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## Garden train 'a hobby in progress'

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Like a lot of people, Al and Jeannie Benson have a garden in their back yard. Like a lot of gardens, there are trees, bushes, flowers and even a pond.

Unlike most gardens, however, the Plano couple also has 800 feet of large scale railroad tracks running through a myriad of wooden miniature buildings, tunnels and bridges. They also have four electric trains weaving through three miniature villages and a farm, all scaled to size.

Al Benson said he started his "garden railroad" eight years ago when a friend of his, Dave McMinn, got him interested. The elder Plano man, he said, had been operating his garden railroad for about 28 years when arthritis forced him to stop.

"He gave me the idea," Al Benson said, adding that McMinn once worked for the railroad.

Although he never worked for the railroad himself, Al Benson said he had a railroad track around the family Christmas tree when he was growing up.

After getting some pieces from McMinn, Benson – who has worked at Docks TV & Appliance in Plano for 40 years – purchased some engines and other equipment from the old St. Aubin Trains in Woodstock and began setting up in a corner of his backyard. Most of the equipment came as kits, which he assembled easily.

"There was just the shed there when he started," Jeannie Benson said. "He put the whole thing together. He knew where he wanted everything to go."

Although some have very elaborate garden themes, such as a Civil War theme, Al Benson said his is just "a hodge podge."

Jokingly referring to it as "a hobby in progress," he said he adds a few buildings every year.

"It's an expensive hobby," Jeannie Benson said, adding that everything is made of cedar and not plastic. "But I always know where he's at."

To their surprise, they aren't the only ones with this particular hobby.

"Mr. McMinn was the only one I knew who did this," Al Benson said. "But they're all over."

In fact, the couple says there are at least 200 in the Chicago area alone, including two in Malta.

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Al and Jeannie Benson of Plano with the garden railroad in their backyard. (DOUG OLESON | [doleson@shawmedia.com](mailto:doleson@shawmedia.com))



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