



Louis Eugene Saso 1916—2005

The herbal community lost one of its grandfathers with the passing of Louis “Louie” Eugene Saso on August 7 at the age of 89. Louie was a friend and mentor who touched the lives of so many herbal practitioners, teachers, researchers, authors, horticulturalists, and students. He was a favorite speaker at herb gatherings, where he exuded his unique charm and confidence in herbal healing, and a passionate dedication to organic herb growing.

With his wife Virginia, Louie created Saso Herb Gardens in Saratoga, CA, in 1974, an oasis in the high technology jungle of Silicon Valley. Harbingers of the Herbal Renaissance, they dedicated their gardens to St. Fiacre, the patron saint of herb gardens and a seventh century healer in Ireland and France. Little did they realize that their gardens would become a holy place for serious herbalists, whose pilgrimages to the gardens were part of their quest for the Herbalist’s Stone. The Sasos taught workshops on herb cultivation and wreath making, held an annual herb fair, and hosted medicinal herb classes with herbalists Chris Hobbs, Kathi Keville, Brian Kie Weissbuch, and Michael Tierra, among others.

The gardens were a delight to behold, filled with hundreds of varieties of culinary and medicinal herbs, scented geraniums, ornamental oreganos, and rare herbs from around the world. They were constantly evolving, so that every visit held a surprise with a newly designed section or a newly acquired, unusual herb. Truly a man of the soil, one of his great pleasures was demonstrating the rich, friable, dark soil he created through organic techniques (and a bit of enchantment). Today, Louie’s herbs grace hundreds of gardens, including Berkeley Botanical Garden’s Chinese and European medicinal sections.

Louie was born in Portland, Oregon, in 1916. His family moved to San Jose when he was 12, when the Santa Clara Valley was full of fertile orchards. In 1940, he started a wholesale produce business with his two brothers. Louie and Virginia sought a less stressful lifestyle for their family, so they bought a farmhouse on 1 acre in Saratoga in 1962. After 38 years in Saratoga, Louie and Virginia retired to Santa Cruz where he continued growing herbs and grafting fruit trees, one of his favorite activities. He gardened until the end—with a tray of gardening tools attached to his walker—always talking about the plants. Louie had the rare ability to see into people, know what they needed, and offer it without being asked. His caring touched many a heart. Louis is survived by Virginia, his wife of 63 years, six of their eight children, 17 grandchildren, and seven great-grandchildren. He truly leaves a fertile legacy.

One of my fondest memories of Louie was in 1980, during the first of 12 annual classes I taught at Saso Herb Gardens. I was worried about freezing up, so Louie began the class by dancing and chanting around the ancient oak tree in the center of the garden, followed by a blood curdling howl. I laughed too much to be nervous, and his “Druid Ritual” became the introduction to all my future classes there.

—Brian Kie Weissbuch, LAc.

During my first visit to Saso Gardens in the 1970s, my adventure with herbs began and my life changed forever. You could walk through the gardens with Louie and forget you were in Silicon Valley. The spirit of the gardens and the Sasos resonated with more earthbound values! Many Saso herbs became cherished residents at my San Jose home. Louis and Virginia were my sole inspiration for creating Hi`iaka’s Healing Herb Garden in Hawai`i. I even thought of calling it Saso West!

—Barbara Fahs, MA.

*Louie has been my friend and mentor for 30 years, since we first met at Rosemary Gladstar’s herbal retreat. I found his enthusiasm for herbs and learning, and life, delightfully contagious. Louie talked about writing a book, but he gave us a far greater gift. He took us on walks through his gardens and planted seeds of knowledge. A few months ago, Louis gave me yet another plant for my garden, a *Salvia elegans* var. Louis Saso. It bloomed the weekend of his memorial service. Louis would like that.*

—Kathi Keville

Louie Saso was a friend, me above all, hero, in the sense of being a role model as someone who lived a life with great heart. His passion was unmatched, even among those I knew. He always wanted to be acquainted with new and exciting people but had a true reverence for the great ones too. As we walked together in the garden, he would point out many treasures hiding amongst more common herbs. He seemed to intuitively know what each plant needed in order to thrive. I will miss Louie greatly, but he will be with me as I walk in the garden.

—Christopher