



Phil Cavotta (left) wears many hats. Here, he and foremen Tony Gabriele (center) and Fran Cavotta examine blueprints of the recently-completed Galleria (background).

CAVOTTA'S CLEVELAND

In the competitive Cleveland market, one name means landscaping: Phil Cavotta tells how he keeps his business successful.

by Heide Aungst

Phil Cavotta is more than a landscape contractor. He's a philosopher, of sorts.

"I'm like the guy who complains about having no shoes, until he sees a man with no feet," says Cavotta, one of Cleveland's leading landscapers. "I might do a big job of say \$100,000, but I'd like to do a million. The next goal might be a million and three-quarters."

Although he's a high goal-setter, he's quick to come back to earth. "It's not the gross, it's keeping your reputation and it's your rapport with people."

Where he comes from is Cleveland, Ohio. Cavotta, vice president of CLI (Cavotta Landscapers Inc.), runs the company started by his grandfather in the 1920s. His grandfather passed the

business on to Cavotta's uncle, who ran the garden store, and his father, who ran the landscaping operations.

Cavotta, 35, learned his profession by working closely with his father. Today, the company is 75 percent installation, 25 percent maintenance. To his credit are big jobs, such as the world-famous Cleveland Clinic, which hosts the King of Jordan during his checkups

A CORPORATE DECISION

Phil Cavotta has learned only too well the truth behind the old adage, "When it rains, it pours."

Not only were Cavotta's crews tied up trying to finish landscaping Cleveland's Galleria last October, but they also had to cope with installation of a giant retaining wall at the city's 40th Street Service Center.

And the weather didn't help.

"We made a corporate decision to take on two jobs totalling close to \$1 million at the same time," says Cavotta. "But to coordinate two jobs that size, together, was some task."

The Galleria posed the most problems while the Service Center was the more labor-intensive.

"We worked 24 hours a day," Cavotta remembers. "I had to wear a lot of hats. I was at the Galleria an average of 18 to 20 hours a day for two straight weeks."

One of the problems the Galleria posed was that the landscaping was done over an underground garage. Because of the excessive weight on the garage roof that would be created by soil, \$100,000 worth of styrofoam was substituted. The styrofoam was topped with a one-third peat, one-third sand and one-third shredded topsoil combination before plant materials were brought in.

Another problem was the Galleria's location—right in the heart of downtown Cleveland where there was no parking available—and the timing—all the contractors were working to make the same deadlines. ("I must have have \$1,000 worth of parking tickets," Cavotta says. And his feelings about working with the continued interference of other contractors: "If we would've had baseball bats, we would've beaten each other to death.")

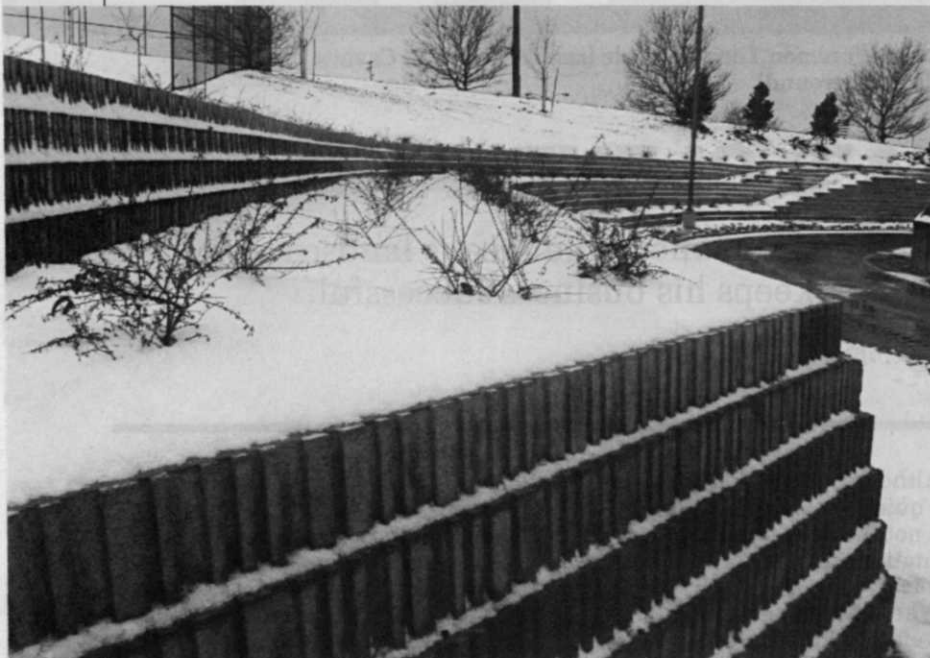
The Service Center retaining wall was 38 feet high and more than 200 feet long. It took 10,000 cement blocks, each weighing 108 pounds. Also involved was the installation of hundreds of trees and shrubs, a sprinkler system and 11,000 yards of bluegrass sod.

