

MODEL RAILROADING BASICS 101

Presented by Division 6 of the North Central Region, National Model Railroad Association

Part 5 – MODEL RAILROAD BASIC SCENERY

We all love a finished model railroad! The scenery makes everything look REAL!! While we can operate our layouts without scenery, the “plywood pacific” look does not give us the illusion we want. With this BASICS 101 presentation, we’ll look at the scenery basics that start us on the way to a “real” looking model railroad!

You do not have to have scenery to operate your railroad. As seen here, this was the very first OPS session on my Reading Lines layout. Notice the “scenery”!! Almost none, or some basic shapes made from Styrofoam. Painting those shapes green also helped with the look of basic scenery.



Here is an odd scenery tip.... operate your layout as much as possible before starting on scenery! Get any track problems, wiring problems and operating problems out of the way. These items can still be fixed once scenery is in place... it just makes it harder to do!

Here you can see more of the basic scenery items.... hill shapes painted green and a finished fascia help give your layout a good look while you work on detailing scenes. Also... don't forget some backdrop painting!!



There are several ways to do scenery. An older method is called “Hard Shell”. This is a method that creates a hard “shell” surface of plaster over a framework of cardboard.



The more modern way is to create scenery shapes from Styrofoam. This has several advantages. You do have to use the correct Styrofoam – use the blue, pink or green solid type used in house construction.



TOOLS

The tools needed for scenery are fairly common items. Elmers glue, plaster, paint brush, serrated knife, spray bottle and a Surf-form tool. The knife is to cut the styrofoam. The Surf-form tool looks like a cheese grater with a handle and is used to carve/shape the styrofoam to it's final shape.

The spray bottle is to contain “wet” water. This is water with a few drops of dish soap in it and mixed. The soap in the water makes it more penetrating into the materials we use for scenery.



MATERIALS

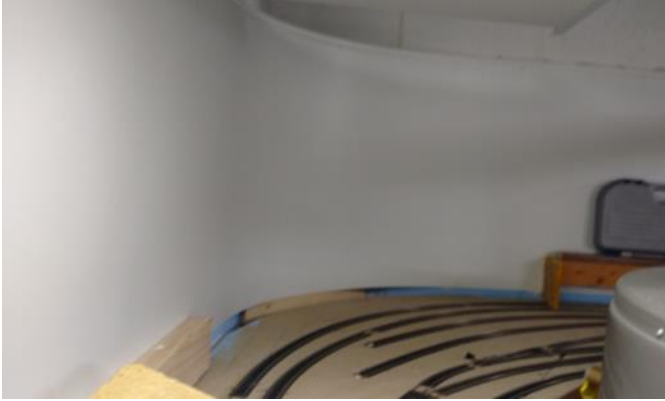
Here are just a few of the many items available for scenery. Woodland Scenics has the most items available for scenery including ground foam (grass, dirt, weeds) and ballast for your track. Many type of pre-made trees are available by many other companies.

Many other items can be used for scenery including real dirt! Some dried flowers and weeds can be used for trees.



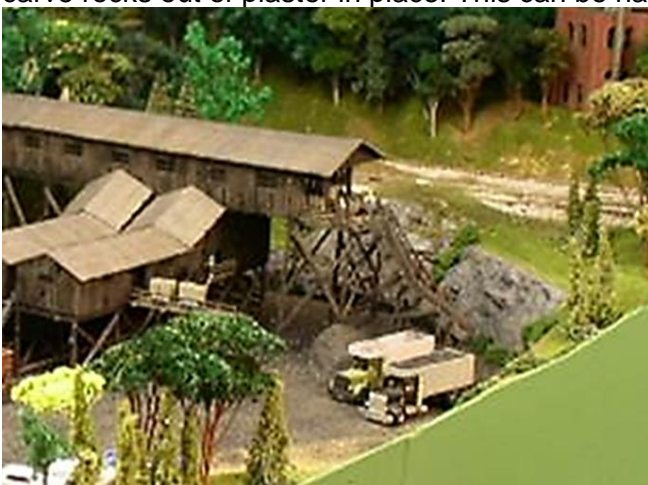
BACKDROP

Before we start on scenery, we need to do our backdrop. I use sheet aluminum to cover the walls of my layout room, but hard board, drywall and even the backside of floor coverings can be used. Most of us paint the sky a nice light blue. After the sky is done, depending on your layouts "location" you need to paint on hills, mountains, fields and other features. You don't have to be an artist... but it can help! Even a simple backdrop of plain green hills can enhance the look of your layout!



