TWISTED WIRE TREES
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I've always thought that trees bring a layout to life, just like people and vehicles. There are lots of options for buying and making trees. Commercial offerings range from the unrealistic to the very realistic, with an associated range of prices, while handmade trees also vary from unrealistic to very realistic as well, with a comparable amount of time to produce them. The other concern you have with commercial tress is that they don't vary.

Today we are going to look at something handmade that I believe looks realistic, is always a little different, doesn't take forever to make, and can be produced with readily available materials.

Floral wire armatures for N scale trees have been written about in the model press, and this is my interpretation of those techniques. Working in T- TRAK-sized modules, I don't tend to make more than 5-10 at a time. I work a production line of steps and don't spend a significant amount of time in each step, not counting the minimal drying time with this method.

Wires cut to length

Bill of Materials:

- Floral wire, something you can twist and bend with a small pair of pliers or fingers

- Spackle

- White glue

- Grey grout

- Grey acrylic folk art paint

- Pink or blue foam scraps, to poke trees into as you build them

- Packing material/quilt packing

- Rattle cans of paint, flat black and green camouflage

- Ground foam, various leaf-like shades

- Unscented hair spray

I am deliberately vague about a couple of the items above as it's not critically important, and variation on the thicknesses of wire doesn't hurt as long as you can manipulate it. The packing material I am referring to came from a jewelry box in a 3" x 3" square. I have since figured out that this is quilt packing, although I haven't ventured to Michaels or Hobby Lobby to find some yet.

A Discussion on Tree Height

I believe that many trees are not made tall enough in N scale. The counter argument is young trees at, say, a Christmas tree farm or an orchard. Wild trees tend to be up to 70 to 80 feet tall, about 6 inches in N scale. I'd say that would be a maximum height with a long trunk and wide canopy. Also, trees tend to grow to around the same height in the same area, as an overly tall tree will eventually get hit by lightning or a windstorm and knock it over.

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Making the Armature

As discussed above, heights can vary, although I would tend to make a batch of trees around the same height, give or take half an inch. I cut 4-5 pieces of wire, fold it in half, and begin to twist them tightly together at the base. I use my fingers with floral wire, although you could use pliers.

Once the trunk is twisted, I split off the untwisted wires into pairs, threes or fours, depending on how many you cut. I twist these together to form limbs off the trunk and keep splitting them up as I go up the tree.

There is no perfect tree; some have short trunks and others long trunks and everything in between. Just work trees up to suit what you think looks good now.

Wires twisted into shape

Dressing the Trunk

I use a 50/50 mix of white glue, spackle, and grey grout to make a paste that's not runny but pliable enough to coat the trunk and other twisted limbs on the armature. I apply this to the twisted areas and, as it dries, smooth it out so that the twisted texture is hidden. It doesn't need to be perfect, just take away that twisted wire look. If you don't have grout, grey paint could be substituted, or don't worry about it as we'll spray it soon.

"Dressed" wire trees

The Canopy

I found in a jewelry box some packing material that was very airy and light. It teased out well and made a nice canopy that I could stretch over the armature. Manipulate as you see fit and then spray with unscented hair spray. It will settle in a bit with the force of the spray so don't go too close. Pull parts out to the edge of the armature if needed. Other materials can be used, like furnace filters, dish washing scourers, teased out cotton balls, or even Woodland Scenics Foliage. However, if using WS Foliage, you might wait until the armature is fully painted before applying.

Once you're done, you should have a good shaped tree.

Fluffy white trees

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Paint the Armature and Canopy

Assuming you used packing material or something like that, you'll have a whitish canopy that is semi-firm to the touch because of the hair spray. I then spray the canopy with a cheap flat back or dark grey rattle can. I tend to poke a number of these into a scrap of pink/blue foam and spray them all at once.

Apply Foliage

You now have a tree with trunk and canopy. Depending on the material, you may even spray the canopy camouflage green and call it quits as it looks okay as a background tree.

Applying foliage gives some more texture and color to the canopy. I sprinkle a small amount over the canopy, top and bottom; shake it a little so it settles on the 'inner' canopy and then spray with more hair spray.

Final Adjustments and Summary

Now's a good time to poke the trunk into a foam block and see what it looks like. You may want to thicken up the trunk with the spackle/glue mix, add some grey to the trunk, add some foliage, fiddle with the shape a little, etc. Trees come in all shapes and sizes and your trees may look better from one angle vs. another. Planting then in bunches hides imperfections that only you will know about!

I hope you found this useful. I tried to keep the materials as basic and readily available as possible with alternatives. I think these trees work well in a modular environment as they are fairly sturdy and can be bent back into shape if they get knocked about.