

Garden crossing; Garden railroading is a hobby flourishing with more than 100 clubs nationally.(Home & Garden)(Correction Notice)

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Correction: Home & Garden: The Large Scale Model Railroad Association phone number listed in today's Press is no longer valid, and the free booklet and video offered by the association are no longer available.

By day, Robb DeVries is an electrician, but, afternoons and evenings, he's a railroad lumber baron. His railway, the Pine Ridge Lumber Co., is outside his back door.

From the deck on the back of his house to a stand of pine trees more than 100 feet away, tiny train tracks stretch through his backyard garden. The trains, carrying lumber, ride along rails that teeter across a high ridge through his wife Cheryl's perennial garden.

By the time he holds his Annual Steamup in his Jenison back yard on June 19, there will be a working sawmill, pond and stream based upon a railroad site in Cass, W.Va.

While DeVries' event is a private affair for his online steam-engine buddies, DeVries will join about 20 railroad gardening enthusiasts for a public open house in Coloma that features trains running on 700 feet of track through mountains and over trestles, through woods and over ponds. As hard as members of the Southwestern Michigan Garden Railway Club are working on their home displays, members are working even harder on the display in Coloma.

"It's just getting all the people to come and to run all the trains and see how nice it could look in your yard when it's done," said John Piehl, owner of J & W Model Trains in Coloma, where the display is located.

Garden railroading often is more family-friendly than the usual train hobby.

"The husband finds out, 'I can do more because she likes it.' It becomes a family thing," Piehl said.

Eight years ago, when DeVries was engaged to Cheryl, he began building the train track in their back yard.

DeVries caught on to a trend that had been about 10 years in the making but really caught fire about 1995.

Garden railroading is considered the fastest-growing aspect of model railroading. Although there were railroad gardens in Britain 100 years ago, the idea died out until large 'G' gauge trains were made available, according to Garden Railways Magazine. The larger trains could stand up physically to the rigors of outdoors as well as look proportional in gardens. From nearly dying out, the hobby has flourished to more than 100 railroad garden clubs nationally, about 300 books on the subject and a couple of very busy online magazines.

Garden railroad members come together to pool resources, ideas and talents. DeVries, for instance, got the Coloma club to raise its tracks like his to ease the strain of bending over the trains and maintaining their tracks.

Ron and Alyce Prins help with the garden maintenance in Coloma.

"You try to make things look like they're in scale," said Alyce, whose husband, two sons and at least one of her three grandchildren are interested in trains. "We've got a lot of ivies and ground covers" for the trains to run through.

Thyme, Alberta spruce pines and small and large sedum make effective backdrops for trains, Ron Prins added.

There's a broad spectrum of members in the Coloma club, from ages 14 to 78, with a lot of cross-generational learning, Ron said.

"But we do take time to run the trains," Alyce said. "You've got to play, too."

Alyce encourages families to see what it's all about at the upcoming open house.

"You know, if you go bowling or play golf, you go alone," she said. "But our son has now bought his son, Skylar, a Thomas the Tank train, and he bought him a separate car that blows bubbles. The kids like to stand on the (display) bridges, because the trains go underneath them."

Back in Jenison, Robb has documented every one of the steps in his garden railroad layout, including the Steam Ups he's held that drew steam engine enthusiasts from as far away as Hawaii. He also documented his wife, Cheryl, gamely planting perennials in the railroad hillside when she was weeks away from having her first child.

Their children, Lauren, 4, and Bradley, 2, love to look at

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Dad's train pictures, even though they have to wait a few years before they can handle the trains. Meanwhile, Cheryl frets that having 150 crocuses, candytuft, sedum, creeping phlox, mini-carnations, Snow in Summer, cranesbill geranium and cheddar pink dianthus isn't enough to keep color in the train garden all season long.

business card that says he is superintendent of operations for the Pine Ridge Lumber Co., "just like a real train."

But she is getting bold and experimenting. Spotting some ivy in a hanging basket, she surmised it might fit perfectly with the 6-to-8-inch trains.

"It grows close to the ground, so it got put in," she said.

It creeps beautifully up the fake mountainside built out of treated lumber, bricks from the front of the house and 20 yards of topsoil.

The Coloma layout features 700 feet of tracks, Ron said. "It's in pristine condition, with two ponds, a big tunnel, a trestle and a small mine. We've got lots and lots of garden plants and perennials. Sedum spreads fast and it looks the right size. We look for miniature plants that are small compared to the trains."

Sometimes the imagination has to stretch a bit.

"We've got trees a thousand feet tall in proportion to our trains," Ron said.

Even though garden railroading has been at fever pitch for the last five years, getting help with planting is tougher than getting help with trains.

"You go into a nursery and ask for what you need, and they give you a kind of a quizzical look," Ron said.

"What you want in your yard is different from what you want in your garden railroads. You don't want perfection in garden railroading."

Half the fun of railroad gardening is seeing how well any train --- steam-powered, electric, battery-operated or remote-controlled --- works in its environment.

DeVries has run his steam-powered trains in the dead of winter. He thoroughly enjoyed watching the train take 30 minutes to clear a 10-foot section of track stacked with snow as high as the train itself.

That's the sort of hook that sinks into many garden railroad enthusiasts: all the hard work that goes into making it work.

"They take a lot of work," said DeVries, handing out a