

A Clinic on Making “Super Trees” Presented at the April 2012 BMRC meeting By Doug Wright

I think that I shall never see... a lovely scene without a tree. Joyce Kilmer said that only God can make a tree. He was right, of course, but in this wonderful hobby of model railroading, model trees are what bring a layout or diorama to life. The closer our miniature trees mimic God’s beautiful creations, the better we represent the real world. As a result, we constantly strive to perfect the enjoyable art of miniature tree making.

In April, I presented a clinic on deciduous tree making at our monthly club meeting. While several methods were shown, the emphasis was on the use of “SuperTrees” from Scenic Express. SuperTrees are a distant cousin of our native sagebrush, and are harvested in the Scandinavian Peninsula. When properly prepared, these plants make beautiful miniature trees that will add realism to any scene. The following guide to procedures and materials required will help anyone use this proven method of creating great miniature deciduous trees.

SuperTree material can be purchased locally from Caboose Hobbies or ordered directly from Scenic Express (scenicexpress.com). This is also where you can buy the flocking materials that we will be using. The ¼ bushel value pack will make about 30 trees, and if you are really ambitious, the Supervalue Pack will make up to 400 trees.



Gently remove the individual plants from the package, for at this stage they are quite fragile. You will notice several large leaves on each plant, and these must be removed.

Using a tweezers, carefully pull these leaves off the armature. This is much easier than it sounds, as the leaves are brittle

and practically fall off by themselves. Next, prepare a batch of diluted Matte Medium. I use a one-gallon container with a really good seal to prevent evaporation. The containers that wall board joint compound or wallpaper paste come in are perfect, as are several other commercial products. Matte Medium can be purchased at any crafts store. It’s a little pricey, but goes a long, long way. A 40% off coupon available at HobbyLobby.com always helps! Mix one part Matte Medium with five parts tap water (a 5:1 solution). As this mixture is depleted, you can add to it at any time, as it never goes bad. Remember to stir well.

Now that you have the unsightly leaves removed and the diluted Matte Medium, it is time to soak the plants in this solution. The plant absorbs the mixture and becomes very pliable. If you read the instructions that come with the SuperTrees, you will note that it is suggested to spray paint the



plants before soaking. I have found that this retards the plant’s ability to absorb the liquid, so I wait on this step. Completely immerse the plants in the liquid (several plants can often be processed together) for at least 2 minutes. I generally leave them in the solution for 5 to 10 minutes. It doesn’t hurt to leave them in longer, but the plant will only absorb so much liquid. Remove the plants, shake off any excess liquid and let dry on newspaper. Once dry, any bent or misshapen plants can easily be straightened by gently touching the tip of a low power soldering iron to the stem. Much easier than the clothespin weighting method suggested in the



instructions, this produces excellent results.

It is now time to paint the plant. Good colors are flat black, dark camouflage brown and primer gray. A mix of these colors often produces great results. Use a flat white for Aspen or Birch trees (for foreground trees you can add the tiny black spots with a fine tip paintbrush). Inexpensive spray paint from the large discount stores work the best. I like to paint several trees at one time, and usually do it outdoors on a calm day. As with any spray painting, always use in a well-ventilated space and wear a mask. Using rubber gloves, hold the armature in one hand and spray the entire plant. At this point a decision must be made: do you want a tree with a single trunk or one with multiple trunks? If you decide to make a fuller, larger tree with multiple trunks there are a number of ways to do this. First, pick out two or more plants that look good together. Once you have decided on the look you are after, you must join the trunks together at the bottom. I have used Aileen’s fast grab Tacky Glue, gap filling ACC and my favorite, brown floral tape (available at craft stores). All are

fast and easy methods that yield good results, but after a little experimentation, you'll settle on a method you prefer. You are now ready for the final step... the flocking.

Flocking material comes in many forms and colors. Some folks recommend using ground foam, which is available in any hobby shop, but I prefer the more realistic look of leaf flake. This material really simulates actual leaves, and comes in a wide variety of natural colors including the vibrant colors of fall. Leaf flake is hard to find locally, if at all, so I recommend the Heki or Noch products available at Scenic Express. Bachman makes a few nice colors in their scenery line, but make sure you get the Turf Blend, not the Turf, as the texture is quite different. I have found this at Caboose Hobbies.



There are basically two methods of securing the flocking material to the tree armatures. The first, recommended by Scenic Express, is again using diluted Matte Medium from a spray bottle. While this method works, there are several downsides to its use, among them being messy and difficult to control the spray. Having made hundreds of these trees, I greatly prefer the second method – hairspray. You may have heard that if you use hairspray the tree will deteriorate with time. I've been using this method for over twelve years, and my very first trees (which survived a move) are still looking great. I prefer the Aqua Net brand (make sure you buy the unscented version), but any inexpensive hairspray will work just fine. Before you

start, spread out some newspaper on your work surface. Reserve one area of paper to spray over and a separate area for under the tree while you apply the leaves. This separation is important, because the leaves that fall to the paper can be easily put back into the container (if you use the Matte Medium method, the liquid that drips off the armature during leaf application falls to the paper and makes a mess, making it virtually impossible to recycle the material). Most of the flocking material comes in shaker bottles, but a grated cheese shaker works well also.

While holding the armature in one hand (wear a rubber glove), spray the tree. Don't over do it, as you can always go back and apply some more. Then immediately hold the tree over the collection paper and shake the flocking material onto the tree, turning the tree all the while you do this. A final misting with hairspray to secure everything in place, and you're done... you've just made a beautiful tree!

On a final note, combining SuperTree branches with a western sagebrush armature can make the perfect foreground tree. Although the procedure is time consuming, it is quite easy to do. Using tweezers, break off individual branches of a flocked SuperTree and dip the ends into gap-filling ACC. Press each branch to the sagebrush armature and apply a drop of accelerator to speed the curing time. Work around the entire armature until you are satisfied with the appearance. The results are spectacular!

Whether you're new to the hobby or an old-timer who hasn't tried these methods, I hope you'll give them a try. They're easy, fun and very rewarding.

