



▲ Consider your space, your trains, and the overall look you want to achieve before committing to a track brand. Rear to front are traditional postwar-style O gauge tubular track by Lionel and a postwar no. 2018 2-6-4. In the center is a Williams GP9 riding on Lionel FasTrack, and in front a Lionel LionMaster diesel poses on GarGraves flextrack.

Select your track

HEY, IT IS ALL ABOUT YOU • by Bob Keller

Just about every story we do on selecting track has one thing in common. It results in a surge in calls and e-mails from folks asking of “Which track should I buy?”

We can’t tell you which is the best brand to buy because we don’t know what you want on your railroad. Adopting a sort of Zen-like-Kung-Fu-sage-wisdom approach to the hobby will help.

There are many paths to toy train enlightenment and happiness. Once you realize that there are few rights or

wrongs in the toy train world (well, except for stuff dealing with fire hazards and our friend, Mister Electricity) things become easier. Why?

Because, as the subhead above says, it is all about you. Or at least it’s about your vision for your railroad. What you want for a layout. What you have room for. Which trains you want to run on your railroad. And since everything has a cost, what your budget can handle. Find the right mix, and you’ll be happy. Yin and yang, folks, yin and yang.

You could just run out, buy a big box of track, and start putting it down to see what happens. This is a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants stage.

But think ahead and plan ahead, and you’ll have a better railroad, and you may even spend less money.

The big “why” of getting ahead of the game is that while buying track isn’t the most expensive thing you’ll ever do, you can easily drop \$1,000 before you know it. Here are some questions to ask yourself before you get going:



TRADITIONAL TOY-LIKE IN O GAUGE Steve Garofalo's O gauge layout (December 2008 CTT) flies the flag of a traditional toy train layout. Decoration is minimal and evokes the layouts of the 1950s and '60s. Steve Crise photo



TOY-RAIL IN O GAUGE Rich Turello's O gauge layout (July 2008 CTT) shows decoration and additional detail, but the placement of the MTH RealTrax on the tabletop will still classify this as a toy-rail layout. William Zuback photo

1. What "look" do you want your layout to have?

Traditional toy-like: The only less complex look would be to put the track down on the living room floor. The objective is to re-create the layout we had when we were 10 years old.

More often than not, the trains are vintage, perhaps augmented with some modern-era traditional toy-like locomotives and rolling stock.

Track is basically screwed down on benchwork. Track may be placed on top of some cork roadbed, and perchance some ballast is added. Structures and accessories will be postwar-style products by Lionel or Plasticville. The aim is nostalgia to the max.

Trackage you may want to consider as the best candidates for a traditional layout include tubular styles by Lionel, K-Line, and Williams. I'd also include track systems with a plastic roadbed base (Atlas O's Industrial Rail brand, Lionel's FasTrack, and MTH's RealTrax). All of these work if just dropped on the layout, without any attempt at scenery integration.

In the S gauge world, I'd include traditional postwar Gilbert American Flyer track and S gauge track by GarGraves (flexible tubular with large wood ties). K-Line also offered traditional-style tubular track.

Toy-rail: Toy-like trains and structures, but integrated into a realistic scenic setting.

Just as often as not, trains can be modern, scale-type trains or vintage postwar outfits. The main difference between a toy-rail layout and a toy-like layout is the look of the scenery.

Many toy-rail layouts we've seen use traditional tubular track, but include additional ties and extra ballasting to improve their appearance. Track brands for this type of layout include the better tubular track by GarGraves and Ross Custom Switches, which feature tubular rails mounted on more prototypical ties. There are also the roadbed-mounted Atlas O Industrial Rail, Lionel FasTrack, and MTH RealTrax systems but with added weathering or integrating it with the scenery.

In the S gauge world, GarGraves offers flex sections of track with large wood ties. Other candidates are American Models' Universal system (solid-rail track mounted on plastic ties), S-Helper Service's S-Trax system (solid rail mounted on a plastic base), and American S gauge brand track made by Classic Trains (solid rail mounted on plastic ties).

Hi-rail: Scenery, track, and trains focus on realism (while, of course, ignoring that third rail!).

Candidates for this are tubular track by GarGraves, Ross, solid-rail track by Atlas O, and MTH's ScaleTrax system.

In the S gauge world, the top three contenders are the solid-rail roadbed system by S-Helper Service and the solid rail mounted on ties systems by American Models or Classic Trains. You may want to consider GarGraves.

2. Your diameter of curves

Everyone wants O-72 or wider curves, but many of us can squeeze in only O-27 or O-31.

Although O-36 seems to be the new "entry diameter of choice," you can still

find ample supplies of tighter-diameter track on the market. Also, most brands offer a wide variety of track lengths and curve diameters. And don't forget that several brands offer flextrack sections so you can customize your curves.

Don't simply focus on the widest diameter you can squeeze in. I mean, if you plan on having two O-72 main lines side by side, recognize that this eats up a fair amount of real estate – not just in the curves, but also in the distance between the lines.

Maybe a single track of O-72 would be better. Or, depending on your track plan, you may be able to have more running fun with tighter curves.

Think about all aspects of operation before you buy that box of track!

3. How many switches do you plan to add to your railroad?

Because of their price, I've always held my functioning switches to a minimum. A couple to shunt cars off to a station or a small yard, and that's enough for me. But inside, aren't we all really empire builders?

