



Landscapes with plenty of bells and whistles on 8-stop, self-guided route

Annual garden rail tour on track

Elena Acoba Special To The Arizona Daily Star | Posted: Sunday, March 4, 2012 12:00 am

Some 10 years ago, Willis and Dottie Fagg thought they might like having a model railroad running around the backyard of their east side home.

But maybe not.

"We weren't sure at the time that that was the right thing to do," recalls Willis, a retired engineer. "We weren't going to destroy things to have a railroad."

Both he and his wife, formerly a computer programmer, like the Texas rangers, yucca and other desert-style landscape they installed when they moved in 18 years ago. So they figured out a way to weave the G-gauge track around their existing plants.

The layout of about 350 feet of track is among eight stops on the annual Rails in the Garden Tour next weekend that's put on by the Tucson Garden Railway Society.

The Faggs specifically wanted to show how people can incorporate a layout around existing landscapes. It differs from a few of the other tour stops in which the exhibitors built the garden around their railway.

Willis started by choosing a small size of outdoor train so that it could make tight turns around plants.

The route hugs the backyard wall, which Dottie decorates with facades of buildings to simulate a 19th-century town.

Lantana, Texas ranger, red and Mexican bird of paradise and red yucca are among the plants that are severely trimmed to keep vegetation away from the tracks.

Open spaces under trees allow Dottie to add some buildings and scenes, such as a train station, a game of horseshoes, mariachi musicians, an adobe village and a mansion on a hill.

Since installing the railroad, the retired couple has made some planting decisions around it.

When Dottie's roses didn't thrive independent from the railroad project, the couple dug them out and planted rosemary. They keep it and other plants shaped like trees as a forest setting for the train.

Most recently, they took out a large amount of concrete and laid soil and rock mulch. The remodel allows more room for growing plants and adding track.

The Faggs' layout doesn't have spectacular features such as tunnels or elevation climbs.

"A lot of decisions were constrained by the existing landscaping," says Willis.

But it does provide a source of entertainment for themselves and their grandsons.

The battery-operated trains issue sounds of steam engines. Some settings move or emit music. Silly signs and surprising pieces like the "fruit" trees abound.

Dottie says they describe their layout this way: "Our train is always whimsical, not usually to scale."

If you go

Rails in the Garden Tour

- What: Self-guided look at model railroads in landscapes.
- Where: Seven residences in central Tucson and the east side and at the Tucson Botanical Gardens.
- When: 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday and next Sunday.
- Cost: \$5, free for 18 years and younger.
- Tickets: Ace Hobby Place, Rillito Nursery and Garden Center, Southern Arizona Transportation Museum, Tucson Botanical Gardens and by mail through www.tucsongrs.org
- Information: 820-0886.

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