

DISANTO COMPANIES: DESIGN, BUILD AND MAINTAIN

When DiSanto Companies moved into new and larger quarters in Cleveland two years ago, it renewed and increased its commitment to the landscape industry.

The DiSanto brothers, Dennis and George, decided it was time to expand their outdoor construction and maintenance business into the areas of design, lawn care, and interior landscaping. As a result, DiSanto is now in the top three in the Northeast Ohio market following a 30 percent increase in business in 1977 to more than \$750,000.

Short range goals are to purchase a large, local tree care company, increase its share of the lawn care market, and to continue to actively bid on both interior and exterior construction and maintenance projects.

Since last year, DiSanto has had a full-time landscape designer, Martin Pawlikowski, a graduate of the Ohio State landscape architecture program. Dennis DiSanto predicts that more landscape construction work will be under separate contract from the general building contract as landscapers develop their own design capabilities. The landscape work is often the last completed on a project and, if done improperly, can hold up acceptance and consequently payment to the general contractor. "If it's a sizeable project and the owners or the clients want to make sure the job is done properly, they will pull the landscape contract out of the general contract," Dennis says.

Landscaping has been a part of the DiSanto family for many years. Fred DiSanto, father of Dennis and George, was an estate gardener and exposed his sons to it. In 1959, the company was formed primarily for maintenance. The company's promise has been, "only what your turf and trees need and only when they need it. Some adjustment to this philosophy has been required for the lawn care division.

The company has its own greenhouse, but stays out of the retail



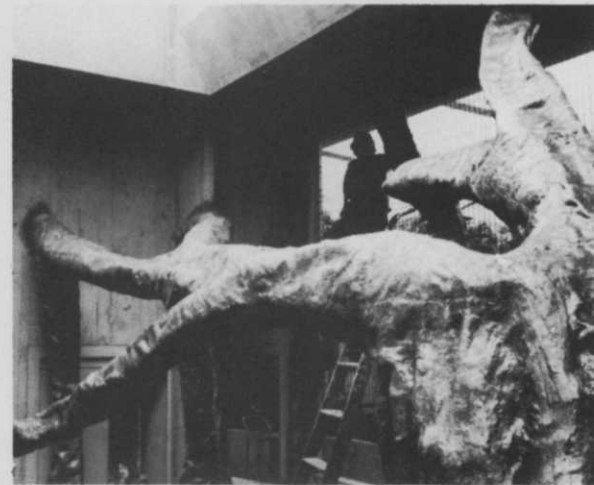
Putting the final touches on the zoo job are (l. to r.) George DiSanto, Dennis DiSanto, Carolyn Brown, and Martin Pawlikowski. The rewards of their efforts in exterior and interior design projects. (right)





Just like the real thing

Before and after photos of the Cleveland Zoo. The old facilities were ugly bars and bare cages. The new quarters have creature comforts like trees to swing on, rocks to climb, and jungle foliage in the background.



The trees are constructed of fiberglass and cement over a steel frame (top). Behind the cages protected by heavy screen are the tropical plants (left).

DiSanto

nursery business. "Retailing is a whole different ballgame from contracting," says Dennis. "It's tough to control both successfully. You have to separate the books because one side might be eating up the profits of the other." He mentioned a case of a business in both retailing and contracting where the retail end was draining the profits of the contracting end. Cost accountants told the owner to phase out or sell the garden center and concentrate efforts on the contracting business. DiSanto sells a small amount of its plant stock to other landscapers in the area.

The advantage DiSanto has over many landscape contractors is the ability to do all types of landscape work from design to maintenance. Currently, 90 percent of the projects designed and constructed by DiSanto are maintained by its crews during and after the guarantee period. It also can, and will, do any size job from maintaining a residential lawn to designing, constructing, and

and small trucks are on three-year leases. Usually, DiSanto buys the vehicles at the end of the lease. Maintenance and repair costs were slightly more than \$40,000 in 1977. DiSanto estimates that for every three pieces of equipment he has one piece in backup.

The company has the following equipment:

- aerator — 1
- forklift — 1
- tractor mowers — 12
- push mowers — 30
- rototillers — 2
- tank trucks — 1
- pickup trucks — 4
- dump trucks — 2
- vans — 3
- tractors — 2
- spray rigs — 3
- cars — 5

Dennis has strong words to say about some of the equipment. "One of our biggest problems is equipment maintenance and repair. Not so much the trucks or tractors, main-

times each day. You can't afford to leave equipment at a job site, it has to be transported." DiSanto tries to impress upon his employees to take care of the equipment.

The company spent approximately \$30,000 for chemicals in 1977. "We do not carry tremendous inventories of chemicals because the products change rapidly within the market," DiSanto says. "We stock up for our spring application, reorder in June for our summer application, and order again in July and August for our fall application. We don't believe in tying up the money or space for a whole year's supply of chemicals."

DiSanto's three divisions each have a different approach to advertising. The landscape division depends entirely upon word-of-mouth advertising. The lawn care division uses direct mail and Yellow Page display advertising. The interior landscaping division uses the Yellow Pages, local magazines, and something extra, a newsletter. The newsletter has proven very effective in educating the customer about the need for regular maintenance.