ROCKS!

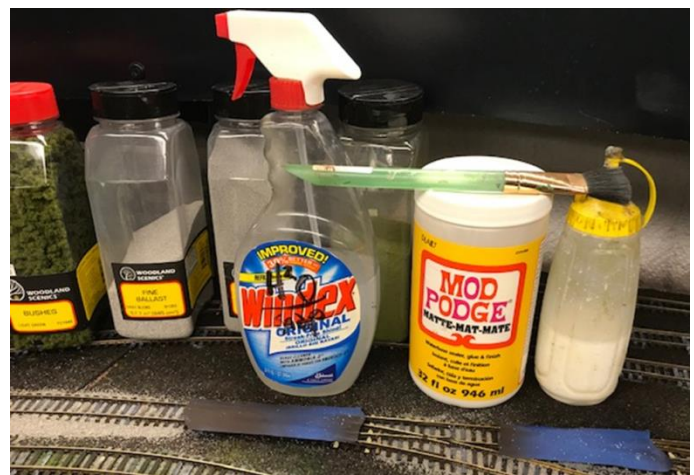
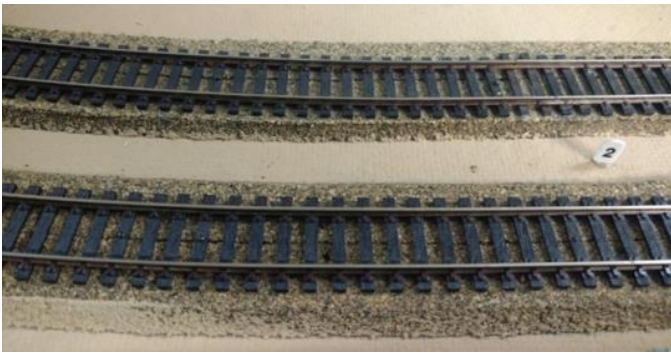
The easiest way to do rocks is to use rock molds! As shown to the right, these are sold in many sizes and shapes. You simply fill them with plaster, let dry and pry your rock out of the mold. Then glue it to your hills and help hide the edges with more plaster and ground coverings. Another way is to actually carve rocks out of plaster in place! This can be hard to do and is almost an art-form!



BALLAST

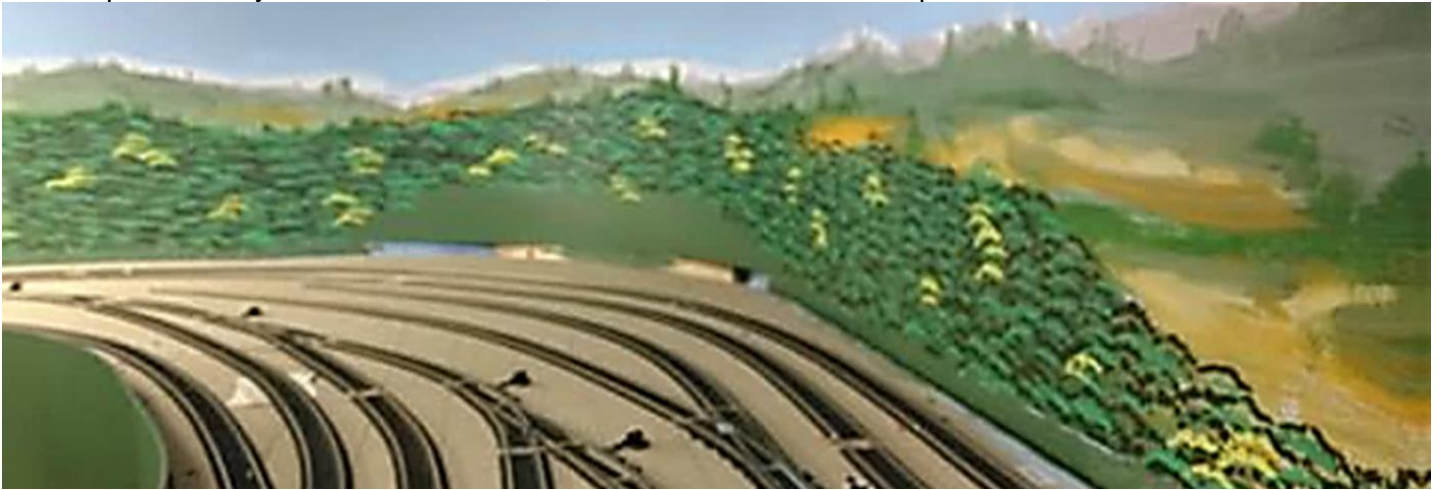
For me, the last part of scenery is to ballast the track! It's also one of those thankless jobs... but it does finish your layout. Ballast comes in a few sizes and several colors. Most railroads use granite and thus it is gray in color. To ballast your track,

