

Building a Simple Ground-Level Railroad

by Paul D. Race



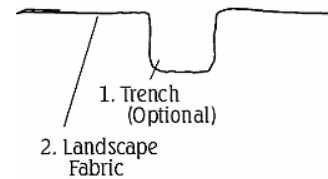
Stuff You Should Have:

- Train Stuff:
 - A starter set - a train set with track and power supply
 - Some pre-built buildings, especially stations
 - Extra track - though a 4' circle of track comes with your starter set, trains look better and run better on larger curves. Consider 10' diameter curves or larger if you have room
 - Some little people, in about the same scale as your trains
- Tools:
 - A shovel - a flat-bladed spade may also help, if you have one
 - A trowel
 - Both kinds of screwdrivers
 - A measuring tape
 - A good pair of scissors,
 - A level – a big one and a very small one would help.
 - A garden hose,
 - A knife
 - A 1-gallon bucket and a larger one
 - A carpenter's square
- Other Stuff You May Need:
 - Old newspapers, not the shiny stuff
 - Crushed Gravel (not rounded) - most or all of the pieces should be smaller than 3/8". 1/2 cubic foot for every 60" track if you don't trench (see below) or for every 30" length of track if you do, plus about 1/3 again to have on hand for low spots
 - Something to mark the border, such as pressure-treated landscaping "timbers."
 - Weed Barrier Fabric - Also "staples," that are made to hold the fabric in place.
 - Mulch - Enough to cover the entire area you plan to use for your railroad, say 3"-4" deep. Also, if you have a choice, select a mulch with relatively small "chunks."
 - Preformed "stepping stones" such as 2x8x16s - you'll use these as foundations for your buildings, and to walk on.
 - Electrical Wire to get electricity to your garden. If you have a GFI-protected outlet you can use, you should be relatively safe running an extension cord over to it initially, though. Just take your power supply into the house when you're done.
 - Irrigation System - if you live in a very dry area where you will need to use drip irrigation to keep things alive, pick up a "starter kit," which should include about 50 feet of 1/2" line, about the same amount of 1/4" line and some drippers.
 - Little Trees - especially Dwarf Alberta Spruce
 - Ground Cover - If you can find something suitable. Look for small sedums with small "leaves," Irish moss, or Creeping, Woolly, or Elfin thyme
 - Planting Soil - especially if the place you're putting the railroad has really bad soil, or you don't know what kind of soil you have. One bag will probably do three small trees, six perennials, or 9 groundcovers
 - A can or two of cheap white spray paint for marking your boundaries and the route of your track before you get out the spade
- Other Stuff You May Want:
 - Landscape lights if you want them
 - Resin waterfall or other feature you can "install" above ground

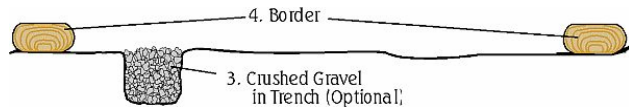


Install your Railroad

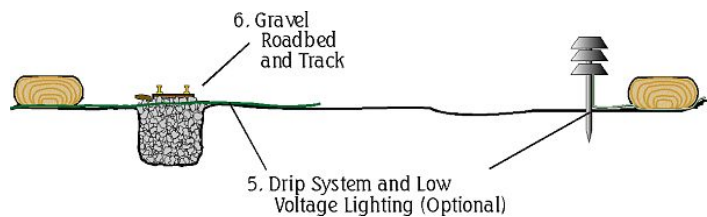
- If you are using sectional track, lay it out where you think it should go. If you don't try using a garden hose to get the shape you want. Mark the path you choose for your railroad.
- Decide and mark your boundaries.
- Install the Roadbed Trench (Optional) - this will help the track have firmer footing and reduce the amount of maintenance the roadbed will need. If you want to do this, mark the route where your track will go, pull up the track, and cut a trench that is 5" deep and wide.
- Lay a layer of newspaper 3-4 sheets deep everywhere you plan to use weed barrier.



- Lay strips of the weed barrier across your future railroad, overlapping the strips by about 6" and trimming them with scissors at each edge, leaving about 6 extra inches. If you have dug a trench for your roadbed, make sure you leave plenty of "slack" to go handle the trenches. Skootch a little extra fabric into each trench and pack gravel on top of it as you go.
- If you have installed a trench for your roadbed, now's a good time to pour the gravel into the trench and tamp or stamp it down firmly.
- Install your border around the outside, folding any "extra" landscaping fabric back on itself if you need to.

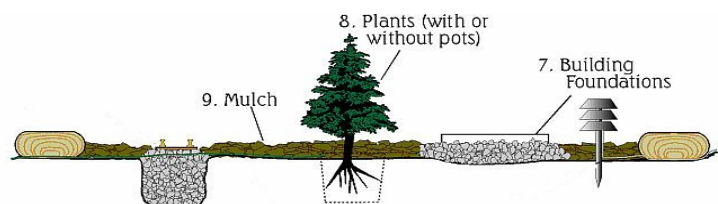


- Put your circle or oval of track back where you think it should go and make certain it still fits.
- Install the waterfall or other above-ground water feature.
- Install the landscape lighting system if you bought one. If you bought solar lamps, you can wait until later.



- Install the 1/2" line for the drip irrigation system if you bought some.
- Pour the gravel roadbed. With the track in place, dump some of the crushed gravel into a small bucket, and walk around your track, burying it a couple inches deep in gravel. The gravel should spread out beyond the ties, as well, so that they are buried along with the rail.
- Shaking the track lightly from side to side, pull the track up through the gravel until only the top of the ties show. (If you pull it completely out of the roadbed, don't panic; you can always add more gravel later.) Tap the track back down to settle the gravel underneath it. Pull any large pieces of gravel out from between the rails, then use a broom to "dust" off the ties and even out the gravel. Applying gravel to hold the track in place is called "ballasting."

- Level the Track - end-to-end and right-to-left. A small end-to-end slope isn't bad, but too much slope will make your trains run like toys.
- Clean the top of the rails.
- Test drive a locomotive, and clean or straighten track where needed.
- Set out Your Buildings' Foundations and level them, using gravel if necessary.



- Plant Your Plants - cut X shapes in the landscaping fabric where they go.
- Mulch lightly around the plants you have in so far (but not everywhere yet).
- Set Out Your Buildings - using the stepping stones you leveled earlier.
- Hook up Electricity and Test Run
- Mulch every place that isn't mulched yet. You should have enough mulch to cover the low-voltage wiring and drip line.
- When you're done mulching, wipe off the top and inside edges of the rails on your track.
- If you haven't run the sprinkler yet, put the train away when it gets dark and set it now.
- Future maintenance will include clearing dead leaves off the track, wiping the rails, and reballasting and releveling the track.