

Radishes also serve as handy garden tool

By **JOAN JACKSON**

Knight-Ridder Newspapers

Since radishes are so easy to grow, some gardeners might wonder, "Why bother?" Indeed! It's that very trait — their easiness — that turns radishes into a handy garden tool as well as a tasty vegetable crop.

"The kind of radishes I grow are the big red ones that children grow. You throw out the seed and watch them grow. But then also watch for the benefits as companion plants," says Louis Saso, a lifelong vegetable gardener who, with his wife Virginia, operates Saso Herb Gardens in Los Gatos, Calif.

In their good-companion role, these power workers help the gardener, the soil, and the plants standing alongside each radish:

■ **Row markers.** Because they come up super fast — within a week at the longest — they mark the rows of the much slower root crops such as carrots, beets and turnips. This lets you cultivate along the rows, knowing exactly where you have planted the other seed. Plant radishes alongside the other root crops, or tuck a few radish seeds at the end of each row to serve as markers.

■ **Natural cultivator.** Each expanding radish is like a teensy rototiller. It pushes and loosens the soil. Then, when the fast-growing radish is pulled from the ground, it leaves a hole and makes room for the slower-growing carrots and beets.

"Long, white icicle radishes are ideal for this, especially if you have heavy clay soil or if you want to grow long carrots or parsnips," says Dick Raymond in his book, "Home Gardening Wisdom" (Garden Way, out of print). "Let the radishes grow beyond the eating stage — until they are huge — and then pull them up. The remaining plants will expand and thrive in the newly created spaces."

■ **Trap crop.** Just as the name implies, radishes trap — or catch — bad bugs that invade the garden.

Saso says. Root maggots, leaf hoppers and flea beetles are some of the pests that can't seem to pass up a tasty radish. "They stop to snack on the radishes and are content to stay there eating their fill," Saso says.

■ **Natural repellent.** Radishes can be sown with cucumbers, squash and melons to repel the striped cucumber beetle and with tomatoes to rout the two-spotted spider mite, says Louise Riotte in "Carrots Love Tomatoes" (Garden Way, \$9.95).

■ **Good friends.** The lowly radish is an outstanding companion to stand alongside leafy lettuce, green onions and baby beets. Planted together they are the ingredients for fast salads. Put parsley and other herbs nearby to provide the seasoning.

With all these things going for them, taste and appearance are still the top reasons to grow radishes.

The choices are amazing. Along with the more familiar red, there are white, scarlet, rose, lavender and even black radishes. The interior is even more interesting: the colors are most often white, but some are pink, green or deep-rose tinted flesh. Radish shapes are generally long, but others are oval, top-shaped, or carrot-like. A radish can weigh from less than an ounce to more than 70 pounds. In their honor, the National Garden Bureau is celebrating 1996 as the Year of the Radish.

Both the short-crop radishes such as Cherry Belle and Champion and the Japanese daikons can be planted at any time of the year in South Bay Area gardens. Some daikon radishes can take more than two months to ripen and weigh as much as 70 pounds. The daikon is the most popular vegetable in Japan.

What to do:

A sunny location and loose, well-drained soil are the simple, but important requirements for growing radishes, according to the National Garden Bureau. Radishes planted in heavy soil will grow slowly and

are likely to have misshaped roots.

■ **Most radishes — especially long-rooted varieties and the daikons — like raised beds where deep, loose soil can be easily provided. To enrich the soil, dig in compost. Before planting the seed work in a general all-purpose fertilizer.**

■ **All radishes are grown from seed. Sow the seed exactly where you want them to grow because they can't be transplanted.**

■ **Sow seeds one-half inch apart to a depth of one-half inch with 12 inches between rows. The trick is to sow the seeds thinly, as plants scrunched together have abundant leaves but small roots.**

■ **Cover the seeds lightly and water with a fine mist. Radishes sprout within days but they need a constant supply of water to do so. Dry conditions produce tough roots, while wet conditions result in cracked radishes. When the tops are three inches high, put down an organic mulch to retain moisture.**

■ **Unless your family is willing to eat a lot of radishes at one time, plan on sowing small amounts of seed every week or 10 days, rather than raising one large crop. Radishes left in the ground too long become woody.**

■ **Thin radishes when the seedlings are an inch high, so the plants won't crown each other and produce misshaped roots. The fast-growing short-crop radishes such as Cherry Belle, Champion and Easter Egg Blend need to stand two inches apart. The mid-season Japanese daikons such as Summer Cross and April Cross should be spaced a minimum of three inches apart. The later-crop varieties which require as much as three months to mature include Black Spanish Long, Misato Rose, German Beer and White Chinese.**

■ **Don't add more fertilizer during the growing season. The initial application that is done at the time of sowing provides all the nutrients needed. Adding more fertilizer encourages the plant to have more top foliage and smaller roots.**