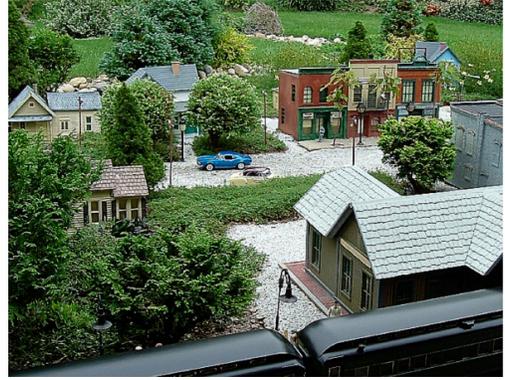


Conifers and other Plants for Garden Railroads

by Paul D. Race

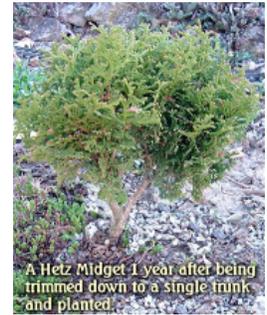
One of the most fun things about a garden railroad is choosing and cultivating plants that look like they belong with your trains and accessories. Many offer the additional benefit of keeping your garden green even when everything else is dormant or frozen off to the ground.



Planning the Plantings

Consider planting the area near your buildings and accessories with plants that suggest the scale of your railroad. Look for small and slow-growing plants, especially plants with Dwarf or Nana in their name.

- ❑ Recommended conifers include:
 - ❑ Cone-shaped trees like Dwarf Alberta spruce that can simulate a forest
 - ❑ Globe-shaped trees like Hetz Midget
 - ❑ Specimen trees, like trees from the Hinoki Cypress (*Chamaecyparis*) family
 - ❑ Slowly-spreading evergreen shrubs like Dwarf Procumbens
- ❑ Low-growing groundcovers with very small leaves or needles, such as:
 - ❑ Creeping and Woolly Thyme
 - ❑ Acre, Stubby Fingers, and Blue Spruce Sedum



Preparing (Or Not) The Planting Site

You want to give your plants something to grow on, but you don't really want explosive growth, so don't stress over the quality of soil in your garden railroad. That said, for conifers you will want to:

- ❑ Compensate for Overly-Alkaline Soil
- ❑ Provide Some Organic Content
- ❑ Avoid Salt Exposure

Finding Conifers With Appropriate Growth Patterns

- ❑ Look for plants with a single trunk, or one strong trunk that will serve after you've cut away the rest.
- ❑ Don't buy plants that are as large as you ever want them to get.

Preparing Conifers

Dwarf and miniature conifers (and several popular landscaping varieties) are actually bred to have thicker growth than is healthy for them. Exposing the trunk and branch structure will make it look more like a tree, and let the inside of the tree "breathe."

- ❑ Each cut you make should either leave some healthy growth at the end or should go all the way back to another branch or the trunk. Cuts against a major branch or trunk heal quickly, branches chopped back beyond the last bit of healthy growth never do, and they'll eventually rot out and provide a path for parasites.
- ❑ First, cut back any branches that are trying to compete with the trunk.
- ❑ Next, clear out "redundant" growth. Each ring of branches on a Dwarf Alberta Spruce will have two or three times as many branches as the tree really needs. You should usually cut at least every other branch back to the trunk. I usually cut back the big healthy-looking branches and leave the wimpy ones. Some plants like Arborvitae sent out flat branches side-by-side like the pages of a book. The principle of clearing out at least every other branch still applies.
- ❑ Once you've thinned a row, cut the remaining branches back to the last joint that has healthy growth.
- ❑ When you're all done, you can go over the whole plant lightly to even things up. But don't panic at the "scrubby-looking" tree you've created. For the next two years it will look far better than if you'd left it with too much growth, and it will likely live longer.

