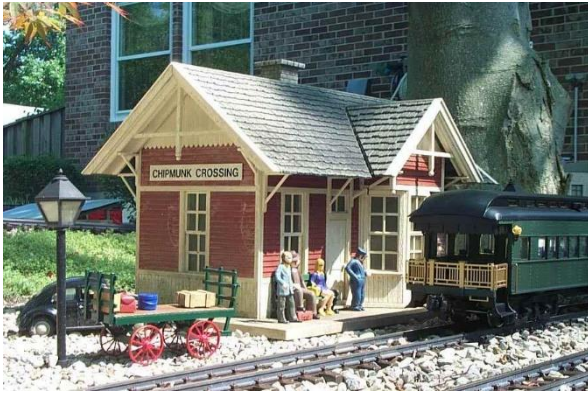


## What is Garden Railroading?

Most simply, garden railroading means running model trains outside, using special weather-resistant equipment.

Most trains made for garden railroading run on weather-resistant track with rails that are 45mm apart (about 1¾"). You can choose trains from several manufacturers, though you're probably better off sticking with one supplier at first.



RR: Wil and Jeanne Davis. Photo: Wil Davis

## How hard is it to build a Garden Railroad?

A garden railroad can be as simple or complex as you want it to be. One of the simplest I've seen consisted of a four-foot-diameter circle of track and gravel around a tree, with a trolley circling a village of birdhouses. It cost about \$150 and took about three hours to install.

But even if you want to end up with something big, consider starting small, then working your way up. Usually, people who start a small "test" layout before they break ground on their future "masterpiece" are more likely to stick with it.

One thing to remember is that a garden railroad includes plants and landscaping. The best railroads have a balance between "nature" and "engineering."

## Do I have to use special equipment?

You *can* run "indoor" trains out-of-doors, but you may discover them fading, rusting, or turning brittle. Trains designed for garden railroading are rugged, reliable, and moisture- and UV-resistant.

Garden train manufacturers use the same 45mm track to model all kinds of trains, which can get confusing if you mix and match trains from different manufacturers. Many folks solve this problem by choosing one manufacturer to supply most of their equipment, until they develop an "eye" for what works together.

A few of the most popular choices include:

Old-Timey US  
Railroads

PIKO, LGB,  
Bachmann

European Railroads

LGB, PIKO

Modern US Railroads

USA Trains

## How Much Room do I need?

You can have a viable garden railroad in a relatively small space. The "minimum" circle of Large Scale track is about 4' in diameter, so you could theoretically build a garden railroad in a 5' square.

With a reversing mechanism, you can even build one in a straight line—if you don't mind your train backing half the time.

That said, trains look better and run better on wider curves, so use the largest diameter curves and turnouts (switches) that fit the space you have.

Most folks use pre-formed curve pieces. These make circles in diameters of 4', 5', 8', 10', or 20'. So, if you have room, consider using 10'-diameter curves for your main line. (Keep the 4' circles to use indoors at the holidays.)

If you have experience using flexible track, you may prefer to use that, but for most beginners, pre-formed curves give better results.

## How do I Plan a Garden Railroad?

The best first step is to see some garden railroads in your area, to learn what people near you have tried with success, and to borrow their best ideas.

On the other hand, some very nice railroads were started by people who took a bunch of track out into the yard and kept putting pieces together different ways until they found a setup they liked. This approach is also helpful for designing around preexisting features like ponds. .

For reliability, avoid "S" curves, and keep your turnouts (switches) within reach of your normal operating position as much as possible.

If you plan to have a pond or waterfall, consider installing that first—it's a lot easier to build a railroad around a pond than it is to build a pond underneath a railroad.

You might also consider getting your trains off the ground to make them easier to work on and more interesting to view from a sitting position. I've gone to a "raised platform" approach myself, building custom decks and installing dirt, gravel, track, buildings and plants where I can easily reach them all.

## What Should I Buy?

You may not want to buy too much railroad stuff right at first. Consider starting with a set you like and an oval of larger-radius track (purchased separately). Get some track down, gain experience, and learn about the products and brands before you spend too much.

At this point, many used garden train sets are available on auction sites, etc. But sellers don't always know (or report) if they've been abused. So try to get your hands on them or have return privileges.

You can also see products by visiting area garden railroads and attending trains shows and conventions.

"Starting small" works for accessories, too. Pick up a building or two at a time, few figures at a time, and so on. You may even decide to build most or all of your own buildings; many folks do.

But you don't need a lot of *stuff* to have a charming garden railroad. Attention to detail and thoughtful use of what you have can go a long way.

## Where Should I Shop for Plants?

Again, you're better off if you start out small and learn as you go. Use a lot of mulch at first, until you learn what works for you.

You can get useful plants at ordinary garden stores, if you know what to look for. In the US Midwest, for example, we often use the following commonly available plants:

- Stubby Fingers, Acre, and Blue Spruce sedum (drought-resistant and easy to spread)

- Woolly, Elfin, and Creeping Thymes (slow to establish, but look great once they do.)
- Dwarf Alberta Spruce (used to represent upright trees)

**Warning:** Even dwarf plants can take over if you don't keep them trimmed back. Still, this list should give you ideas for things to try. And, if they grow nicely, you can transplant "starts" from your thymes and sedums to the new sections as your railroad grows.



RR: Robert Mengelkoch & Roberta Shiverdecker.

## Where do I Learn More?

- Join your local garden railroad club.
- Attend garden railroading conventions.
- Visit the "Family Garden Trains" web site. (<http://familygardentrains.com>)

The Primer articles on this site includes detailed and updated articles on all the subjects discussed in this pamphlet.

**Most important of all, have fun. Big fun outside.**

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RR: Wil and Jeanne Davis Photo: Wil Davis

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Answers to Frequently-Asked Questions about Garden Railroads

By Paul D. Race

## For Family Garden Trains

<https://family-garden-trains.com>