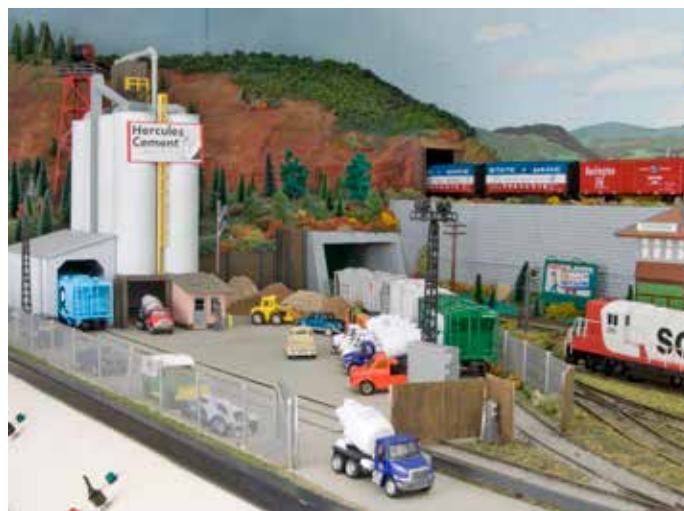
I incline toward picking the same brand of track and switches. You can make a case for spending either more, or less, and mixing up the brands.

The spending "more" involves buying more exotic switch combinations. For example, if you need a double crossover, you may want to buy a Ross no. 8 double crossover, but it costs between \$479 and \$659, depending on what version you opt for.

The spending "less" involves scrounging bargain bins and checking out used switches and blowouts of older



HI-RAIL IN O GAUGE Extensive scenery and integration of the GarGraves track with a meticulous roadbed mark Dave Connolly's O gauge layout (March 2008 CTT) as a hi-rail layout. Trains, track and structures are in harmony. Fred M. Dole photo



HI-RAIL IN S GAUGE Brad Nelson's S gauge line (March 2008 CTT) combines classic and modern S gauge trains with superb scenery. He used solid-rail track with ballasting and detailing to make the track seem part of nature. Jim Forbes photo.

new stock. Used switches can save you some dough-re-mi, but I'd never walk out of a shop with one without having the dealer test it for me.

When you start laying down track, be sure you have an idea how many switches you want in your track plan. If you get the track bolted and ballasted in place, it can be a mess to excavate the area for a new switch. So, if you want 16 switches, but can afford only six or eight today, make the sites for future installation less permanently finished.

If you just want storage, you can create a yard of "fake" switches. Trim curved sections at an angle to complement a yard feeder track. Place it close enough to the feeder line, and nobody will notice that there isn't really a switch there unless they look very closely.

4. Can you mix and match?

Yes indeed, you can. Through buying transition sections or transition pins, you can easily mate virtually any O gauge track brand to another. In S gauge it gets a bit trickier. S-Helper Service offers rail joiners to mate its track with American Flyer and GarGraves track. S-Helper's Don Thompson advises, "We have had customers take our no. 00660 rail joiners and distort them slightly to connect with American Models track, but we do not have such an item for sale."

5. Can you do it on a budget?

Is cost a factor? If so, be miserly. I built one layout, roughly a 12 x 12-foot square with an open center, and tracked it with used (and I mean low-down-and-dirty kind of used) postwar track. I

bought it in bundles of 10 sections for \$4 from a dealer in Seattle. He was happy to get rid of it, and I was happy to buy it. At the time (the early 1990s) most guys building a new layout wanted freshly minted track.

The rails did require a lot of cleaning, but in the end only one section was unusable. Given my tight budget for that layout, used track was worth the elbow grease to get that much usable track for such a low price.

You also may be able to find new or used 36-inch tubular straight sections for a good price. Buy those for the long runs in the distance and transition them to a more visually appealing brand or style for segments running with a clear view from an audience.

I've never had an unlimited budget for building a layout, and I've made more than one mistake in track selection. But you can do it successfully one small step at a time.

6. What about Mister Electricity?

Broadly speaking, the track you'll find on the market delivers satisfactory electrical connectivity. Most brands, however, when connected, taken apart, re-connected and taken apart in a continual cycle start to lose some of their mojo as pins get bent or lost and the receptacles become enlarged.

So for best connectivity, connect the track once and leave it alone. But the larger the layout, and the longer the distance from the power supply, the more the power level drops. The highest power level starts at the transformer and then tends to diminish the farther it travels down the right-of-way.

Plan ahead by selecting the right power source for the main line and the right power source for accessories and the wiring. Install an adequate number of lockons, or you may want to consider installing a central buss line of heavy gauge wire with a network of feeder lines to the track. Never save money by opting for thin "doorbell-type" wiring. Performance will be lacking, you may run the risk of pushing too much power through inadequate wire, and, ultimately, you'll just end up having to do it all over again with better wire.

Where you can, scrimp on track to get something running. But, and I can't stress this enough, spend the cash and get the right wire for the job. You can swap out the track later if you want; the power grid will continue to serve the new track just as well as the old brand.

Where does that leave us?

Deciding on the sort of look you want narrows the track choice of track brands considerably. Knowing the diameter of curved track, the number of switches you want, the complexity of the track plan, and the extent of your budget will guide you to the right choice – for you and your vision!

After that, you can focus on buying and installing the track and doing the wiring. Before you know it, you'll have your trains high-balling. **CTT**

For more practical information on trackwork for your O gauge railroad, see *Trackwork for Toy Trains* by Peter H. Riddle. To order call 800-533-6644 or go to kalmbachbooks.com

