

13 In pursuit of better model trees

Thoughts on trees and recipe for home-cooked aspens



Bob Hamm's own HO scale layout features hundreds of the aspen trees he shows how to make in this article.

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PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

Before making that first tree you need to consider several topics. These include size, type, appearance, modeling approach, color, and texture. Here I want to present some lessons learned working on my own HO scale Iron Gorge & Western RR set in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado. I'll conclude by sharing my recipe for making peppergrass aspens.

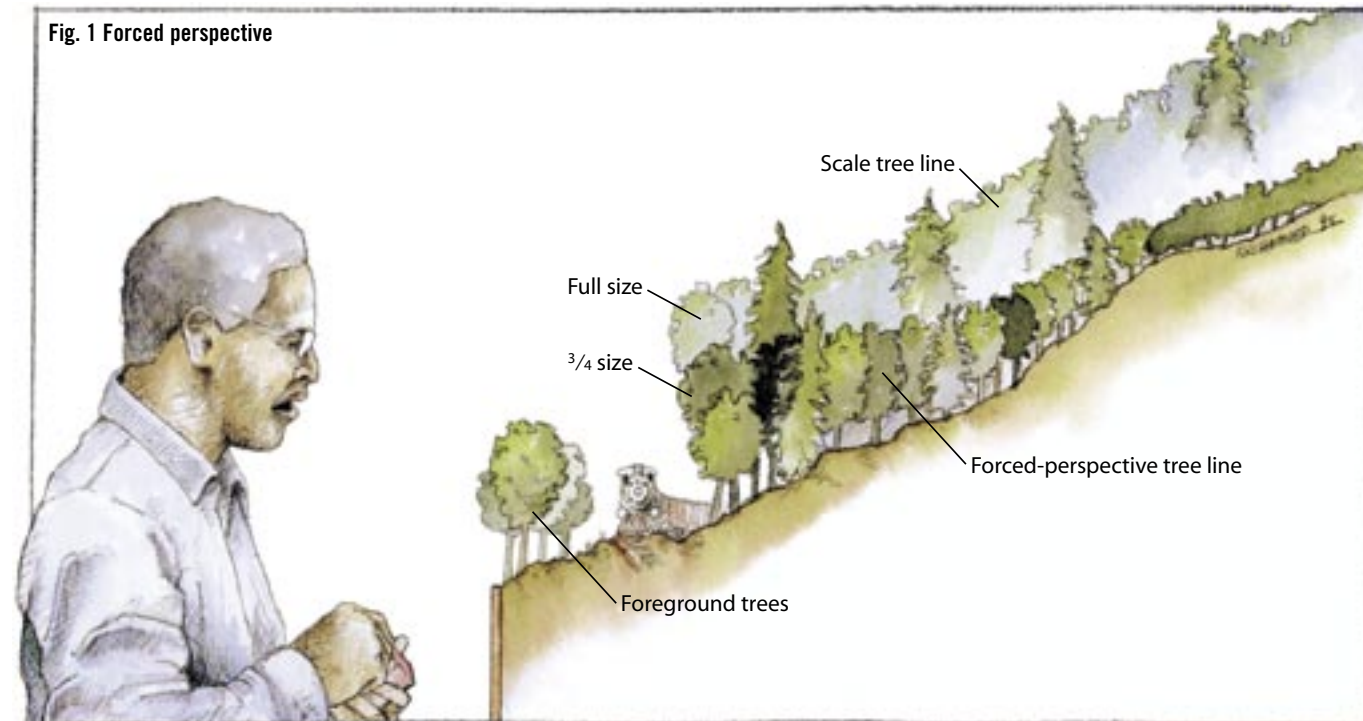
Tree sizes

Most trees I use in the foreground (aspens, firs, spruces, and others) are between 35 and 40 scale feet (5 to 5½ inches) tall. This is about half to three-quarters the average size of the real thing. I didn't arrive at this size by scientific method, but by simply observing what size trees seemed best to fit my scenery.

I think these smaller trees fit better because many of our structures and scenery features are also

undersized. Take structures for example. Often we choose a smaller one not because it's more prototypical, but because it fits the scene better. Often we selectively compress the prototype so it won't overwhelm its surroundings or simply because we don't have enough room for a scale version.

By using increasingly smaller trees towards the backdrop we create the illusion that distances are greater than they actually are. See fig. 1. This technique is called



“forced perspective,” and it’s particularly effective where there are lots of conifers. Their distinctive pointed shapes allow a direct size comparison between background and foreground trees. I go so far as to use background trees that are about one-third the size of those up front.

Tree types and appearance

Geography and climate determine what kinds of trees grow where, and seasons govern how they look at different times. If you’re modeling the area where you live, just be observant. Take a few trips over back country roads. Take some pictures, make some notes, and collect some leaves for color samples.

If you don’t live in the area you model (as in my case) rely on books, calendars, magazines, and videos. Take a trip to your chosen location, perhaps as a family vacation or as a side jaunt after a business trip. Remember to take your camera.

Generally, I don’t try to build specific models of a given species, but I do try to capture the flavor and appearance of the trees of an area.

Try to identify the dominant species. Learn what they look like, how large they grow, where they grow (near streams, on slopes, and so forth) and how they group and mix with other species.

In the part of the San Juan Mountains I model, for example, aspens are the principal deciduous trees, while the conifers are divided among engelmann spruce, douglas fir, and lodgepole pine.

