



# CONCOCTING CONIFERS

A Workshop on Making Cheap and Easy Conifers

By John Eagles



## ABOUT ME:

My name is John Eagles and I've been a member of the NMRA since August 2003. Before that, I was an armchair modeller for more decades than I care to admit. But a hands-on workshop in July 2003 by John Montgomery and Ken Scales inspired me to become an active modeller. This workshop is my way of trying to give something back to this great hobby of ours.

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## **WORKSHOP OBJECTIVE:**

This is a hands-on workshop which aims to teach some methods of making cheap and easy generic conifers. It's not designed to do into any detail about the differences between say a Blue Spruce or a Douglas Fir or a Lodge Pole Pine or a Redwood. So if you were expecting a botany lesson, sorry folks wrong workshop!!!!!!

Hopefully this workshop will give you the skills to make a lot of "pine trees" quickly and cheaply that will impress visitors to your layout as they admire your magnificent forests.

The aim is not to make the "perfect" pine tree. Rather it is to make a quick cheap tree that is an adequate representation of a pine tree. So that when they are grouped together in the background they will create the illusion of a forest.

Pine trees are a fairly common scenic element in many locations. The problem is they can become quite tedious to make and can become very expensive if you are using commercial pine trees. I'm in the process of trying to build a HOn3 logging layout set in the Pacific Northwest, so I guess I need more pine trees than most. At times the task of building all the pine trees seemed overwhelming and I even seriously contemplated changing my layout's theme to a mining tramway set in the Arizona Desert. Then I realised I would be stuck with having to make lots of cacti.

Anyway the method I'm going to show you for these pine trees is not new. The idea has been around for a while and has been reported on in the model railroad press over the years. All I have done is "steal" an idea here and there and mix in some of my own and this is what I have come up with. No doubt you will come up with your own ideas that improve what I show you. Please feel free to share your ideas. I hope you find this workshop useful.

## **THE CONIFER:**

Basically, this style of conifer consists of three elements:

**The Trunk:** Bamboo skewers or chopsticks or square balsa 1/4" to 1/2" square.

**Branch Structure:** scouring pads, either green or brown.

**Foliage:** Ground foam either commercial or home made.

## **MATERIALS NEEDED:**

**The Trunk:** Bamboo skewers or chopsticks or square balsa 1/4" to 1/2" square.

**Branch Structure:** scouring pads, either green or brown. Buy the cheapest brand you can find.

**Foliage:** Ground foam either commercial or home made

**Glue:** Weldbond, also some toothpicks to apply the glue and some cardboard or index card to put the glue on.

**Paint or Stain :** I use the following:

Feast & Watson Walnut stain.

Black India Ink mixed in a ratio of 2 teaspoons of ink to 345 ml (one Bottle) of isopropyl alcohol.

Art Spectrum Sepia India ink Concentrate mixed with isopropyl alcohol in a ratio of one part ink to 5 parts alcohol.

Tamiya Dark Sea Gray Acrylic paint mixed with isopropyl alcohol in a ratio of one part paint to 5 parts alcohol.

**Styrofoam Block:** use to “plant” your trees while assembling them.

**Spray Adhesive:** I use Micador Workable Matt Fixative which you can buy from an art supply store. Basically use any good spray adhesive. So long as it dries flat and clear. Some people use cheap hairspray but I find that overtime its loses its hold and the ground foam falls off the trees.

**Artists Pastel Chalks:** If you are feeling very fussy you can use these chalks to colour the tree trunks and to add moss to the tree trunks. An optional extra

## **TOOLS NEED:**

**Razor saw and mitre box or cutting board.**

**A wood rasp or surform rasp or 12 inch flat bastard cut file.**

**Pencil sharpener.**

**Exacto knife with a #11 blade.**

**Utility knife.**

**Scissors.**

**Coarse hacksaw blade and holder or, coarse jigsaw blade and holder.**

**Disposable gloves.**

**Pieces of an old T shirt or cheap paint brushes.**

**A container at least as long as the tallest tree you intend making.** 12 inches long is a good size.

**Sandpaper.**

**An old ballpoint pen or centre punch or sharpened chopstick.** This for poking a hole in the scouring pad branches for the tree trunks.

**Paper towels and newspaper.**

## **MAKING THE TREES:**

It is best to make these trees in a production line. I usually make a dozen or so at time. A word of warning though, don't go overboard and try and make a 100 at a time, you will go crazy.

### **THE TREE TRUNKS:**

#### **Method #1 Bamboo skewers:**

- A packet of bamboo skewers will cost you between \$1 and \$2. You get between 100 and 150 per packet. Buy the 12 inch ones and try to get the thickest you can find. They make better looking trunks.
- You can use the skewers as is for a 12inch high tree.
- Or using a razor saw and a mitre box or cutting board cut the skewers to different lengths. Cut from the blunt end of the skewer so that the pointed end becomes the top of your trunk. I find it best to cut your skewers to different lengths because in nature is rare that a group of trees will be the same height.
- Also you can get 2 trunks out of a single 12 inch skewer by cutting them roughly in half. **NOTE:** I said roughly in half, again the idea is to end up with 2 trunks of

different height. Now you will have 2 trunks, one with a tapered end on it and the other with no tapered end.

