



Garden Railways

OH 60

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Welcome to the wonderful world of the Garden Railroad, combining two hobbies--gardening and model railroading. Trains can run through your garden and over the lawn, across steams and gullies. They can run outdoors most times of the year (yes, even in Vermont!), in most types of weather (provided of course the power pack or transformer is in a waterproof location). Trains can then be brought indoors during the winter to use in play or living areas, especially around the Christmas tree.

Outdoor railroads--referred to as "Big Trains" or "G" scale--have been long established in Europe, particularly Germany and Great Britain. Over the past decade they have increased in popularity in this country, until they are now the fastest growing area of model railroading and a new area of gardening. Each of the several manufacturers of the equipment may use a slightly different scale, however most will run on the same track which is 45 mm. wide. Just like model trains of other scales, electricity is delivered to the engines by track power. The track power as well as the controller (speed control), if separate from the transformer, are low voltage and safe. Only the transformer needs to be protected from the weather. Trains can also be operated with batteries and radio control.

The big scale train hobby can take many directions. Some garden railroaders may keep their rolling stock (train cars) and engines bright and shiny, others may like to "weather" them to look more real. Some like to have an exact replica of a real railroad, others just a creative layout or one based on fantasy. If interested in the latter, consider a princess castle with dragons, or perhaps a Jurassic Park; or make a desert scene with lots of sand. Some like to run trains on a schedule, others just like to see them run around a track. And some put more emphasis in the trains and layouts, others emphasize the plants and design.

For those more interested in the layout and running of a railroad than in the plants, it is important to have many sidings, commercial buildings, draw bridges, working industrial machinery--hoists and cables--and engines and rolling stock that look as though they have been working. Vignettes are common that look like sidings into heavy industrial parks, engine workshops, and other manufacturing plants. Buildings add to any layout, and come from a number of manufacturers in kits or either wood or easy-to-assemble durable plastic. Commonly seen buildings on layouts are churches, farms, houses, stores, and buildings of the "Old West." Plans are available in 1/2" scale to build your own buildings, bridges, trestles, etc.

For those more interested in the plants than the workings of the layout, miniature flowers and plants are called for which are usually dwarf or slow growing. Whatever the emphasis, combining some of these plants and railroad features, with other landscape features such as rocks, water (ponds or running streams or waterfalls), and low voltage night lighting systems, is what creates an exciting garden railway. You may not need a great amount of space for a garden railway. Use the area which you have. Some layouts are on decks with potted plants.

Some plants for garden railways:

Annuals:

Begonias (shade)
Dianthus (Pinks)
Impatiens (shade)
Dwarf Marigolds
Creeping Zinnia (Sanvitalia)
Dwarf Zinnias
Petunias
Cockscomb (*Celosia*)
Ornamental Peppers
Ageratum

Perennials:

Creeping Thymes
Wooly Yarrow
Astilbes (shade)
Coralbells (shade)
Sedums/Sempervivums
Creeping Phlox
Stella de Oro Daylily
Crocus
New York Asters
Dwarf Iris

Shrubs:

Purple Gem Rhododendron
Horizontal Junipers
Dwarf Spruces (Alberta)
Dwarf Hemlocks
Dwarf Arborvitae
Blue Fescue (dwarf, clump grass)
Russian Cypress (*Microbiota*)
Miniature Roses
Bearberry (*Arctostyphlos*)
Dwarf Balsam Fir

So where does one start? Some of the brand names to look for are Bachman, Aristo-Craft, LGB, and Hartland Locomotive Works. Prices vary greatly among the manufacturers and local dealers. Local railroad stores, while often not stocking the Big Trains, have color catalogs of them you can browse through or purchase, and can order most any train, car or accessory you might need. Accessories include such items as lighting and sound systems for cars, miniature figures to scale or people and animals, building kits and railroad signals. Wide selections and often the best prices are found from national mail order catalogs if you already know a bit about what you want.

Magazines on outdoor/garden railways:

Garden Railways, <http://www.trains.com/grw/>
<http://www.largescale.com/>

Some Sources of plants for garden railways:

Check your yellow pages for local lawn and garden centers and dealers, and specialty nurseries. In Vermont a good listing is the Perennial Display Gardens brochure from the Vermont Assn. of Professional Horticulturists, PO Box 396, Jonesville VT 05466 (802-865-5979).

Local Networking:

Vermont Garden Railway Society, c/o Ron DeYoung, 9 Lamell Ave., Essex Jct, VT 05452 (802-878-2868), radeyo@aol.com