1. Sand cork if needed. Paint your cork roadbed gray so if you miss a spot while ballasting, it doesn't show through.
2. Use blue painting tape to cover moving points of track. Spray track on cork with brown –OR- Paint side of rails with a rust paint pen.
3. Use fingers and clean tops of rails while still wet. Let dry over night. (An additional step for realism is to also very lightly dry brush with gray- this will bring out the molded texture on the ties.)
4. Brush on the (white glue, modge podge) to the side of the cork.
5. Use fingers to sprinkle ballast on to sides. If you put on to much DO NOT FIX IT. You can fix it later. Then wait 15 min. for the glue to set up.
6. Using a very small paper cup pour some ballast into a cup. Make wedge in the cup and begin to pour the ballast in the center of the rails going just over the top of the ties.
7. With a soft brush, push the ballast down the track so you can see the tops of the ties. Some ballast will spill on the outside of the rails, this is ok.
8. Go back and make sure that no piles of ballast are on the inside of the rails. Tapping the track with your spray bottle helps the ballast settle in between the ties.
9. Lastly rewet your track and apply your diluted glue. Then rewet the track again. Do not try to fix the ballast after this. It will look messy if you do. Let dry overnight. Do not glue ballast near a turnout switch points.



LET'S DO A SCENE

Let's look at a typical scene and how it can be done! I need some small hills between the backdrop and the mainline tracks. As you can see here, the backdrop has been painted first. We didn't have to paint the backdrop all the way down to the roadbed, because the hills will take-up that area!



