

HOW TO MODEL TREES

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scenery - model trees



It always surprises me how many really good model railways are completely spoiled by the trees and shrubs chosen by the modeller. One, otherwise excellent model railway shown at a top UK exhibition was planted with commercial trees that were all identical! There are such good materials and methods available, I cannot see why some folks still persist with such stuff! There are a number of top model tree makers where you can be assured that each example is unique. Great if you have the cash to go that way! Far better to learn how to make your own trees.

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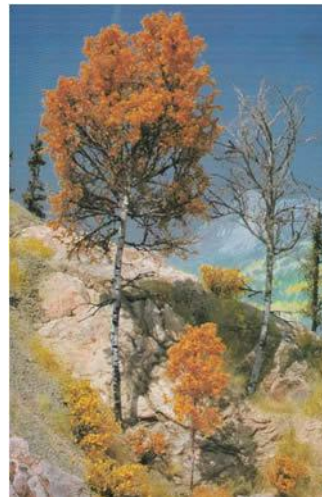
*the superb trees on the 1:50 scale Pempoul layout; a model of the Reseau Breton
photo Crawley Model Railway Soc*

It is really worth the time to get things right.

Firstly, it is essential to decide which month of the year you are modelling. In spring, many trees have very visible flowers, the Horse Chestnut having some of the most spectacular. Later in the year, fruits may be clearly visible, and leaf colour changes. Autumn scenes can be really spectacular, with autumnal shades varying between species. Winter scenes are very rarely modelled, it being quite difficult to model realistic bare branches. It is possible however, using sage brush or wire armatures and the judicious addition of sea moss. An example is shown below. Some trees hang on to their autumnal leaves for a long time, such as Oaks. When denuded of leaves, it is easy to see how many trees are being covered with ivy. Mistletoe is also very evident.



a winter elm with mistletoe



autumn Aspen by Rick Reimer

Substantial areas of County Gate (which is fixed in June) are solid trees. Visits to the modelled area will give a very good idea of what trees to expect...take along a guide to British trees. Photograph in the month you intend to model. It is worth noting how trees colonise an area. Silver birch are early colonisers for instance, but are short lived and are subsequently replaced by other species. We had to bear in mind that the area was heavily felled to supply timber for the Great War. Where civil engineering has taken place, it is important to study how fast nature will take over disturbed land. Early photos of the Lynton and Barnstaple show how bare the tracksides really were at first. By 1935, the time of the railway modelled by us, three decades have passed so plants had become well established. The area modelled has relatively thin soil so it is rare to see really tall trees.



poplars and silver birch made using wire armature method

model tree making

Most of the trees on County Gate are towards the back of the model where individual detail is less important. Copses and woods when seen from a distance usually show foliage down to the ground. Colour differences between species of trees are also less apparent. For these we have used sea moss supplied by International Models. The moss is trimmed to shape with scissors and is then sprayed brown. The moss is sprayed with spray mount and is then dipped into the scatter material. Mostly we have used Woodland Scenics 'coarse turf - medium green'. This we buy in large jars in industrial quantities! Some trees are given a second application of scatter of slightly different colouring...some scatter is from GreenScene, and others from International Models. Where new growth is shown, a slightly lighter green scatter is applied to the tips of branches.

Bushes and trees at the front use scatter by Anita Decor, Treemendus or Noch.

Remember, just because a manufacturer of scatter calls the colour 'elm' does not mean that it is correct. Always check personally.

The trees are planted by drilling into the Polyfilla substrate and gluing in with epoxy. Each tree has to be correctly shaped to fit into its position in the copse. Nature tends to use every space available to collect sunlight.

Trees that stand more alone and those towards the front of the model need a different technique. Poplars and birches, for instance are made using fine wire armatures soldered together. We use up to 50 strands of 3 amp fuse wire, carefully twisted together into finer and finer branches. The visible branches and trunk are painted with bark product from [Treemendus](#) prior to spray painting. Depending upon the species, scatter is either attached to the armature direct, or small pieces of sea moss are glued to the wire armature and then treated with scatter.

