

Backyard railroad a scene straight out of rural America



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The smiling engineer, with a coal car behind him filled to the brim, makes sure his train chugs along the track, spouting smoke as it weaves through the tunnels and in and out of stately conifers.

It's a scene straight out of rural America.

But in this case, the narrow-gauge locomotive, with its action-figure crew, five cars and caboose, runs in David Wood's backyard, where the mini-mountain landscape and waterfall spilling over stacked Colorado moss rock are a lot smaller than the real thing.

For Wood, it combines his hobby — large-scale, narrow-gauge trains — and his love of the Rocky Mountains, right in his own backyard in south Lincoln.

As a kid, he wasn't all that interested in trains, he said. As an adult, he saw a train setup in a local bakery in California three decades ago and began his own journey down the track.

Garden railroading, as it is called by enthusiasts, usually involves LGB (Lehmann Gross Bahn in German or Lehmann big railway in English) on a narrow-gauge track. Set up outside, it can be as small as a circle around picnic table or as elaborate as Wood's — multileveled, multiple trains with a waterfall.

Wood's inspiration was the historic Durango/Silverton train, which was a part of the Denver and Rio Grande Railway and still rumbles through the San Juan mountains. He named his backyard line the Timberline and San Juan.

Before setting up a train track next to his patio, Wood conducted lots of research. He attended garden railroad conventions in different parts of the country and made a list of what he liked, finding out what worked and what didn't.

Along the way, Wood collected locomotives and cars for his dream setup. He estimates he has 140-plus cars and 15 engines, which he can swap in and out of service.

When he and his wife, Ann, and their two daughters and son moved into their current home, Wood knew this would be the place

where his backyard railroad would become a reality.

He began with computer software that could map his track plan to scale, including the water feature, both levels and all of the curves, tunnels and trestles. After he was sure it was what he wanted, Wood built a clay model to scale with elevations.

"I wanted to give the builder an exact idea of how it would look," Wood said.

This wasn't Wood's first attempt at train design. As a dentist, Wood thought it would be fun to have a large-scale train incorporated into his reception area, so he set one up to "entertain" patients while they waited.

But the backyard was much more complicated. It took about a month for the hardscape to be completed to the specs, which included an elevation from 3 to 5 feet and 48 tons of Colorado moss rocks and several truckloads of dirt.

Wood made the three tunnels of pre-fabricated fiberglass, making sure they would be sturdy enough under the rocks. He built and stained the four trestles and covered much of the dirt near the track with pea gravel.

Obviously, the track and layout are the heart and soul of a backyard train, but the landscaping is an important part, too. Like frosting on a cake, it makes the presentation complete.

Wood used mostly dwarf species and even though they have been there almost a decade, their size is still in scale with the setting. Dwarf Alberta spruce are the mainstays, but there are mugo pines, junipers and hens and chicks, with the smaller plants closer to the track structures. For color, Wood adds flowering annuals.

Wood named his "town" with a train depot stop, Animas, and he has it laid out like an old-time Colorado mining town, complete with a sheriff at the depot and a few mountain cabins.

Wood admits his backyard track is an elaborate one costing thousands of dollars, but said starter sets are more budget friendly and beginners should do their research before taking on a big project.

But for this small-track engineer, nothing is better than spending a clear summer night in his backyard, where he says it makes him feel like taking a "mini trip to Colorado."