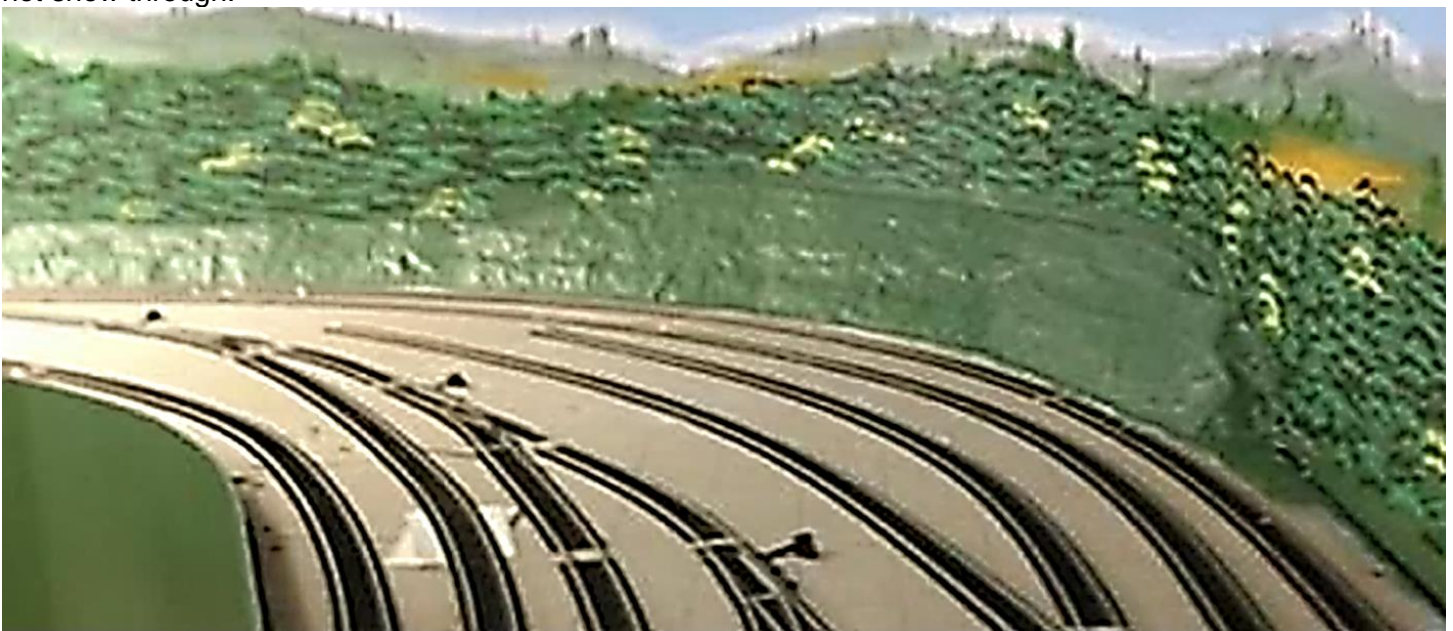
Next is to use the styrofoam to make the hills. Cut to size, then shaped with the surf-form tool, you can see how the hills take shape, sloping up from the track to the backdrop. A shop-vac is necessary to clean-up the area after using the surf-form tool. It's quite messy! Once you have all the pieces shaped, remove each and apply some Elmers glue to them and glue them in place and to each other. Let everything dry for a day or two. While the white "beadie" packing Styrofoam is not recommended to use... we all break the rules from time to time! For this scene on my layout the white Styrofoam is all I had. Being small hills and back in a corner, I felt it was OK to use.



After everything dries in place, we apply plaster-cloth to the hills to give the hills a good rigid surface. This makes it easier to apply the ground coverings and prevents damage if it were to get bumped. Plaster cloth comes in a roll, just cut it into manageable size pieces for installation. You can put it on dry and using a brush, apply water to it to get it to adhere to the styrofoam. Another method is to dunk the piece of plaster cloth in a tub of water and then apply to the hill, smoothing it out with a wet brush. Cover it all and also have the plaster cloth attach to the roadbed. Let dry for a day or two. If you don't want to spend money for plaster cloth, you can use cut strips of newspaper or paper towel, soak in a pan of regular plaster and apply to the hills like paper Mache.



Once the plaster surface has dried, I paint the hills a green color. You could also paint it a brown or tan color for a dirt look. By painting the surface, if you get the ground cover light in some areas, the white plaster does not show through.



To finish the scene, I applied Woodland Scenics fine ground cover in a light green color. I model summer, so the green looks correct for my season. To add the ground cover, cover the painted hills with Elmers glue, spreading it all over the surface with your fingers or a brush. Then sprinkle the ground cover over the glue. I use a small paper cup to help with control. When the area is covered, spray the area with the spray bottle of “wet water”. This soaks everything together in the glue. You may have to add some additional ground cover and spray that too. It’s best to let this dry for a day or two. Now we can ballast the track.

The final finishing of the scene is to plant some trees! With the styrofoam hills, this is easy to do! Using a screwdriver or other sharp tool, poke a hole into the hill. Take your tree and “plant” into the hole. Many times, you don’t even need glue. Plant your tree at least 1” deep into the hill. This is where the old hard-shell type of scenery is a drawback. If you poke a hole in hard shell, there is nothing behind it to hold the tree!