We use much more scatter on our trees than many modellers so the trees appear very dense, which is usually the case when viewing from a distance.

making 'prime trees'



The elm and oak described 'planted' by the Glenthorne Hotel. The new backdrop is now in place - [click on image to enlarge](#)

For prime broad leaf trees near the front of the model, we are now using a method using sage brush or heather as the armature with sea moss. Such trees are very delicate and should be placed where they are not likely to be damaged by folks playing with the trains! We have been very lucky to have a kind US trucker who collected sagebrush for us from the Nevada desert. I have noticed that there is a very similar plant to sage brush higher up on the hills of the Canary Islands, so for Europeans, next hols you can get gathering!

materials

- Sage brush, heather or any other well shaped woody plant stem
- sea moss
- Super glue (gel type) and accelerator
- spray mount and fixative
- scatter material
- Clothes pins or small clamps
- Tweezers
- Straight pins
- Side cutters

description of materials

The trickiest part of making this type of tree is finding the correct materials. Sage brush or heather can be found simply out in nature. They should be put in a microwave and 'baked' for a few minutes to kill off any fungus, bugs, etc.

Spray mount is by far the best spray glue for this application. Spray fixative, used by artists is far better than hair spray for finally fixing the foliage.

I use Woodland Scenics medium green coarse turf to add 'leaves' to the trees or other scatters from Greenscene, which I am now beginning to prefer. Highly detailed trees have scatter by Anita Decor.

A pair of clothes pins or a small clamp works well to hold the armature while working with it. When connecting two clothes pins in an L fashion they also serve as a convenient stand to keep the tree upright when drying.

A pair of tweezers helps out a lot when trying to attach sea moss to the branches with super glue.

At the base of each tree I fit a straight pin in to help hold the tree in place when 'planted' on the layout. After the pin is stuck in the end is clipped off with a pair of side cutters.

A simple pair of side cutters or anything else which will cut a straight pin will work just fine.

Some use polyfibre to create the foliage. I have given up with this method as now and again it shows and destroys the entire illusion. Sea moss (*Teloxys aristata* of the family *Chenopodiaceae*) continues with arborisation and is much more real. Here we are making a large old elm for Glenthorne meadow. Elm is a very brittle tree, so I have included some dead cracked branches and some parts which have had the attention of a tree surgeon.

Sagebrush Tree Construction Steps

- Prepare the armature. Select a portion of sage brush which is typical of the species of tree you require. It is always a good idea to look at real tree species in winter. Stick a straight pin into the base of the tree to add stability when 'planted'. Clip the pin head off after inserting the pin.
- Armatures can also be made using twisted wire. This is the preferred method if an actual tree is being modelled. Heavier wire is twisted together to form the trunk and this is attached to bundles of 3 amp fuse wire for lighter branches. The armature is soldered together, washed, and then coated in bark material from Treemendus. This can be carved to create texture. A combination of wire armature and sage brush off cuts can also be used.



old oak modelled on a tree on the way to Woody bay (7") - click on image to enlarge

- Glue a small pieces of sea moss suitably trimmed to the armature starting from the bottom. In some cases, the sagebrush is drilled to take the sea moss branches. The positioning of the sea moss will give the tree species its distinctive shape.



beginning to add sea moss for a large elm - click on image to enlarge

- Continue the process working your way from the inside and bottom of the armature to the outside and top. Continue until all desired branches have been covered with sea moss. It is fine to leave some branches uncovered to represent a dead branch here and there. Spray the sea moss with spray mount now and again to further attach the branches.



elm - click on image to enlarge



English oak - click on image to enlarge

- You may have to hand paint the glue joints as some accelerators for superglue make it go white. I use a grey/brown mix. Very lightly spray paint with Modelmates moss green, so the original colours show through.



elm - click on image to enlarge

- You may choose to add ivy growing on the tree trunk at this time
- Over a bag or in some other environment set up to catch the overshoot, spray the sea moss with spray mount. Be careful to spray away from the main trunk and from above - try to spray in bursts instead of one constant stream.
- Carefully and slowly sprinkle on the flock. Darker flock can be applied to the bottom side of the sea moss then apply some lighter to the top of the tree to give it a bit of a highlight. It is very important not to overdue the flock. You should still be able to see through the tree after the flock has been applied.
- It may be possible to light spray paint the flock to obtain the right leaf colour.