"The hardest part of that job, for me, was making the bid. It was the first time in the city's history that a wall like this was built," Cavotta recalls. The job took five-and-a-half weeks.

And what did Cavotta learn from the hectic experience?

"There's no way a landscaper knows everything!"

—Jerry Roche □



A portion of the 10,000-cement-block retaining wall at Cleveland's 40th Street Service Center that took more than a month to install.

(see *Weeds, Trees & Turf*, Sept. 1986, p. 35). Cavotta also installed and maintains the Galleria, Cleveland's newest downtown shopping mall under glass.

Cavotta employs 23 people at peak-season, six in the off-season. He owns 14 trucks, from a pickup to a tractor/trailer. He swears by 21-inch Jacobsen mowers.

In 1987, Cavotta made more than \$1 million. He plans for more growth by playing by the rules, and by making up his own rules.

Following the rules

Five of Cavotta's employees work five days a week for eight months on the Clinic's 80 acres. Because of the hospital's patients, Cavotta's crew follows strict guidelines. "We can't spray during daylight hours," he says. The crew sprays after midnight, when most everyone's asleep and not walking the grounds.

Another rule crews must follow is keeping equipment noise levels down. The Clinic dictates a certain decibel level which can't be exceeded.

Breaking the rules

Still, when Cavotta has a chance to use his ingenuity to get around a problem, he will. And the expressive Italian might just add a hint of rhetoric, too.

"We look at a job and ask, 'Can we do it?' Eventually we come up with an idea," he says.

One of his favorite jobs was the Galleria.

"At first, it was a nightmare," he recalls. That nightmare consisted of

When dealing with his employees and clients, tricks just won't do.

22-hour days to meet the owners' strict Oct. 15, 1987 opening. The weather simply wouldn't cooperate.

"You can fight labor problems...you can fight mechanical problems...but you can't fight the weather," he laments. "What are you gonna do, call God and say 'Hey, turn off the water on East 9th Street?'"

The architects designed the Galleria landscape so that 55 maple trees would be planted on top of an underground parking garage. But Cavotta quickly recognized that the

amount of dirt needed to complete the planting job might make the roof cave in. "We talked about the job for months. We even called a roofing contractor," he remembers. The consensus solution was to use a light non-biodegradable foam, with 1,800 yards of dirt on top of it.

That was also the most expensive solution. The foam itself cost \$100,000. The next trick was to use a 150-ft. conveyor to get the trees to the roof.

Business philosophy

When dealing with his employees and clients, however, tricks just won't do. Cavotta is a straight-forward up-front kind of guy. A family-owned business such as CLI is exactly that—family, whether or not the employee is actually a blood relative. And Cavotta stays close. "I know all their birthdays," he says, referring to his key personnel. In fact, after the successful Galleria project was completed, he took his

foremen and their families to the Bahamas...and picked up the tab.

Running a family-owned business, of course, isn't always easy. "A lot of times if you mix personal feelings with business, it comes back to haunt you. Business is business...family is family."

He even relates his work to family. Asked which landscaping project has been his favorite, he answers: "That's like asking a father which child he likes the most. One's a doctor, one's a lawyer and one's a shoemaker. But you love them all the same."

Just as parents admit they make mistakes, Cavotta easily confesses his. "I've made some mistakes on jobs, like an omission on a bid," he says. "But you learn. It's not all honey out there. There's a lot of vinegar."

Once, on a railroad land reclamation project, he and the hydroseeding crew had to cross a

'It's not all honey out there. There's a lot of vinegar.'

—Phil Cavotta



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bridge to access parts of the job. While they worked, someone took the bridge down. "Now I'm on the other side of the river..." with no way back. That was one of those little things not usually planned on.

Planning ahead

If there's one thing Cavotta has learned through the years, it's to plan ahead for what can be planned. "I wear a lot of hats," he says. "One day I'll be behind a machine moving snow, the next I'm looking at blueprints."

Through such versatility, he's been successful in the competitive northeast Ohio market.

He also knows his plant materials, which is a necessity with climate changes affecting areas near Lake Erie. On the average, for every 10 bids he makes, he is awarded one job. But that's better than most. "My name is synonymous with landscaping in this city," he says proudly. His next goal is to do a project outside of Ohio, "something people can relate to, like the White House."

His secret formula for success probably won't change: "Shoot high...and never forget where you come from." **LM**