

On Track

Gardens, model trains add wow factor at Medford's Railroad Park

By [Sarah Lemon](#)

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Theater brings John Grilli and his wife, Mary Ann, to the Rogue Valley every year from California.

Medford Railroad Park also makes the Palo Alto couple's itinerary, although they have no kids in tow.

"We stumbled on this place probably 10 years ago," says John Grilli. "It's very impressive."

Because the park, run by volunteers and on donations, is open only every other Sunday, five years had passed since the Grillis' annual visit coincided with the park's infrequent hours. A railroad history enthusiast, John Grilli says he was surprised to see the addition of numerous gardens crisscrossed by model railroads on the park's seven acres.

"It's really a community asset."

The park opened in 1981 on the former site of the city's water treatment plant at Table Rock Road and Berrydale Avenue. The nonprofit attraction is maintained and managed by Medford Garden Railroaders, Southern Oregon Live Steamers, Rogue Valley Model Railroad Club, Morse Telegraph Club and the Southern Oregon chapter of the National Railway Historical Society. The groups' ongoing efforts keep local families, such as Justin and Kati Saxbury, with 3-year-old son Rylan, coming back to the park several times each year.

"It seems like every time we come here, there's something new to see," says Justin Saxbury, as Rylan ogles the Thomas the Tank Engine display.

"The water's blue this time," chimes in Kati Saxbury.

Turquoise-tinged lakes, streams, ponds and waterfalls are just the latest handiwork of the Garden Railroaders. With about 60 members, a few of whom show up for Friday and Saturday work parties, the club has transformed about an acre of bare earth donated by the Medford Parks and Recreation Department into a diverse array of garden designs, including bog, desert, mountain, hanging-wall and Japanese.

"When I get done, there'll be bonsai, and there'll be a pagoda," says Bill Meyer, who situated a waterfall-fed pond, Japanese maple and Zen meditation garden near his namesake, miniature "junk dealer" on the outskirts of the park's mythical town of Red Rock.

Boasting a theater, bowling alley, water tower, hardware store and taco shop to complement its city hall, courthouse, fire station, post office, bank and church, Red Rock is serviced by a large train station. Locomotives chug past the bog garden's pitcher plants over several bridges, including a covered bridge whose torched exterior demonstrates how steam-engine sparks often ignited the wooden structures, says Meyer. Most custom-built by hand, the park's bridges often are donated by members downsizing their collections, moving out of the area or getting "out of the train business," says Meyer.

The park's plants, similarly, are a "hodgepodge," says Meyer, a Medford resident who retired from teaching fourth and sixth grades at Lone Pine Elementary. Costco donates hundreds of plants that otherwise would be discarded, he says. Garden Railroaders prefer perennials, namely rosemary, thyme, mosses and sedums. But petunias that Costco donated last year turned the "Hogwarts" hanging garden into a riot of blossoms, so many that they blocked the "Harry Potter"-themed model train from view.

Cuttings from members' home gardens also furnish much of the foliage, says Meyer. Iris and azalea bloom in the spring, followed by daylilies, Shasta daisies and California poppies. Strategically placed succulents cover gravel borders and keep kids from throwing pebbles onto the tracks. Blueberry bushes corralled by a split-rail fence discourage contact with cables anchoring the park's power poles.

Although electric lines run all over the model-train layouts, the club plans to convert the displays to battery power, which doesn't require constant clearing of debris from the tracks, says Meyer. A trolley line is the latest addition, located on the other side of the mountain from Red Rock, between the log yard — with its flume, pond, sawmill and wigwam — and D&D Landing, where a ferry moves train cars to the next section of track. The hillside soon will be populated by 100 dwarf Alberta spruces, says Meyer.

"We have over 200 miniature trees," says Meyer, noting that some of the 2-footers are more than 20

years old.

It may be only five years in the making, but development of the Railroad Park's gardens moves at almost real-world pace. Just past D&D Landing and a quarry that acknowledges rock donations from Rogue River's Robco, plans are laid for a ranch and "destination resort" complete with a swimming beach, water park and miniature golf course, says Meyer.

But don't expect to see high-speed trains rushing through the garden's "modern town," says Meyer. The Garden Railroaders keep their work firmly rooted in the 1930s, '40s and '50s, when trains were "dominant" on the landscape.

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If you go

What: Medford Railroad Park

Hours: 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. the second and fourth Sundays of every month April through October.

Where: Table Rock Road and Berrydale Avenue, near Medford Fire-Rescue Station No. 4.

Admission: Free, but donations are appreciated.