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Making Forests from the Trees

How to Use Pine Cone Trees on Modular Railroads

The Eastern Carolina Railroaders set up and operate its FasTrack® Modular Railroad at national and regional train shows throughout the Eastern United States, including the LCCA Annual Convention and at the TCA meet at York, Pennsylvania. Our railroad is action oriented with numerous visitor-controlled operating accessories and visitor-operated trains. We want show visitors to enjoy our modular railroad, and we expend considerable time and effort designing our modules to be user-friendly and interesting to operate. Frequently show visitors will come to us and say, "I really loved your railroad." And then they follow with "And I particularly liked your pine cone trees." **(Photo 1)** It is ironic we can spend hours making a scene for a module only to hear a visitor exclaim how wonderful the pine trees are – and it only takes 15 minutes to paint one of them.

Although these show visitors are complementing us on our unusual use of pine cones, what they really mean to say is they like how we use pine cones to represent trees and use them to create natural-looking scenes on our modular railroad. Yes, we know real trees do not really look like pine cones, and we know that there are many beautiful models of trees available from many different model railroad suppliers. But model railroading is art. It is representational rather than realistic. And in a representational context, pine cones work well. They are a natural stand-in for the real thing. They suggest a forest rather than become a forest.

Most importantly, pine cone trees have a significant advantage over commercial model trees – they are practically free. And price is a major consideration when we use several hundred trees on our modular railroad at a train meet or show. We use so many pine cone trees on our modules they have become a signature scenic feature of the Eastern Carolina Railroaders' modular railroad as you can see in **Photo 2.**

Scenery for the LCCA FasTrack Modular Railroad is particularly challenging. Because the modular railroad travels between shows, scenery cannot be permanently attached to modules. Buildings, bridges, signals, operating accessories and almost all scenic elements must come off modules and be stored between shows. To be practical, scenic elements must be easy to set up and rugged enough to withstand considerable abuse during the unpacking and repacking that occurs with each train show. Pine cone trees are well suited for use as scenic elements because they are so durable and so easy to make and to use. Let me show you how to make them, and use them, on your modular railroad – or even on your home layout.

Making Trees from the Forest

Simply speaking, if you want pine cone trees, you need a source of pine cones. Ask anyone who lives in the Southeastern United States about pine cones, and they will tell you how annoying pine cones are. They fall like rain during storms and litter yards and

Photo 1

Photo 2

Photo 3

Photo 4

gardens. Then they spend hours raking them into multiple little piles for disposal. If you live in an area of the country where pine trees grow, you should be able to gather as many pine cones as you want from your yard. And your neighbors will be delighted to give you all you care to pick up any time you would like some. I get my pine cones from my yard, from my neighbor's yard, from a city park down the street and from a friend who lives across town. Multiple sources are preferred because each source will provide different sizes of pine cones. Pine trees grow almost everywhere in the US. If there are no pine trees close to your home, you can probably find pine trees growing in a state park or along the side of a highway. Just watch for an opportunity to pick some up.

Pine cones are brown or grey. I paint them in shades of green to represent live trees. I use two or three colors of green in spray cans ranging in color from dark to medium to light (**Photo 3**). The green colors should be dull green with shades of grey or olive mixed in. I never use a bright green. A bright green pine cone looks like plastic. Using multiple colors of paint creates variety in color within each pine cone tree.

Interestingly, pine cones grow in spirals so they do not have flat bases and will not sit straight on our modules. So, before I paint my pine cones, I trim their bases on my band saw so they sit reasonably flat on a table (**Photo 4**).

I paint my pine cones in groups of 40 to 50 at one time. I set up a spray painting area outside in my yard using an old cardboard box placed on two sawhorses (**Photo 5**) and arrange the pine cones on the cardboard in a grid with about 3 or 4 inches of space between cones. I spray them all at once starting with the darkest green. I simply dust paint over the whole field of pine cones so that each pine cone receives some color but is not uniformly painted green. I want variation in color within each tree (**Photo 6**). I follow the dark green with a lighter shade of green to provide some highlights on the tips of the pine cones. I use only a light dusting of this lighter green. If you want even more highlights on your pine cones, you can give them a very light dusting of an even lighter green. For more variety in color I will sometimes (but not always) add a very, very light dusting of a medium brown. A finished pine cone tree is shown in **Photo 7**. I make no attempt to paint the bottoms or underside of the pine cones. I want the natural brown of the pine cones to show through the green "foliage" of the painted cone. After the paint has dried overnight, I dump the finished pine cones into a large plastic storage tub for use on the modular railroad (**Photo 8**).

That's all there is to it. Pine cone trees are quick and simple to make. A batch of 50 pine cone trees takes only about one hour to cut, set out, and paint. If you have difficulty finding a source of pine cones, decorative miniature Christmas trees from Dollar Stores make an economical substitute (**Photo 9**). These are available on sale after the holidays. Similar trees can be made from discarded artificial Christmas tree branches and a block of wood cut from a tree branch.