Those particular conifers look similar until you get up close and look at the bark and needles, so rather than try to imitate each species, I simply plant several slightly different kinds of tall, conical trees that have the right general appearance.

Selecting tree colors

As you all know, tree color depends on the time of year. For those of us with summertime layouts, it’s simply a matter of selecting the right greens. Try to match paint samples with photos or leaves.

In his book *How to Build Realistic Model Railroad Scenery*, Dave Frary suggests using a single base color for your earth. I think it’s

similarly important to establish a basic green or group of closely related greens to provide color continuity for deciduous trees and other leafy plants. The conifers also need their own base color.

I use Floquil paints for my final tree colors because they are flat, available in many colors, and easy to alrbrush. I mix three foliage greens all based on Coach Green (RR48) and Burlington Northern Green (RR35).

One mix adds 1 part Reefer Yellow (RR31) to 2 parts of each of the greens, a second adds 3 parts Reefer Yellow, and the last adds 1 part Reefer White (RR11).

Other brands of paint will work as well, but be sure they’re flat. Also, in selecting colors be sure to view them under actual layout light.

I keep a notebook of my color samples and mixes, using 8½” x 11” vinyl holders made for 35mm slides. Two-inch-square pieces of white cardboard with the paint samples on one side and the recipe on the other work well.

Foliage texture

When viewed from afar, the best foliage materials have a texture

like clusters of leaf-size specks. The more they “pop out” the better the effect.

Another desirable attribute is a delicate or airy structure. You want to be able to look between leaf clusters and see the inner branches.

Fine-textured commercial ground foam when applied to a delicate support armature does a good job of meeting both requirements. I particularly like the AMSI line of ground foams, for both their colors and fine texture.

Many natural materials also have these qualities. Some of the best are: peppergrass (also called baby bush, candy bush, and beige lace), hardhacket (or hardcap), and wild spirea (or meadowsweet). These plants may be known by other names as well.

I buy the peppergrass in florist shops and craft stores, but gather the other materials from overgrown fields and meadows in east-

ern New York and Western Massachusetts in the early fall.

All these natural materials are characterized by tight clusters of what appear to be seed pods connected by a delicate armature of branches. The seed pods are about leaf size and generally multi-faceted.

Some of the best-formed weed heads make good trees with little more than trimming and painting. I use wild spirea in this manner for my background trees. Sprigs of the peppergrass work well for aspen saplings and filling in the foreground.

A recipe for aspen trees

Colorado Rockies modelers need aspen trees by the bushel. I build my foreground aspens by gluing peppergrass sprigs to the trunk. Figure 2 shows the tools and materials needed.

For the trunks I use straight

twigs or weed stalks $\frac{1}{6}$ " to $\frac{1}{8}$ " in diameter and 3 to 6 inches long. The glue should be thick-bodied and fast drying. Walthers Goo works well, as does Quick Grab by the 3C Co. in Woburn, Mass. A small piece of foam board makes a useful base for setting the tree down.

Typically peppergrass costs \$3 to \$4 a bunch. Choose the kind that is straw-colored, or “natural.” It’s most likely to have the “seed pods” that look like leaves. Pick the bunches with the fullest clusters. I’ve found the quality varies.

Let’s build an aspen

The sequence of photos in fig. 3 takes you through the construction, so grab a twig and let’s go. It helps to have an image of the tree’s basic shape in mind, and that’s provided in fig. 4.

I hope you’ll give this recipe a try. It works great for me.



Fig. 2 Tree-making supplies. Here’s what you need to make the tree shown in fig. 3. The shaker, lower left, contains Highball N scale ballast for adding speckles to the trunk.



Fig. 3. Apply glue to the top $\frac{2}{3}$ of the trunk. Cut 30 to 40 leaf clusters $\frac{1}{2}$ " to $1\frac{1}{2}$ " long while you’re waiting for the glue to skin over. Spread these clusters out on a flat surface.



Add a short ($\frac{1}{2}$ " to $\frac{3}{4}$ " long) cluster to the top of the trunk, sticking straight up. Put the next sprig near it but slightly off vertical. The foliage clusters should touch or come close to touching.



Work down and around the tree in a spiral, using slightly longer ($\frac{3}{4}$ " to 1") branches. They should approach horizontal towards the middle branches and begin closing the oval illustrated in fig. 4.



After the cement has set, dribble CA down the trunk to further secure the branches and provide a barrier against the Floquil paint. Then spray the tree basic green.



Once the green is thoroughly dry, paint the trunk and lower branches, varying the color from white to gray. Polly S and other acrylics won’t dissolve the green paint and cement underneath.



Now for the *pièce de résistance*. Sprinkle on High Ball N Scale cinder ballast while the white paint is still wet to give the bark a slightly speckled appearance.



Highlight about a quarter of the leaves you can reach easily with a slightly whiter green. This represents the backs of some leaves and gives the realistic illusion that the trees are swaying slightly in the breeze.

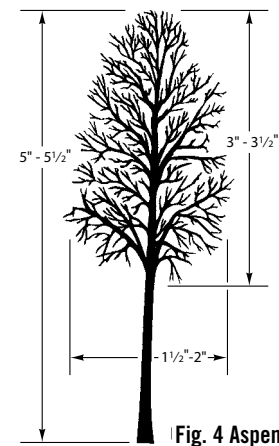


Fig. 4 Aspen tree proportions