

Gradual Implementation of Rapidly-exploring Random Tree (RRT) from Scratch

Rabah Louali, rabah.louali@gmail.com, Dec. 2025.

Keywords: matlab, robotics, path-planning, rrt-algorithm.

1 Global Goal

This project provides a step-by-step implementation of the Rapidly-exploring Random Tree (RRT) algorithm. The implementation is designed to be gradual, starting from a basic algorithm and incrementally adding features such as animation, collision detection, and pathfinding.

This resource is oriented toward:

- **Students:** Those wishing to learn the RRT algorithm via a clear, simple implementation.
- **Researchers:** Those needing a bare-bones RRT structure to customize for specific requirements.

The code is written in **MATLAB**, but the logic is kept simple to facilitate translation into other languages (Python, C++, etc.).

Collision detection is handled using **continuous edge-checking** against circular obstacles. By utilizing vector projection rather than discrete sampling, the algorithm guarantees collision-free paths with minimal computational overhead ($O(1)$ per obstacle), making it ideal for educational prototyping.

2 Steps of Implementation

1. **Simple RRT:** Basic tree generation.
 2. **Animation:** Visualizing tree growth in real-time.
 3. **Collision Detection:** Checking for obstacles before adding edges.
 4. **Goal Detection & Pathfinding:** Stopping when the goal is reached and backtracking to find the optimal path.
-

3 Simple RRT Algorithm

Pseudocode¹

```

Algorithm BuildRRT
    Input: Initial configuration  $q_{init}$ , number of vertices in RRT  $K$ ,
incremental distance  $\Delta q$ 
    Output: RRT graph  $G$ 

     $G.\text{init}(q_{init})$ 
    for  $k = 1$  to  $K$  do
         $q_{rand} \leftarrow \text{RAND\_CONF}()$ 
         $q_{near} \leftarrow \text{NEAREST\_VERTEX}(q_{rand}, G)$ 
         $q_{new} \leftarrow \text{NEW\_CONF}(q_{near}, q_{rand}, \Delta q)$ 
         $G.\text{add\_vertex}(q_{new})$ 
         $G.\text{add\_edge}(q_{near}, q_{new})$ 
    return  $G$ 

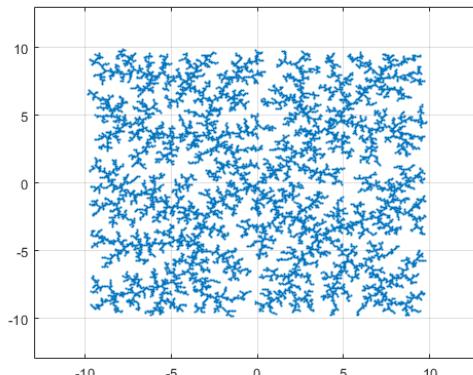
```

- "**RAND_CONF**" grabs a random configuration q_{rand} in C. This may be replaced with a function "**RAND_FREE_CONF**" that uses samples in C_{free} , while rejecting those in C_{obs} using some collision detection algorithm.
- "**NEAREST_VERTEX**" is a function that runs through all vertices v in graph G , calculates the distance between q_{rand} and v using some measurement function thereby returning the nearest vertex.
- "**NEW_CONF**" selects a new configuration q_{new} by moving an incremental distance Δq from q_{near} in the direction of q_{rand} . (According to [4] in holonomic problems, this should be omitted and q_{rand} used instead of q_{new} .)

MATLAB Implementation

(See *RRT_Basic.m* in repository)

RESULTS



¹ [Rapidly exploring random tree - Wikipedia](#)

4 RRT Animation

Visualizing the growth of the tree helps in understanding how RRT explores the configuration space.

MATLAB Implementation

(See `RRT_Animated.m` in repository for the implementation featuring real-time plotting).

5 Collision Detection

It is crucial to verify that the edge $[q_{near}, q_{new}]$ does not collide with obstacles.

