

Articles in S.J. News
Thu. Aug 11 - 2005

Posted on Thu, Aug. 11, 2005

Louis Saso, 89, ran popular herb gardens

By Thaa Walker
Mercury News

For nearly four decades, as Silicon Valley roared forward, Louis Saso offered a bit of peace and quiet at his Saratoga-based Saso Herb Gardens, one of the Bay Area's best known family-owned nurseries before it closed in 2000.

Mr. Saso and his wife of 63 years, Virginia, operated the herb gardens from their home on Fruitvale Avenue, and thousands are said to have visited their one-acre spread filled with exotic fruit trees, flowers and 500 different kinds of culinary, ornamental and medicinal herbs.

Mr. Saso died of congestive heart failure at his Santa Cruz home on Sunday. He was 89.

Known as ``Papa Louie'' to his family and as ``Louie'' to his friends, Mr. Saso was a teacher and a mentor, those who knew him said. He was described as a hard worker who grew softer around the edges as the years went by, a charmer who often answered his wife's call to come to bed most nights with a question that always made her smile: ``What's in it for me?''

Many who visited their Saratoga garden found a respite from the hustle of life in Silicon Valley.

``People get so disconnected from nature,'' said Lee Ann Ray, who had just quit a corporate job in 2000 when she signed up to work at the garden for several weeks in exchange for lessons on gardening.

``Louie taught me it is about more than houseplants. It's about nurturing things from the soil . . . and then sitting with your tea made with herbs you grew yourself as you think about what you've accomplished for the day.''

Mr. Saso was born in Portland, Ore., in 1916. His love affair with the earth and the things that come from it began with his parents, Anthony and Marie Saso, Italian immigrants. Anthony Saso sold fruit and vegetables from a horse-drawn wagon, and at the end of each day, Louis Saso and his two brothers would sell what leftover they could.

The family moved to San Jose when Mr. Saso was 12. In the 1930s, he and his brothers started a wholesale produce business. In later years, Mr. Saso set off on his own to form Hayward Produce, delivering fruits and vegetables to small independent grocery stores.

Around 1941, Mr. Saso re-connected with his future wife, Virginia, whose family owned a fruit ranch in Sunnyvale. The two had met briefly four years

earlier, when she was 13 and he was 21, but romance didn't blossom until they met again at a church picnic.

The couple had eight children. Over the years, they ran a campground in the Santa Cruz Mountains, and in the 1970s after Mr. Saso began to develop a passion for herbs, the family moved to Saratoga and opened the Saso Herb Gardens.

Nearly five years ago, Mr. Saso and his wife decided it was time to slow down and sold the gardens, putting an end to the 38-year Silicon Valley institution.

They bought a home in Santa Cruz, and built a greenhouse and planted fruit trees on the grounds.

In 2001, Mr. Saso suffered a stroke and afterward was only able to get around with the aid of a wheelchair or a walker. But on many days, he could be found in his garden, potting plants.

``He couldn't stop gardening if he wanted to," said his wife. ``He had to keep his hands in the soil."

Louis ``Louie" Eugene Saso

Born: Feb. 16, 1916, Portland, Ore.

Died: Aug. 7, 2005, Santa Cruz.

Survived by: Wife, Virginia; and six children, 17 grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

Services: A celebration of Mr. Saso's life will be held Friday at 7:30 p.m. at Pacific Gardens Chapel, 1050 Cayuga St., Santa Cruz. A memorial Mass also will be at noon Aug. 20 at Holy Cross Church, 126 High St., Santa Cruz.

Memorial: Donations in Mr. Saso's name can be made to the Cabrillo Stroke Center, 501 Upper Park Road, Santa Cruz, Calif., 95065.

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