- Using either Exacto knife with a #11 blade, a single edge razor blade or a utility knife, whittle a taper on one of the blunt ends. Don't be too fussy.
- Finish off the taper with a coarse file or wood rasp or some sandpaper.
- Lightly sand the skewer to remove any splinters of bamboo that are sticking out. This is important. If you don't do this the scouring pad "branches" will catch on these splinters and rip chunks out of your trunk.
- The next step is to stain your trunks. Get a piece of cloth (an old T-shirt cut up into squares is great for this) and dip it into your stain and draw the trunks through the cloth one at a time. Leave to dry on some paper towels. **NOTE:** wear disposable gloves it makes cleaning your hands after a lot easier.
- The stain we will be using today is Feast & Watson's walnut stain. If you wanted to give the trunks a greyish tinge, you can re-stain the trunks with a black India ink stain after the walnut stain has dried. What stain you use at home is up to you.
- Your tree trunks are now finished. Pretty hard eh.

## Method#2 Chop Sticks

- I use two different types of chopstick. The first type is your traditional shaped wooden or bamboo chopstick I mean by traditional shape is they have a long taper at one end and are square on the other end. The best ones I have found come in a packet of 20 and stained brown. You can find them at your nearest Asian grocery or \$2 shop. I paid \$2 a packet for mine. You can also get the white bamboo type. Avoid chopsticks that have printed or embossed writing on them or that have designs carved into them. Never use plastic chopsticks.
- Using a razor saw and a mitre box or cutting board cut the chopsticks to different lengths. Cut from the square end of the chopstick so that the tapered end becomes the top of your trunk.
- Now comes the fun part; carving your chopsticks into tree trunks. Using a pencil sharpener, sharpen the tapered end to a point.
- Using either Exacto knife with a #11 blade or a utility knife, whittle the tapered end until it forms a point. It doesn't have to be anything fancy.
- Then carve off the corners of the square section of the chopstick. Rotate the chopstick and continue carving until it is roughly round. **NOTE:** I said roughly round, tree trunks are never perfect circles.
- Then using a wood rasp a coarse file or a Surform file, run the chopstick along its lengthwise to even out any rough spots left by your carving.
- Then using a pencil sharpener, sharpen a point on the blunt end of the chopstick. This will help you plant them in your scenery.
- Using a coarse razor saw or hacksaw blade or a jig saw blade distress the chopsticks to add the bark texture. Be vicious about this.
- Then lightly sand the skewer to remove any splinters of bamboo that are sticking out. This is important. If you don't do this, the scouring pad "branches" will catch on these splinters and rip chunks out of your trunk.
- If you are using the brown chopsticks you can just stain them with black India ink stain.
- If you are using the white bamboo chopsticks, stain them with the Feast & Watson walnut stain first. When dry re-stain with the black India ink stain. Or use whatever

stain you prefer. **NOTE:** wear disposable gloves it make cleaning your hands after a lot easier.

- The second type of chopstick, I'm not even sure is a chopstick but I found them next to the chopsticks in an Asian grocery store They are made of bamboo, oval in cross-section with a short blunt taper on one end. A pack of about a 100 costs me \$3, cheap tree trunks.
- Using a pencil sharpener, sharpen the tapered end to a point.
- Using either Exacto knife with a #11 blade or a utility knife, whittle the tapered end until it forms a point. It doesn't have to be anything fancy.
- Using a wood rasp, a coarse file or a Surform file, run the chopstick along the taper to even out any rough spots left by your carving.
- Then using a pencil sharpener, sharpen a point on the blunt end of the chopstick. This will help you plant them in your scenery.
- Using a coarse razor saw or hacksaw blade or a jig saw blade distress the chopsticks to add the bark texture. Be vicious about this.
- Then lightly sand the skewer to remove any splinters of bamboo that are sticking out. This is important. If you don't do this, the scouring pad "branches" will catch on these splinters and rip chunks out of your trunk.