5.1 Obstacle Representation: Rectangular vs. Circular

Choosing the right shape for obstacles is a key design decision.

	Rectangular Obstacles	Circular Obstacles
Pros	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Easy to define ($x, y, \text{width}, \text{height}$);▪ Matches indoor environments (walls, rooms);▪ Easy to load from grid maps.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Simple collision math (Euclidean distance);▪ Smooth geometry; efficient randomization.
Cons	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Corner collision checking is complex;▪ Less realistic for unstructured outdoor environments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Harder to model flat obstacles accurately.
Best For	Indoor robotics, warehouse navigation, floor-plan-based maps.	Outdoor navigation (trees, poles), aerial robots, and fast simulation/research.

Note: This implementation uses **Circular Obstacles** for mathematical simplicity and performance.

5.2 Collision Detection Algorithm (Circle)

Goal: Check if the segment $[q_{near}, q_{new}]$ intersects a circle defined by center and radius (r).

Steps:

1. Compute vector quantities:

$$\vec{v} = q_{new} - q_{near}$$

$$\vec{w} = center - q_{near}$$

2. Project the center onto the line segment

$$t = \frac{\vec{w} \cdot \vec{v}}{\vec{v} \cdot \vec{v}}$$

3. Determine the closest point (h) on the segment:

- o If $0 \leq t \leq 1$: $h = q_{near} + t \cdot \vec{v}$
- o If $t < 0$: $h = q_{near}$
- o If $t > 1$: $h = q_{new}$

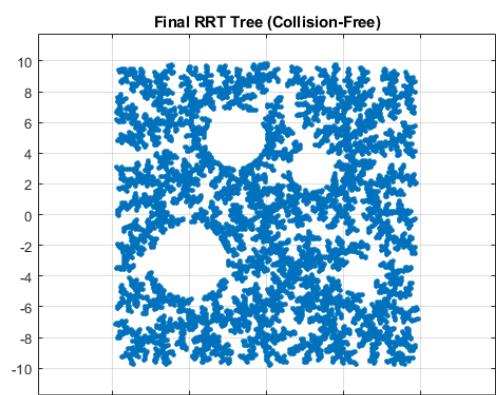
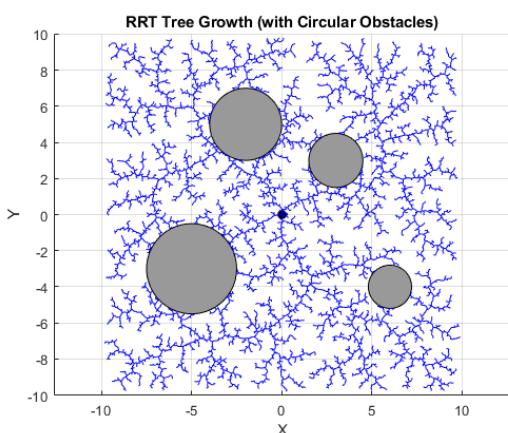
4. Check distance:

- o If $\|h - center\| \leq r \Rightarrow Collision$
- o Otherwise $\Rightarrow Free$

MATLAB Implementation

(See `RRT_Animated_Circular_Obstacles.m` in repository)

RESULTS



6 Goal Detection and Path Extraction

RRT is generally categorized into two types based on the goal:

	Online RRT (Single-Query)	Offline RRT (Multi-Query/Roadmap)
Principle	The algorithm runs until the tree gets sufficiently close to a specific goal (q_{new}), then backtracks to find the path.	The algorithm builds a massive graph covering the entire space first. Paths are queried later using Dijkstra or A*.
Best For	This is best for dynamic scenarios or high-dimensional manipulation.	Good when many queries in the same map, but Requires precomputation

Note: This implementation uses **Online RRT**:

- **Stop Condition:** The loop breaks when a node is added such that $\|q_{new} - q_{Goal}\| \leq \epsilon$.
 - **Backtracking:** Using the graph structure, we trace the parents from the goal node back to the start node to reconstruct the path.
-

7 Complete Integrated Code

This script combines animation, circular collision checking, and goal detection.

