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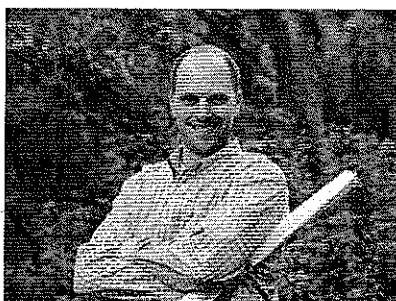
## How'd you land that great job?

March 26, 2008

### Bryan LaComa, landscape designer at In Harmony Sustainable Landscapes

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By Michelle Goodman  
NWjobs.com



GARY LACOMA

Bryan LaComa, a designer at the sustainable landscaping company In Harmony, creates dozens of residential landscape plans each year.

**The job:** "I got sick of being under fluorescent lights all week," says nature lover Bryan LaComa, who ditched his job as operations manager of a Bellevue health club more than a decade ago to cultivate a career in landscaping. After five years working in the field, he landed a design gig with Bothell's In Harmony Sustainable Landscapes, champion of environmentally conscious lawns, gardens and yards since 1994. Today LaComa divides his time between meeting with clients, drafting landscape plans and ensuring that his designs are executed correctly.

**Q. How did you get into sustainable landscaping?**

**A.** I've always been an outdoorsman. My other two passions are fly-fishing and photography. Growing up, I spent half my summers on San Juan Island. I really got a chance to learn firsthand about the land and nature and ecosystems and how a tree grows and falls.

My first landscape training came when I was in high school. I started a mowing company called Mr. Mower. You grow it, I'll mow it -- you know, delusions of grandeur of running the world through a lawn mower. Later on in life when I was in corporate America and wanting to undo some of the wrongs that I've seen done to our region, it was an easy fit for me to get back into the landscape profession.

**Q. So where did you get your formal landscape training?**

**A.** I went through the Environmental Horticulture program at Lake Washington Technical College. It's a one-year intensive program that covers all aspects of the landscape industry, from design to plant knowledge to greenhouse growing operations. You name it, we covered it.

We also worked directly with a lot of the high-end contractors in the area and helped them grow all the plant material for the Northwest Flower & Garden Show. So not only are you getting training, but you're put in front of the companies who are doing the hiring. I got a job coming out of there with a wonderful landscape architect and contractor in the area. I was hired because of my plant knowledge and my strong back, and I worked with [that company] about four years before moving to In Harmony to design.

**Q. How did you dig up the In Harmony gig?**

**A.** My wife is a shrub buyer for a local wholesale nursery, and she just happened to have a conversation with one of the owners of In Harmony when they were looking for a designer. One thing led to another, and I met with the owners here.

That was six years ago now. At the time, I was their only designer. Now we have two full-time staff designers, Malissa Gatton and myself, and we have five outside designers who actively work for us.

**Q. Did you have to show a portfolio to get the job?**

**A.** I had my own landscape maintenance company while I was at [horticulture] school, which allowed me to have a very flexible schedule. So yes, I sat down

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with a portfolio and showed them examples of my design work. But it's more than just what you have on paper that counts. There's a client and a story that goes along with each design.

**Q. What's a typical workday like for you?**

**A.** How much time do you have? The only one constant in landscaping is that there is change. Every day, every hour, you need to be flexible and be willing to compromise. You have clientele that expect certain things, you have guys in the field who are executing your plans who expect certain things, you have duties as an employee. So there's really a lot of juggling that takes place.

Malissa and I both draw by hand. Probably half of our time is actually spent designing. Once our sales staff gets an initial design agreement with a client, the project is ours. We will meet with a client first. And then we usually will bring a minimum of two concepts back to them and give them an idea of how much each is going to cost so they have a say in things. A big part of what we do is getting people excited, getting people involved, trying to educate a little bit about sustainable methods.

From that meeting, we'll go back to our office and work up a final plan and a final estimate and work with clients on getting something installed that meets their budget.

**Q. How involved are you with the implementation of your designs?**

**A.** We're definitely interacting with production. We have a full-time plant procurer here who has our list of plants [for each job]. If we need substitutions for those plants, she'll call us and say, "OK, I've hit all the nurseries. This isn't available. Should we wait? Or, here are six different options of stuff that I saw available." She really makes our life easier.

We're generally there for the first day of a project to walk through [the property] with the crews and explain the plan. We'll talk about plants that are staying, plants that are not staying. We're on site for most of the major parts of a project as well, so patio, water features, woodworking, stone work. We also work as a liaison to the clients, make sure things are the way they expected them to be. Then, thanks to the wonderful technology of the cell phone, we're in constant communication.

**Q. How many projects do you work on at once?**

**A.** Malissa and I each have between eight and 14 designs on our table at any one time. So we're very busy. We really have to stay organized and focused and efficient. On average, I bet we each produce somewhere in the neighborhood of 75 to 100 designs in a year.

**Q. How long does each design project last?**

**A.** It really varies, which makes it even more interesting. Sometimes one of the salesmen will come in and say, "I've got this little part of a yard for this client -- what would you do? Can you give me some plans to figure something out?" Sure, no problem. And we'll do that in a couple of hours.

On the flip side, I'm working on a project in Seattle that is partway installed, and it's been a year and two months now. We're currently working through the permit phase. So the budget and goals of the client really dictate how much we do. It's all over the place.

**Q. What hours do you keep?**

**A.** We're in the customer-service industry. A lot of people get off work at 5 or 6 o'clock and can't meet during the week. So that puts us meeting with clients during the evening or on a Saturday. On average the wintertime is slower, and the spring and summertime [are] all over the place. There are a lot of 35- to 40-hour weeks in the winter, and there are a lot of 60- to 70-hour weeks during the busier season.

From a design side, there's not as much up and down as there is for the rest of the landscape industry. We stay pretty steady. The only thing that changes is that people want the work done quicker as the sun and the temperature [start] rising. They get a little more excited to get out and be a part of their yard.

**Q. What advice can you give someone looking to work as a landscape designer?**

**A.** Education in the field is extremely important. One of the things that's nice about being a designer as opposed to an architect is there are no prerequisites that come with being a landscape designer. Anybody can be one. But if you want to get a job with a company, certainly experience comes into play. And having the education generally shows the world that you made a commitment to this line of work.

But there's no replacing real-world experience. [Landscape] maintenance experience is extremely valuable. To know how plants and trees are going to grow and change and look five years after you've installed them is important. Also some construction background can be helpful. Growing up, I worked for my uncle's construction crew. He was an engineer and architect, so I helped build homes.

**Q. Does In Harmony offer internships?**

**A.** We do weeklong apprenticeships with Lake Washington Technical College. So we will have people

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- Lake Washington Technical College Environmental Horticulture program
- Seattle Tilth
- Northwest Horticultural Society
- Northwest Flower & Garden Show plant blog
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out in the field and on site here. We will have people tagging along with Malissa and me on the design side, too. We have five former Lake Washington grads here on staff. We're all motivated to give something back because the school's a big part of how we all got to where we are.

So if it's [an internship] through an official horticulture program, the school should get in touch with us. We'd be happy to work something out.

*Freelance writer Michelle Goodman is the author of The Anti 9-to-5 Guide: Practical Career Advice for Women Who Think Outside the Cube. She lives in Seattle, where she works from a spare bedroom with her dog Buddy at her feet.*

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