stories, Virginia Saso: famous herb garden co-founder trained

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Santa Cruz County Stories, Virginia Saso: famous herb garden co-founder trained many county herbalists



Virginia Saso founded Saso Herb Gardens in Saratoga with her late husband Louie.

By ISAIAH GUZMAN - Sentinel correspondent

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SANTA CRUZ -- Virginia Saso's memory is fading, so she can't remember all the names of many of the plants in her garden.

"I don't know what that is," says the 86-year-old, running her hand over the leaves of a waist-high bush. "It's a type of hydrangea."

She can't always recall life as a young lady either -- "That was a long time ago," she says -- but her family and scrapbooks full of old newspaper clippings piece together a life lived both in sync with and ahead of its time.

Saso house kept, reared eight kids and did much of the dirty work as she and her husband Louie ran three family businesses. With Louie, she helped start the well-known Saso Herb Gardens in Saratoga in the early 1970s, and together they educated people on organic gardening and the medicinal properties of herbs decades before garlic pills landed on Safeway's shelves.

And in the early 1940s, when women weren't often handed a higher education, she was offered a college scholarship but turned it down to elope with 26-year-old Louie a month before her 18th birthday.

"She told her mother but not her father," says Saso's 63-year-old son, Steve Saso.

Virginia and Louie taught classes through West Valley College under a 500-year-old oak tree in their backyard. They grew thousands of herbs, at one point more than the U.S. Botanic Garden in Washington, D.C.

Potpourri, dried flower and herb wreaths, and herbal teas were Saso's specialties.

"They had fans way, way back when people were just getting in to natural foods, natural medicine," says Saso's daughter, Mary Lou Saso, 56.

Before the herb garden, Louie and Virginia owned a wholesale produce business for 25 years, and River Grove Park in Felton during the 1960s.

They sold the herb garden and moved to Santa Cruz in 2000.

"It was everything," Saso says.

The past few years have not been easy for Saso. She lost two sons in their 50s to cancer, and Louie passed in 2005.

But while her mind isn't as sharp as it once was, Saso still works in her garden an hour each day. Until recently, she was a board member of The Gardeners' Club in Aptos, which honored her in July with a Lifetime Membership Award and established a scholarship in her name.

The grandmother of 17 and great-grandmother of seven doesn't take any prescription medications, just herbal tinctures, the same kind she and Louie were promoting 40 years ago.

"A lot of the herbalists and such in our community have been taught by Louie and Virginia," says Cherry Thompson, club president. "She really is just wonderful."

Virginia Saso

Born: June 16, 1924, in Sunnyvale

Previous occupations: Owned three businesses with late husband Louie, the last being the renowned Saso Herb Gardens in Saratoga. At one point, Saso Herb Gardens had more herbs than the U.S. Botanic Garden in Washington, D.C. Louie and Virginia also owned River Grove Park along the San Lorenzo

River in Felton.

her garden: Saso's home garden has more than 100 different types of herbs, flowers,

vegetables and fruits, including apricots, loquats, pears, oranges, lemons, plums, grapes and a variety of guavas.

As a girl: She grew up picking and drying cherries, apricots and prunes in her father's orchards.

Ahead of her time: Virginia and Louie used to teach organic farming when the practice was not yet widespread. They taught people how to use herbs to control insects instead of pesticides. 'They had a lot of influence on a lot of people when people were just getting into natural medicine,' says daughter Mary Lou Saso.

Planting seeds: Saso raised eight kids. She has 17 grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

Buy some seeds: www.saso.com