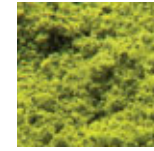


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13 In pursuit of better model trees

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.

BY ROBERT HAMM
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.

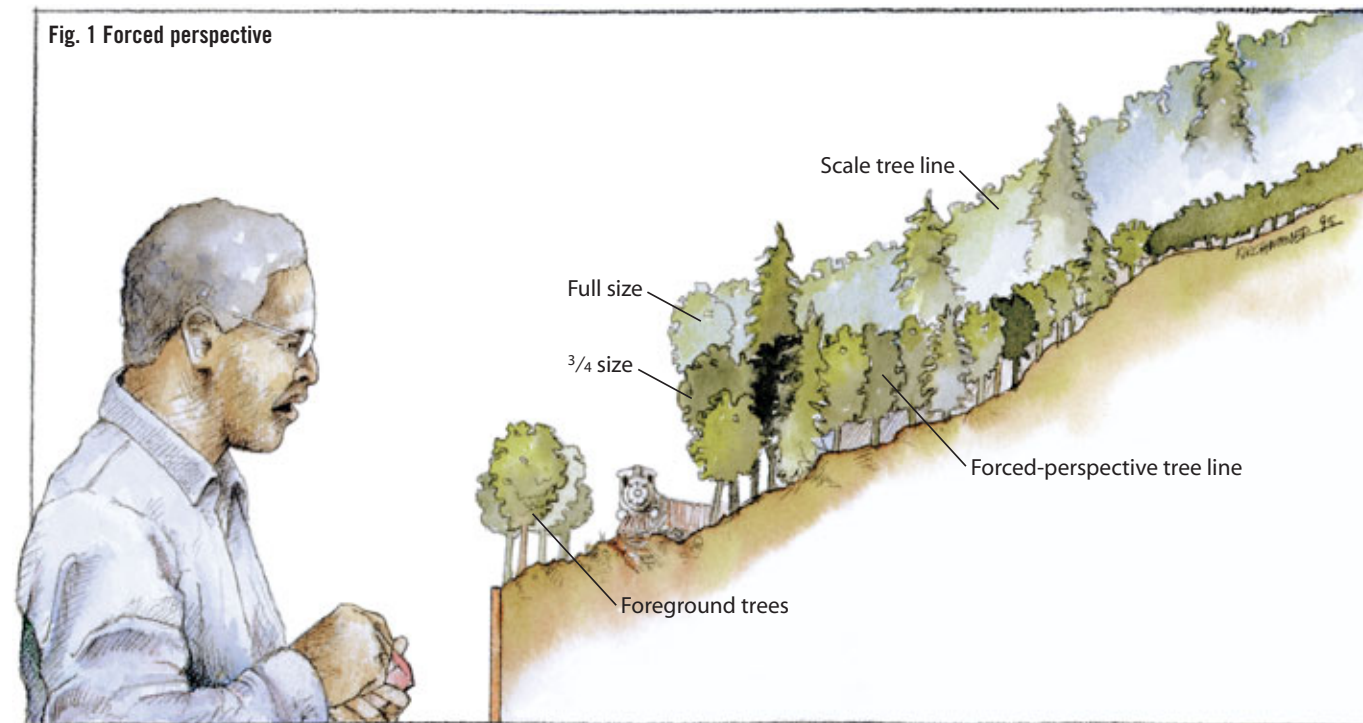
Tree sizes

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