

All aboard in the backyard garden

By [MEG McCONAHEY](#)

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Published: Friday, July 6, 2012 at 3:00 a.m.

Tucked into a subdivision off Healdsburg Avenue is a hidden mountain hollow. The remote settlement boasts a filling station and hardware store and the only way to get there is by the Possum Creek Railroad, which will take you on a circuitous ride through several tunnels, across a series of trestles, over a mountain pass and beside a big waterfall before pulling in to the village station.

The miniature railroad town materialized five years ago in Alison and Jerry Ogden's backyard, the offspring of a happy marriage between one woman's passion for gardening and her husband's lifetime fascination with model trains.



JEFF KAN LEE / THE PD

A miniature model train rumbles over a little bridge next to a waterfall in the Healdsburg backyard of Jerry and Alison Ogden, which is filled with miniature train tracks, a tunnel, buildings, vehicles, people, as well as dwarf plants. The tableau combines Jerry's interest in the trains and Alison's interest in gardening.

Like a lot of hobbies, it started modestly enough with a short line Jerry rigged up between the basement of his Healdsburg home and a backyard gazebo. A single-engine freight train could be dispatched to deliver a bottle of wine to delighted guests. But inevitably, Jerry's burgeoning interest in model railways compelled further development into the frontier of the Ogdens' modest yard.

Besides, laments Alison, a master gardener, "Somebody had to go under the house to get the bottle and put it on the boxcar and sometimes by the time I got back up there, it was all poured out."

Jerry had created an elaborate basement set up with his dad when he was a kid before boxing them all up when he was 15, and got re-infected with the bug. They sold his vintage American Flyer boyhood collection to finance new rolling stock. Before long, the couple was singing "I've been workin' on the railroad" while digging dirt and laying 300 feet of track for what would eventually become a showstopper between their back deck and their back fence.

Their garden was a featured stop on the recent Sonoma County Master Gardener's Bloomin' Backyards tour. Some 700 people filed through, gaping at the railway, which emits real train sounds as it chugs through a meticulous landscape of miniature plants, from pygmy cedar and dwarf birch trees to Tom Thumb miniature roses.

Since it's too small to hop aboard, more than one visitor placed his smart phone on the front of the engine for a virtual ride.

The railroad was named for a family of baby possums that invaded their basement in the early days of the project.

Building such an elaborate setup is a complicated and costly undertaking that requires both design and engineering skill. The Ogdens enlisted Nancy Norris, a Pleasant Hill professional landscape contractor who specializes in garden railways,

to design and act as foreman. Each Monday for 10 weeks she spent the day supervising and assisting the Ogdens while they served as the construction crew.

“This is not a cheap hobby, but people have done amazing things doing the work themselves. There is an amazing range of sizes and styles of garden railways, depending on the capability, imagination and resources of the person building it,” said Norris, who writes for “Garden Railways” magazine and wrote “The Miniature Garden Guidebook” to help hobbyists landscape to scale.

The Ogdens didn't tally how much they invested, but it's probably more than \$10,000 even with the sweat equity. The larger and durable G-scale engines typically used in outdoor railroads can cost \$300-\$400 apiece and a single building \$70 to \$100 and more.

There are elaborate setups on lavish properties in the South Bay that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, said Norris. She explained that because railways are “never finished,” hobbyists report spending an average of \$2,300 a year, according to a survey by Garden Railways magazine.

The spot where they put the railway had long confounded Allison, even with her master gardening skills. She had tried both grapevines and native grasses on the steep, windy slope. The first soil they used as fill to build the mountain proved too porous. They wound up scouring building sites for discarded yellow clay, which they carted away by the bucketfuls.

They also had to build a retaining wall to secure the hillside and install French drains.

Laying the track was tricky. It's stainless steel and comes straight, requiring a track bender — part of Norris's special equipment — to create the curves.

“Then we put it together with little connectors,” said Alison. “We had to get on our knees with little screwdrivers.”

The Ogdens are not alone in their playful backyard obsession. They are members of both the Redwood Empire and Bay Area Garden Railway societies.

Norris said while many hobbyists have outdoor trains, not all put as much into their landscape as the Ogdens.

But this is the part that Nancy loves. She placed some 80 different miniature and dwarf plants along the Possum Creek Railway, groundcovers like Elfin thyme, Morris Midget dwarf boxwood, even dwarf pomegranate, dwarf camellias and a tiny olive tree called ‘Little Ollie.’

Some still require vigilance to keep them cut back so they don't outgrow the landscape. But maintenance, they maintain, isn't hard. Jerry says he can get the track as clean as a whistle in minutes sweeping with a piece of towel on a stick. They hand-water, keep the trains in at night and set up the town only for special guest appearances.

MORE ABOUT GARDEN RAILWAYS

Redwood Empire Garden Railway Society: President Bob Guinan. 415-320-9700.

Bay Area Garden Railway Society: One of the largest in the country, it meets monthly in a different member's garden throughout the Bay Area. 526-0195

The G&O Outdoor Railway is the only public garden railway in Northern California. The G-scale and O-scale layout is a division of the San Leandro Historical Railway Society. You can bring your own train to run on the track. Free. 1302 Orchard Ave.,

San Leandro. 510-569-2490 or slhrs.org.

LonePine Gardens: Specializes in Bonsai and succulents. A go-to source for some of the smaller plants in scale with garden railways. 6450 Lone Pine Road, Sebastopol. lonepinegardens.com. 823-5024.

Miniature Garden Guidebook: By Nancy Norris. \$21.95. Available at kalmbachstore.com/12444.html.

Garden Railways Magazine: Grw.trains.com.

Nancy Norris: Landscape contractor specializing in garden railways. She does work all over the Bay Area, including the North Bay. 925-408-9402.

(You can reach Staff Writer Meg McConahey at 521-5204 or meg.mcconahey@pressdemocrat.com.)

Copyright © 2012 PressDemocrat.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.