### **Method#3 Balsa Wood Trunks**

- Use ¼" to ½" square balsa.
- Using a razor saw and a mitre box or cutting board cut the balsa to different lengths. I make mine 6" to 15" long. The longer the tree the bigger the diameter.
- Using either an Exacto knife with a #11 blade or a utility knife, whittle a taper on one end until it forms a point. It doesn't have to be anything fancy. The taper should be about a third of the length of the trunk.
- Then carve off the corners of the square section of the balsa. Rotate the balsa and continue carving until it is roughly round. **NOTE:** I said roughly round, tree trunks are never perfect circles.
- Use some sandpaper to smooth out any bumps or lumps on your trunk.
- Then using a pencil sharpener, sharpen a point on the blunt end of the balsa. This will help you plant them in your scenery.
- Using a coarse razor saw or hacksaw blade or a jig saw blade distress the balsa to add the bark texture. Be vicious about this.
- Then lightly sand the trunk to remove any fuzz.
- Stain your trunk. I use 2 stains on my balsa trunks. The first is Tamiya Dark Sea Gray Acrylic paint mixed with isopropyl alcohol in a ratio of one part paint to 5 parts alcohol. When that has dried, I use a wash of Sepia India ink Concentrate mixed with isopropyl alcohol in a ratio of one part ink to 5 parts alcohol. You can use your favourite stain. **NOTE:** wear disposable gloves it make cleaning your hands after a lot easier.

## **MAKING THE BRANCHES:**

- Using your scissors cut your scouring pads into rough ovals of different sizes. You will need about 3 to 5 different size ovals. They should range in size from one and a half inches to 3/8 inch.
- Also cut some small triangular pieces from the scouring pads. These will form the tip of your trees.
- Take the ovals you have made and tear the layers of scouring pad apart. You should get from 3 to 6 layers per oval. You can also stretch and tear the edges of the oval to break-up their uniformity.

## **ASSEMBLING THE TREES:**

- Push your tree trunk into the Styrofoam block.
- Using a toothpick put a dab of Weldbond on the trunk about 3/4" to 1" from the bottom.
- Take the largest oval you have a poke a hole through the middle of it .I use an old ballpoint pen.
- Slide the oval down the trunk to the glue.
- Put another dab of Weldbond on the trunk and slide another oval down but offset it about 90 degrees.
- Continue the procedure, working your way up the trunk. As you go up the trunk use smaller ovals. The idea is to create a tapered branch structure without looking like neat Christmas tree. The more "branches" you use the denser the tree will be. Vary them from tree to tree.
- Poke a hole in the edge of the triangular piece using a toothpick. Glue the triangular piece to the top of the trunk
- Spray the scouring pad branches with spray adhesive and then roll in ground foam.
- After about an hour, respray with adhesive to ensure the ground foam sticks.
- Plant your trees.

## **PLANTING YOUR FOREST:**

You will need lots of good rich soil, fertiliser and water. Only kidding. I use Styrofoam as my scenery base so I just poke the trees into the foam.

If you are using plaster-based scenery, I imagine you will have to drill a hole or poke a hole with an awl and the glue the trunks in. Perhaps with Shelleys' No More Gaps.

- Plant your trees in odd numbered groups. They always look better than even numbered groups. By using different colours and textures of ground foam on your trees, you create variety. Nothing is the same in nature.
- Also mix in other pine trees made by other methods. For example; trees made by the twisted wire and rope method. Word of warning though, don't make your trees so different that they don't work together.
- Use ground up dead leaves mixed with tea leaves to cover your forest floor. I grind mine up in an electric coffee grinder.

## GRINDING YOUR OWN:

The biggest expense in making trees is the commercial ground foam. There are a lot of great commercial ground foams available and I use them a lot. However it soon became apparent that in order to make all the trees I needed I would have to win lotto to pay for all the ground foam I would use. So I decided to grind my own.

### Materials:

- Soft upholstery foam. The best is the stuff you find, it's free.
- Cheap flat green acrylic paint. I bought a 4 litre can of pinewood green fence paint from K-mart for \$16.

### Tools:

- A second hand old fashioned meat grinder, The kind that clamps to a workbench and you turn the crank handle to force the foam through. Mine cost \$20 at a junk shop in Newtown. Well actually they called it an antique shop but that's Newtown for you.
- Electric coffee grinder. Mine cost \$30 from the Breville Second's shop in Redfern.
- A knife to cut the foam with.
- BBQ tongs.
- Some trays. I use the cheap aluminium foil baking trays.

### Making the foam:

- Cut the foam into 2" squares.
- Place into a tray and cover with paint. Leave for 30 mins. **NOTE:** wear disposable gloves it make cleaning your hands after a lot easier.
- Remove from the tray using the bbq tongs. Give the foam pieces a squeeze as you do to make sure they are saturated with paint. Place in another tray to dry
- After the foam has dried, feed the pieces into the meat grinder. Use a stick to push the foam down as you turn the handle. **NOTE: NEVER EVER USE YOUR FINGERS THAT IS VERY SILLY AND VERY DANGEROUS.**
- Place a tray under the grinder to catch the foam.
- Pick out any pieces that haven't been coloured by the paint.
- Loosely pack some of the ground up foam into the coffee grinder. Grind for 45 seconds. **Note:** This will vary depending on the coffee grinder. Play around with it until you get a texture you like.
- If you are feeling fussy you can use some sieves to grade the foam.

Well that's all folks I hope you enjoyed my workshop.