elm (12") - click on image to enlarge



English oak (10") - click on image to enlarge



an old elm suffering from die-back and an alder tree (approx 8") - click on image to enlarge



a horse chestnut and an elm with die-back - click on image to enlarge



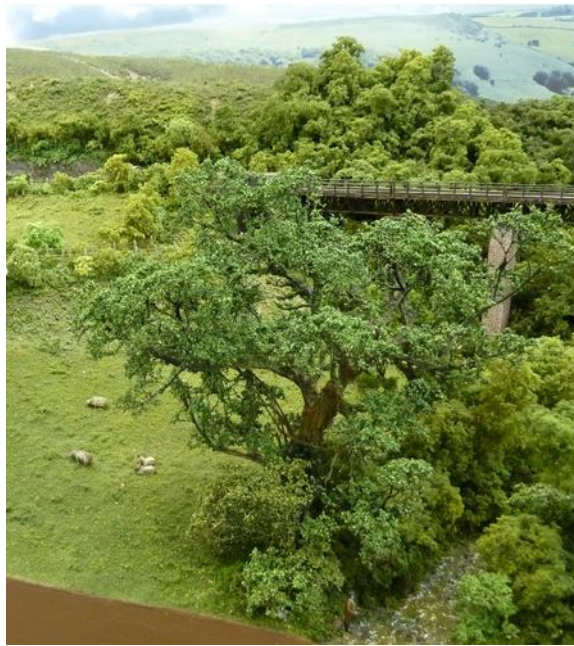
elm modelled on a tree near Woody bay (12") - click on image to enlarge

- Tap off the extra flock into a container.
- Give the tree another light coat of fixative to help keep the flock in place.

Time taken to build each tree is around 5 hours.



a gnarled tree by the viaduct



prime oak tree - foliage by Anita Decor

conifers

A different technique is needed for conifers. My favourite material is Asparagus fern (*Asparagus densiflorus 'Sprengeri'*), bought from a florist shop. First, separate the fronds from the main stem and spray the desired colour (a darker green unless you are modelling Larch). Use acrylic paint for this.

Then immerse the fronds completely in a glycerine/water mix (1 : 3) overnight. This will preserve the fronds and prevent them becoming brittle.



immerse in glycerine/water mix overnight - photo Charles King

The trunk is made with dowel which needs to be sanded down to size with a gradual taper. It should be left uneven and 'distressed'. It can then be dyed the correct colour or painted.



completed trees - Charles King

The best commercial conifers I have seen come from [Canyon Creek Scenics](#). The trunks are just first rate.

shrubs and hedges

Most of our shrubs and hedges are made using either sea moss or small wire armatures in a similar manner to making the trees. Hedges vary according to the area in Britain. During the 1930s, photographs show that hedges in north Devon and Somerset were somewhat unruly affairs. There were of course no Bushwhackers! Planting individual hedge plants takes a long time, but the effect is well worth it. The one exception on our model is the trimmed hedge in front of the

Glenthorne Hotel. This was made using insulation material used under carpets in the car industry. This was trimmed to shape and treated with scatter. Additional scatter was added on the outside of the fence to depict through growth. About 1500 individual plants have made up the hedges on sections 1 and 2.



trimmed and wild hedges in front of the hotel

		Model Tree Heights							
Scale	Ratio	10mm	16mm	19mm	23mm	30mm	40mm	55mm	70mm
'O'	1:48	18"	22"	2'8"	3'3"	4'3"	5'8"	7'9"	10'
'OO'	1:76	2'6"	4'	4'8"	5'9"	7'3"	10'	13'9"	17'6"
'HO'	1:87	2'9"	4'6"	5'6"	6'6"	8'6"	11'5"	15'9"	20'
'N'	1:160	5'3"	8'4"	10'	12'	15'9"	21'	28'9"	36'9"
'Z'	1:220	7'3"	11'6"	13'9"	16'8"	21'8"	28'9"	39'8"	50'6"
		Model Tree Heights							
Scale	Ratio	80mm	90mm	105mm	135mm	150mm	200mm	300mm	350mm
'O'	1:48	11'5"	12'10"	15'	19'3"	21'4"	31'6"	42'9"	55'
'OO'	1:76	20'	22'5"	26'	33'9"	37'5"	49'9"	74'9"	87'3"
'HO'	1:87	22'9"	25'9"	30'	38'6"	42'9"	57'	85'6"	99'10"
'N'	1:160	42'	47'4"	55'3"	70'9"	78'9"	105'		
'Z'	1:220	57'9"	65'	75'9"	97'6"	108'4"			



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tree planting

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