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Imaginative gardeners build tracks through backyards

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Tony and Theresa Goatz run G-scale trains in their Spokane Valley backyard garden they built above ground that features lifelike mountains, mature plantings, a pond, stream and waterfall. With them is their Papillion, Lucy.

If you go

Inland Northwest Garden Railroad Society

The club meets the third Saturday of each month at a member's home. Dues are \$20 per year. Visit www.ingrs.com for more information.

Spokane is a railroad town. While trains are a common daily sight, some of the most scenic lines run right through local gardens.

Tony and Theresa Goatz live in Spokane Valley. Having a model garden railroad was always on Tony's mind.

"The first time I saw this backyard, I knew immediately that was where my railroad was going," he says.

Tony has been a rail fan for as long as he can remember and Theresa says she is "just along for the ride." He designed the railroad and she does the gardening.

To get started, he bought an issue of HO magazine and saw ads for garden railroads along with one for the Inland Northwest Garden Railroad Society. He and Theresa joined the club and their backyard landscape benefited from other members' ideas and suggestions.

"The biggest challenge is that we have a flat yard," Tony explains. "I couldn't drive into the backyard so I had several yards of dirt dumped in the driveway and brought it all back there by wheelbarrow load. My neighbors and their kids helped me get it done."

A related challenge was that the soil he ordered was sandy loam with bark in it.

"It's still settling, which is a real problem for laying the tracks," he explains.

Tony started out with a small loop of track and it grew from there. His goal was to have a realistic-looking mountain railroad with tunnels, rivers, ponds, a waterfall and a town. He has done a great job of accomplishing just that.

"I like to do things differently," Tony says. "I have one tunnel with a crisscross in the middle so the train comes out in a different place than you'd expect. It really surprises people, which has been fun."

He runs two sets of G-scale trains – which are approximately 1/29th actual size – on two sets of tracks so he can run both trains at the same time.

One train has a diesel locomotive and the other is steam. Each is battery-powered and they run over 600 feet of track.

Theresa says that landscaping a garden railroad is a bit of a challenge.

"Sometimes I can't do any planting because Tony keeps changing things," she says. "Aside from that, you have to keep the plantings to scale, so you have to trim them back often. I primarily look for small plants and groundcovers to use.

"But this has been a great way to incorporate a husband's love of trains with a wife's love of gardening."

That's a common sentiment, says Chuck Inlow, Inland Northwest Garden Railroad Society president.

"We are a family-oriented club because garden railroading involves model railroading and gardening together," he says. "It has something to offer for both husband and wife, as well as for kids of all ages."

Mike and Maggie Williams moved to their central Spokane neighborhood six years ago. They used to live in Florida where they both were involved with garden railroads.

"We started with a circle of track and each year, we add something different," Mike says.

"It's always evolving. There is a saying in model railroading that if you're done, you've defeated the purpose in having it," he adds with a laugh.

The Williamses also run G-scale trains.

“We embrace the LGB trains, which are Swiss,” Mike says, “because we think they are the prettiest and wanted to model our railroad after that.”

They have about 400 feet of track, laid out in two loops so they can run two trains at a time.

When it comes to the garden around their railroad, the couple do a lot of watering and weeding. But their goal has been to keep it as low-maintenance as possible.

“We want to have as much time as possible to play with our trains,” Mike says. “We used to grow a lot of annuals but that can get spendy since they have to be replaced every year. But we really enjoy the beauty of flowers.”

Their garden has several walkways with water features and a sitting areas. This provides different vantage points from which to watch the trains and the splashing water softens noise from the nearby streets.

“This garden is our little sanctuary,” Mike says. “The trains have a hypnotic effect and it’s very relaxing.”

For those who have always wanted their own garden railroad, he has sage advice:

“Join a club because that’s where you get the information. When you’re building your railroad, go with simple. Don’t try to do elaborate things all at once so you’ll get to play with the trains as quickly as possible.

“Other than that, remember that it’s gotta be fun.”

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