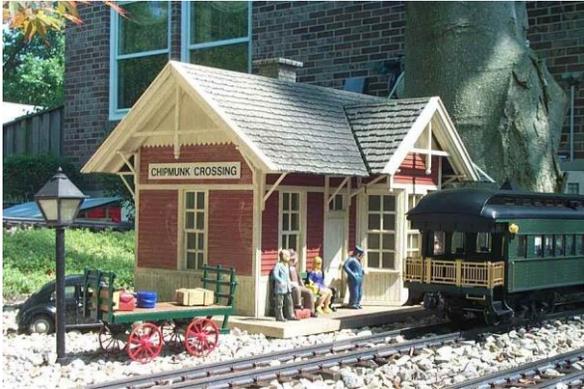


What is Garden Railroading?

Most simply, garden railroading means running model trains outside, using special weather-resistant equipment. This hobby has been growing in the United States since LGB® trains were introduced in 1968. Most trains made for garden railroading run on weather-resistant track with rails that are 45mm apart (about 1¾”), so that 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. Of course, people are more impressed by large railroads with lots of plants, trains, and accessories. 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. In many families, one spouse will handle the landscaping and gardening, while the other handles the tracks and trains. 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.

Large Scale 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 at first, until they develop an “eye” for what works together.

A few of the most popular choices include:

Modern US Railroads	PIKO, USA Trains, or MTH Gauge 1
Old-Timey US Railroads	Bachmann, LGB, or Hartland Locomotive Works (HLW)
European Railroads	LGB, Märklin

How much room do I need?

Obviously, the more room you have the better, but you can still 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 a 14’ by 20’ space for your railroad, 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 it, but for most beginners, pre-formed curves give better results.

How do I plan a Garden Railroad?

A book on planning model railroads will give you some ideas; just remember that people don’t interact with a garden railway the same way they do with an indoor railway.

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 just took a bunch of track out into the yard and kept putting pieces together different ways until they found a combination they liked. This approach is also helpful for designing around preexisting features like ponds or terraces.

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 use a large water feature, such as a pond, 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.

I highly recommend getting your trains off the ground to make them easier to work on and more interesting to view from a sitting position.

What Should I Buy?

You may not want to buy too much railroad stuff right at first, anyway. When you are installing a test loop, you can get by with a starter set you like and an oval of larger-radius track (purchased separately) to use outside. Get some track down, gain experience, and learn about the products and brands before you start making other folks rich.

Good sources of product information include:

- The Garden Train Store page (<http://www.garden-train-store.com>) focuses on products that are especially helpful to beginning garden railroaders.
- *Garden Railways* magazine—Has articles about new products and ads for old ones.
- Catalogs from the major manufacturers—You may have to pay for these, but the product lines don’t change that much from year to year, so most catalogs are useful for years.

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, a “pack” or two of people 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 make a “one-horse town” more pleasing than a city full of generic-looking kits.

Where should I shop for plants?

Experienced gardeners may use Latin names and seek out hard-to-find plants, but don’t be intimidated. Again, you’re better off if you start out small and learn as you go. Use a lot of landscaping fabric and mulch at first, until you learn what works for you. You can get usable 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 (not as hardy as sedum, but look great once they’re established)
- Dwarf Alberta Spruce (used to represent upright trees)
- Dwarf Procumbens and Blue Rug Junipers (for ground cover or “bonsai.”)

Warning: Even dwarf plants can take over if you don’t keep them trimmed back. Still, this list should give you some ideas for things to try out. 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.
- Subscribe to *Garden Railways* magazine.
- Visit the “Family Garden Trains” web site (<http://www.familygardentrains.com>). The Primer articles on this site includes detailed and updated articles on all the subjects discussed in this pamphlet.
- In fact, **Family Garden Trains** has the Internet’s largest collection of free, professionally-written articles just for beginning and intermediate garden railroaders.

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



<http://www.family-garden-trains.com>

and

Miami Valley Garden Railway Society



<http://www.mvgrs.com>