Photo 5

Photo 6

Photo 7

Photo 8

Photo 9

How to Use Pine Cone Trees to Enhance Scenic Effects on the Modular Railroad

Pine cone trees are used in numbers. Single trees are okay, but large numbers of trees are most effective to set up scenes on the modular railroad. Here is what pine cone trees can do:

• Define the boundaries of a scene on a module
• Hide the back edge of a module
• Disguise unsightly breaks between modules
• Soften the transition between modules
• Direct visitors' lines of sight to interesting scenic elements
• Hide mini-scenes so that visitors do not see all scenic elements at once
• Briefly hide trains from view as they traverse the railroad

Provide a unifying look to a railroad composed of modules from different builders

A primary use of pine cone trees is to fill the space where two modules meet. By covering this space, trees act as visual barriers to separate adjacent modules that may have very different scenic treatments. Trees provide an area of visually bland or uninteresting space between distinctly different scenes (**Photo 10**). One module may show a rural scene, perhaps with realistic ground cover with grass, weeds and rocks while the module it is connected to represents an industrial area. Or an adjacent module may simply use painted plywood to represent grass and dirt. A group of trees can disguise abrupt or unsightly breaks between modules (**Photo 11**) by drawing the viewer's eye away from the junction between modules toward a more interesting area on one of the modules. By gently separating scenes, pine cone trees act to soften the transition from one module to the next.

A second use of pine cone trees is to frame scenes so that each becomes a distinctly different scene within the railroad as a whole. Trees arranged around a tobacco farm in **Photo 12** mark the boundaries of the farm. They isolate the farm from the other parts of the railroad and divert attention away from the edges of the module. The lumberjacks in **Photo 13** are framed by pine trees that emphasize the work that they are doing. An added benefit of separating scenes is that our trains appear to have a purpose by transporting materials from one place to another. A group of trees between scenes on modules places an area of uninteresting space between two areas of interest so that our trains appear to be travelling to some different, and distant, destination.

Pine cone trees can act to direct a viewer's line of sight toward important scenes on our modules. Pine cone trees are used in **Photo 14** to direct a line of sight from right to left along a river on a one of the Eastern Carolina Railroaders' Civil War modules. A brief skirmish between Union and Confederate soldiers has broken out at a gristmill on the river. A line of trees guides the viewer's eyes from the Confederates beside the mill across the river to the Union soldiers on the left bank. The entire battle scene then becomes visible. Pine cone trees can also frame small mini-scenes hidden within larger scenes on a module (**Photo 15**). By carefully arranging groups of trees we can hide scenes of hobos, deer, bears, dogs and cats so that they can only be seen from specific directions. Visitors cannot see everything all at once and are continually being surprised to discover something that was previously hidden simply because they didn't look down that

Photo 10

Photo 11

Photo 12

Photo 13

Photo 14

particular line of sight **(Photo 16)**. Kids particularly like to discover hidden animals in the trees and forests.

Pine cone forests make excellent backdrops for our modules. A line of pine cone trees along the back edge of a module can block the view of the module's edge so that the model scene doesn't appear to fall off the back of the module. A tree or group of trees in the foreground can temporarily block our view of a train as it passes behind the trees. This has the effect of making our trains appear to be going somewhere and makes their passing through the scene more interesting **(Photo 17)**.

Pine cone trees can add a unifying theme to connect very different modules built by different individuals so that the overall modular railroad has a unified look, as though it was designed and built by one individual or group **(Photo 18)**. Many times, when a combined modular railroad is assembled at a train show, special event or annual convention, the combined railroad consists of different modules built by different individuals with different ideas about how to build and scenic a model railroad. Pine cone trees, liberally added to everyone's modules provide a unifying factor to smooth out the scenic rough spots and make the multiple modules appear to be a unified whole.

Pine cone trees can become major scenic elements on your modular or home railroad. Look for the Eastern Carolina Railroaders' modules at the next LCCA Annual Convention or at the TCA meet at York. You will see pine cone trees and forests separating scenes, hiding mini-scenes and providing scenic backdrops to our modular railroad. I hope you enjoy our modular railroad as much as many of our visitors who say "I loved the railroad, and I particularly liked the pine cone trees!"

Photographs by David Bjorkman

Hints for arranging trees on your modules
Place trees in small groups
Put an odd number of trees in a group
Do not space trees evenly. Nothing is uniform in nature
Mix sizes; Mix colors
Put taller trees in back
Use a line of trees to hide the back edge of a module's scene
Use groups of trees to guide a visitor's line of sight

Photo 15

Photo 16

Photo 17

Photo 18