

TAKING IT OUTSIDE

DAVID BODNAR OF
MT LEBANON
COMBINES LOVE OF
GARDENING, TRAINS
AND TECHNOLOGY IN
GARDEN RAILROADING

By Earl Bugaile



Step onto the back patio of David Bodnar's home and you enter a world of miniature trees and shrubs, and a babbling waterfall and pond complete with fish and aquatic life.

Look around the setting, and you'll see a variety of small buildings, and even a miniature radio tower whose beacon flashes "Pittsburgh" in Morse code. Winding through this picturesque landscape are trains and trolleys, which are part of Bodnar's garden railroad.

Welcome to the world of garden railroading. A hobby that takes the world of model trains from under the Christmas tree and the game room, to the natural elements of sun, rain and snow, and even the hazards created to the track by the critters usually found around a garden, even an occasional deer.

Garden railroading, utilizing G scale trains and track is not entirely new, but is somewhat unique to the Pittsburgh region. It's a popular hobby in states like Florida and New Jersey but there is a niche of garden railroad modelers in the Pittsburgh region.

Bodnar is one of about 50 members of the Pittsburgh Garden Railway Society, but is among only a handful of modelers to actually run a railroad. He placed it into operation in the summer of 2003, shortly after he and his wife, Lois purchased their home on Bower Hill Road in Mt. Lebanon.

"I had American Flyer trains as a child, and as most kids I kind of grew out of them," Bodnar said. "But I became intrigued by garden railroads later in life. Furthermore, my wife loves to garden, and when we saw the back patio of this house, I thought it would be a good combination to combine our talents."

He recalled his previous home, which was not conducive to creating such a layout, but his current home provided that opportunity. "It gave us an outdoor patio leading to the den, which was something we always wanted, and I knew right away that this would be a good place to put a railroad.

The task of converting the back patio to create the railroad was not an easy one. The garden had been overgrown with trees and shrubs, and required the better part of a year of intense work before Bodnar could begin planning the layout and laying track.

A retired teacher, and the head of technology and computers in the Mt. Lebanon High School, Bodnar used many of his skills not only to craft the structures, but also to set up a radio control system using microprocessors to operate the trains.

In building the double-loop railroad, he had to scale natural terrain and create tunnels. He used pieces of a wooden-barrel hot tub that came with the property to construct the trestles and bridges. "When I tore out the tub, I discovered it was made of Australian hardwood, which was resistant to rot," he said. "The color of the wooden bridges has aged, creating a natural-looking appearance."

The other major project was the replacement of a pond that had been built with the house in 1929. Bodnar used lava rock in combination with plants to help filter the new pond, which is fully lined, and is deep enough to allow fish to survive during the winter months.

The question that seems most logical of taking model trains outside is the effect that weather and the elements have on the track and scenery, which are outdoors 12 months a year.

The rails are made of brass and require regular cleaning, the crossties on the track are made of plastic, and the roadbed, made of outdoor plywood needs to be replaced to the effects of weathering. Just like the real railroads, track maintenance is a constant task. The buildings, most of which were scratch built by Bodnar can last as long as five years. As a precaution, during the snowy months, Bodnar will take some of the buildings indoors for storage.

Animals roaming into the garden can also pose problems. Bodnar recalls a roaming deer causing damage to the track.

Needless to say, garden railroading is not for those without the time



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and the resources to make it possible. At today's cost of approximately \$10 per foot just for track, the hobby can be an expense for the beginner. Bodnar said for that reason, garden railroads are developed over the years, and are always a work in progress.

He credits his wife Lois, with creating and maintaining the garden, where trees to match the garden railroad scale have been added through the years. A Japanese maple tree, which came with the house, remains in the center of the railroad, which is kept perfectly manicured.

When he and Lois are not entertaining guests on their patio among the trains, Bodnar designs, builds and creates computer operating systems for railway projects for individuals, and groups. Several years ago he designed and created the indoor animated train display for the children at Children's Hospital. He continues to oversee that project today.

"Garden railroads are not a trivial pursuit," Bodnar said. "It takes a lot of time, it's expensive, and you just can't walk away from it like a train layout in your game room. But in the end it's great fun."

Bodnar has catalogued the progress and highlights of his railroad on his web page at www.davebodnar.com.

