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CASCADIA WEEKLY

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BY TRAIL RAT

## Home & Garden

ADVENTURES IN LANDSCAPING

**PRIMARILY TO** keep myself physically engaged with the natural contours of the earth between trail-building gigs, but also to help pay the bills whenever I'm shackled up in Bellingham during the off season, I have frequently sought out and secured gainful employment as a landscaper.

Although, if given the choice, I will always choose building single tracks through the wilderness over planting tulip bulbs in somebody's backyard, that's not to say I won't do it.

If all the years of down-and-dirty digging and pushing hot, steamy wheelbarrows full of organic mushroom compost around the greater Pacific Northwest have taught me anything, it's that when it comes to generating topographically induced geo-technical predicaments, landscaping and trail work are essentially twins. Not identical twins perhaps, but definitely sharing the same DNA.

For starters, one of the very first things any landscaper learns is that the profession we call landscaping is actually comprised of two distinctive yet ultimately complimentary sub-specialties: hardscaping and softscaping.

Hardscaping generally consists of building various outdoor/garden structures like curving pathways, rustic stone patios, rock retaining walls and/or raised planting beds, each of which is specifically intended to help visually accentuate a smaller individual place (i.e. "pocket") within

the larger confines of an overall space.

Softscaping, on the other hand, concerns itself primarily with the arranging and planting of flowers, shrubs and trees around all those smaller individual landscapes in such a manner so as to help blend or "soften" the whole thing into a topographically compelling, free-flowing space.

Back in the mid-1990s, when I first started landscaping in Seattle, I pretty much relegated myself strictly to softscaping duties. But, as my skill set expanded, I inevitably found myself gravitating to hardscaping.

First I bought a pick mattock, then came a contractor-grade two-wheeler, a 16-pound maul and six-foot-long pry bar. I made a few calls, dropped a few names and suddenly, before I even really knew what the hell I was doing, there I was in the backyard of a palatial multi-million-dollar home in Laurelhurst trundling 300-pound sandstone block after 300-pound sandstone block down a steeply brushy mud-slathered embankment on the shore of Lake Washington.

Although several years later I eventually caught word that at least half the first stone staircase I ever managed to cobble together eventually had to be rebuilt, that initial experience supplied such a mighty boost in my confidence that by the time I finally touched down in Whatcom County later that winter, I felt compelled to share my fledgling hardscaping abilities under the paid apprenticeship of no less than one of the most highly skilled and excruciatingly exacting dry stone masons to ever wield a chinking mallet this side of Chuckanut Drive.

Being a baby boomer and former anti-Vietnam War protester, my master liked to think of himself as just another super-chill, garden variety, laid-back hippie. And pretty much, he was—except whenever he came around to inspect my work.

"And just what the hell exactly do you call that?" I remember him snarling as he pointed out a rather humiliating litany of defects in the four-foot-high rock retaining wall I was trying to build to help stabilize a steep and extremely precarious section of hillside.

"Well," the Master grumped after I failed to conjure up any sort of defense, "to my eyes it hardly fits the bill as a random pile of rocks, let alone a wall."

Then he made me tear the whole thing down and rebuild it from the ground up, until finally, two tense and toilsome days later, the quality of my work had risen just enough to meet his lofty expectations.

Although you won't find this particular fruit of my labor—nor any of the numerous other sustainable hardscapes I have helped install throughout Whatcom County in the 15 years since—on Sustainable Connection's annual eco-friendly Home & Landscape Tour June 25-26, you will be able to peruse, critique and draw inspiration from a finely crafted array of hardscapes, softscapes, clay walls, hydroponic radiant heating, passive solar and various innovative uses of reclaimed building materials including, but not limited to, a green roof on a post and beam arbor built out of materials salvaged from a cotton warehouse. Cool, huh? ☺



### ATTEND

**WHAT:** 9th Annual "Imagine This! Home & Landscape Tour"  
**WHEN:** 10am-5pm June 25-26  
**WHERE:** Nine tour stops in Whatcom County  
**COST:** \$12  
**INFO:** [www.sustainableconnections.org](http://www.sustainableconnections.org)