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AN HERB GARDEN THAT OFFERED THE SIMPLE SPICE OF LIFE

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AFTER 23 years of operating the Bay Area's best-known herb nursery, Louis and **Virginia Saso** have closed Saso Herb Gardens in Saratoga. They are the latest in a long list of small, family-owned nurseries to close in recent years.

But they're not out of business -- not totally, at least.

"We plan to be open one Saturday a month April through September in 1998. We will continue to offer some workshops, especially Louis' 'Planning an Herb Garden,' and I will offer a variety of wreath classes. And we will continue our free lecture tour of the herb garden on the day that we are open," says **Virginia Saso**.

Their extensive herb garden and nursery surround the Sasos' private home at 14625 Fruitvale Ave., Saratoga, across the road from West Valley College. It is marked by a simple wood sign. They've never owned a cash register.

To garden insiders on the prowl for the latest culinary herbs, everlasting flowers for drying and ingredients for potpourris, the Saso garden has been a mecca for wonderful discoveries.

Their ornamental oreganos, varieties of basil and collection of medicinal herbs are legendary. **Virginia Saso's** outdoor workshops under an old oak tree are popular with crafts people. Two more workshops are scheduled in November.

The Sasos call themselves "reluctant retirees." While age figures into it, upkeep of the extensive nursery forced them to make the decision.

"This is really high-intensive gardening," says Louis Saso. "Probably our biggest headache is the need for constant watering. Pots of herb plants have to be watered every day. There is just no way to do this automatically and be successful."

Three years ago the Sasos started a work-exchange apprenticeship program. "This has worked out well, and we are going to continue this program," he says.

The herb nursery grew out of a horticultural class on herbs that Louis Saso taught in the early 1970s at West Valley College. When Proposition 13 came along and the cost of the class went up, not enough students enrolled. So in 1975, the Sasos began offering Saturday classes in their own back yard.

Recalls **Virginia Saso**, "Since I was a part of Louie's class, teaching about the cooking aspect of herbs as well as about herb crafts, it followed that I also start teaching my own classes on growing and using everlasting flowers and herbs, including wreath classes."

"Our greatest pleasure," she says, "has been in teaching the workshops and in the people that we have met. Herb gardeners are the most wonderful people. It is very special to be able to teach people in a garden. It seems to have a very calming effect on all the participants in the classes."

Herb gardening -- for both culinary and ornamental uses -- is the biggest growing trend in

gardening, a trend the Sasos have encouraged locally with their numerous varieties of lavenders, basil, oregano and such.

"People are discovering that herbs make a great difference in the taste of their cooking, and the herbs grown in the garden are always available. There is hardly a magazine today that doesn't include an article about herbs, whether it is about culinary, ornamental or medicinal herbs," **Virginia Saso** says.

Many herbs used for medicine can be grown in the back yard, among them feverfew (used for migraine), echinacea (an immune enhancer) and St. John's wort (used for depression.)

Medicinal herbs, she claims, will be the next big trend, "especially herbs used in Chinese medicine as well as herbs used in Western medicine."

What are the Sasos going to do with their spare time?

"Of course the upkeep of the gardens will take up most of our time," says Louis Saso, "but first off there will be a cruise to Alaska next year.

"We have made some fantastic friends in the herb business all over the country. Now we will have time to visit them," he says. "There are also some nurseries that we haven't had time to visit. There is always another unusual plant to discover for our gardens."

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