The interior landscape division, Interior Green, was created in 1975 when DiSanto was awarded the contract for a new mall in Akron, and in response to a growing demand by its customers for tropical plants. In 1977, the division's revenue exceeded \$200,000. DiSanto hired Carolyn Brown, who had experience with tropical plant care at the retail level, to help design and direct the division. Interior Green's latest achievement is providing both spectators and animals in the Cleveland Zoo's new primate center with a tropical environment. A unique design makes the animals appear in a jungle-like setting without the animals actually being near the plants. DiSanto worked with a firm to build cement and fiberglass trees for the monkeys and gorillas inside their cages.

Interior Green has not limited its services to large, commercial clients. It also serves residential, small commercial, and industrial offices with installation and maintenance of tropical plants. Maintenance service includes watering, fertilizing, pruning, pest control, and addition of seasonal flowering plants to add color. Malls, banks, department stores, and office buildings are Interior Green customers.

Interior landscaping presents new challenges to a landscape company, DiSanto says. "All your plant

"When you spend \$3,000 for a mower and it's in the shop once a month at \$150 each time, you get frustrated."

maintaining the huge, two-level, indoor shopping center Randall Park Mall.

The comprehensive design/build/maintain approach is paying off for DiSanto. It is invited to bid on nearly every major landscape project in Northeast Ohio. And when quality is considered equally with price, DiSanto often gets the job. One side effect of emphasis on quality in design is the loss of public jobs due to the one-sided price consideration of public bids.

Types of work subcontracted out by the company are large irrigation work, stone work, and hydroseeding. The company does most of its own patio and deck construction. DiSanto does the rest with an in-season staff of 35 and an off-season staff of eight. In 1977, construction and maintenance each accounted for half the company's business. Very rarely does the company do only design.

Expenditures for equipment in 1977 totalled nearly \$45,000. All cars

ly cutting equipment. I just don't think the manufacturers have really addressed themselves to the landscape contractor who is using equipment six days a week. They are building equipment for the golf course and residential markets, not for the guys who are cutting millions of square footage.

When you spend \$3,000 for a piece of equipment and you have it in the shop more than once a month at \$150 each time, you get frustrated. The main problems are belts, pulleys, reels, chains, and adjustments. The local repair shops can't meet our needs nor can they provide overnight service. That is why we have backup equipment."

DiSanto showed us an old Jacobson estate mower. "They stopped making this mower two years ago. We thought it was a great mower and can't understand why they stopped making it."

"The manufacturers don't seem to realize that we load and unload mowers from trailers six or more

material comes either from Florida or California. Transportation to Ohio is risky because of the delicate nature of the plants. To fill an order for one major project may require three or four different suppliers and three to four months to get the material.

"The important thing with tropical material is the lead time necessary to acclimate the plants to their new growing conditions. Without this adjustment period, during which the plants are shaded, and gradually adjusted to lower temperatures, and humidity, the plants' chance for survival is only 60 percent. DiSanto claims that contracts are now beginning to require acclimatized material. "There are many things unknown about tropical plants and interior landscaping. It's a learning experience trying to keep these plants alive and healthy in a foreign environment."

Interior landscaping is also spreading into residential jobs. A few large homes are now being built or remodeled to accommodate tropical plants as a central feature.

The lawn care division, American Green Corp., incorporated in

1976, started primarily by making the lawn applications for existing maintenance accounts. Designed for the homeowner who does not wish a complete maintenance program, American Green applies herbicides, fungicides, and insecticides as a liquid spray and fertilizers in granular form. The firm also offers liming and a choice of liquid fertilization. Crabgrass preemergents can be mixed with the dry fertilizer and applied together.

The lawn care division uses vans which contain an 800-gallon tank for spraying and enough room for two tons of dry material. This system permits American Green to apply the various chemicals selectively, rather than using the same mixture for all accounts in one day.

As mentioned earlier, the company promises its customers, "only what your turf and trees need, and only when they need it." DiSanto and American Green manager Al DiSante (not DiSanto), have adjusted this policy slightly to align it with the lawn care customer's attitude. "The average lawn care customer is interested primarily in price and

visible results with no headaches. They do not appear to care what you put on their lawn." To confuse the customer with a large number of decisions and prices can make selling difficult. The company is still very willing to discuss alternatives with an interested customer.

Three supervisors are certified chemical applicators. Although the company has eight year-round employees, DiSanto has made it a major goal for the next two years to find a way to employ all valued employees year-round. He is working on other ideas, like interiorscaping, to keep his employees busy in the winter.

One thing that has helped DiSanto and other landscapers in Ohio is periodic meetings held by the state extension service during which contractors candidly discuss major problems. At one recent meeting a landscape contractor from Michigan discussed his business.

The company belongs to the Associated Landscape Contractors of America, Inc.; the Ohio Turfgrass Foundation; the American Horticultural Society; and the Ohio Nurserymen's Association.

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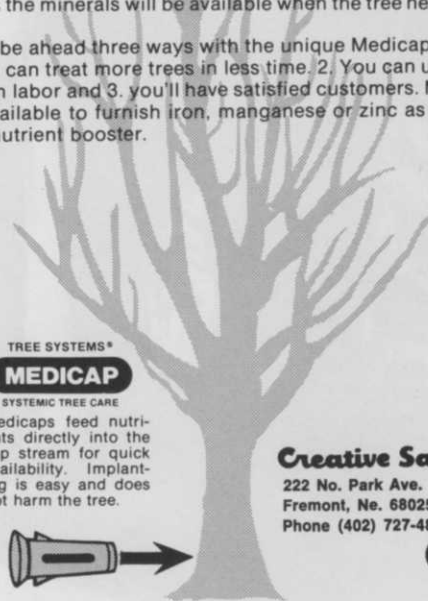
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