MATLAB Implementation

(See `RRT_Animated_Circular_Obstacles_Goal_Detection.m` in repository)

```
%> RRT with Goal Detection, Collision Checking, and Path Extraction
clear all; close all; clc;

%% Parameters
q_init = [0, 0]; % Initial configuration
q_goal = [8, 8]; % Goal configuration
goal_threshold = 0.3; % Distance threshold for declaring goal reached

K = 10000; % Maximum RRT iterations
Dq = 0.1; % Step size

q_max = [10, 10];
q_min = [-10, -10];

%% Define circular obstacles: [x_center, y_center, radius]
obstacles = [
    3, 3, 1.5;
    -2, 5, 2.0;
    6, -4, 1.2;
    -5, -3, 2.5
];
```

```

%% Initialize graph
G = graph();
G = addnode(G, table(q_init(1), q_init(2), 'VariableNames', {'X', 'Y'}));
idx_init = 1;

%% Setup Figure
figure;
hold on;
axis([q_min(1) q_max(1) q_min(2) q_max(2)]);
axis equal;
grid on;
title('RRT Tree Growth (Goal Detection Enabled)');
xlabel('X');
ylabel('Y');

% Plot start and goal
plot(q_init(1), q_init(2), 'ko', 'MarkerFaceColor', 'k', 'MarkerSize', 6);
plot(q_goal(1), q_goal(2), 'ro', 'MarkerFaceColor', 'r', 'MarkerSize', 6);

% Plot obstacles
theta = linspace(0, 2*pi, 50);
for i = 1:size(obstacles,1)
    cx = obstacles(i,1); cy = obstacles(i,2); r = obstacles(i,3);
    fill(cx + r*cos(theta), cy + r*sin(theta), [0.6 0.6 0.6], 'EdgeColor','k');
end

%% =====
%%      MAIN RRT LOOP
%% =====
goal_reached = false;
idx_goal_node = -1;

for i = 1:K
    %% 1. Random sample
    q_rand = [
        q_min(1) + (q_max(1) - q_min(1)) * rand, ...
        q_min(2) + (q_max(2) - q_min(2)) * rand
    ];

    %% 2. Find nearest existing vertex
    coords = [G.Nodes.X, G.Nodes.Y];
    [~, idx_nearest] = min(vecnorm(coords - q_rand, 2, 2));
    q_nearest = coords(idx_nearest,:);

    %% 3. Compute q_new
    direction = q_rand - q_nearest;
    dist = norm(direction);

    if dist < Dq
        q_new = q_rand;
    else
        q_new = q_nearest + (Dq/dist)*direction;
    end

```

```

%% 4. Collision checking
collision = false;
for j = 1:size(obstacles,1)
    center = obstacles(j,1:2);
    r = obstacles(j,3);
    if ~collisionCircle(q_nearest, q_new, center, r)
        collision = true;
        break;
    end
end
if collision
    continue;
end

%% 5. Safe → Add node + edge
G = addnode(G, table(q_new(1), q_new(2), 'VariableNames', {'X', 'Y'}));
idx_new = numnodes(G);
G = addedge(G, idx_nearest, idx_new);

%% 6. Animate edge
plot([q_nearest(1), q_new(1)], [q_nearest(2), q_new(2)], 'b-');
drawnow limitrate;

%% 7. Goal detection
if norm(q_new - q_goal) < goal_threshold
    disp('Goal reached!');
    goal_reached = true;
    idx_goal_node = idx_new;
    break;
end
end

%% =====
%% PATH EXTRACTION
%% =====
if goal_reached
    disp('Backtracking path using shortestpath...');

    path = shortestpath(G, idx_init, idx_goal_node);

    % Extract coordinates
    px = G.Nodes.X(path);
    py = G.Nodes.Y(path);

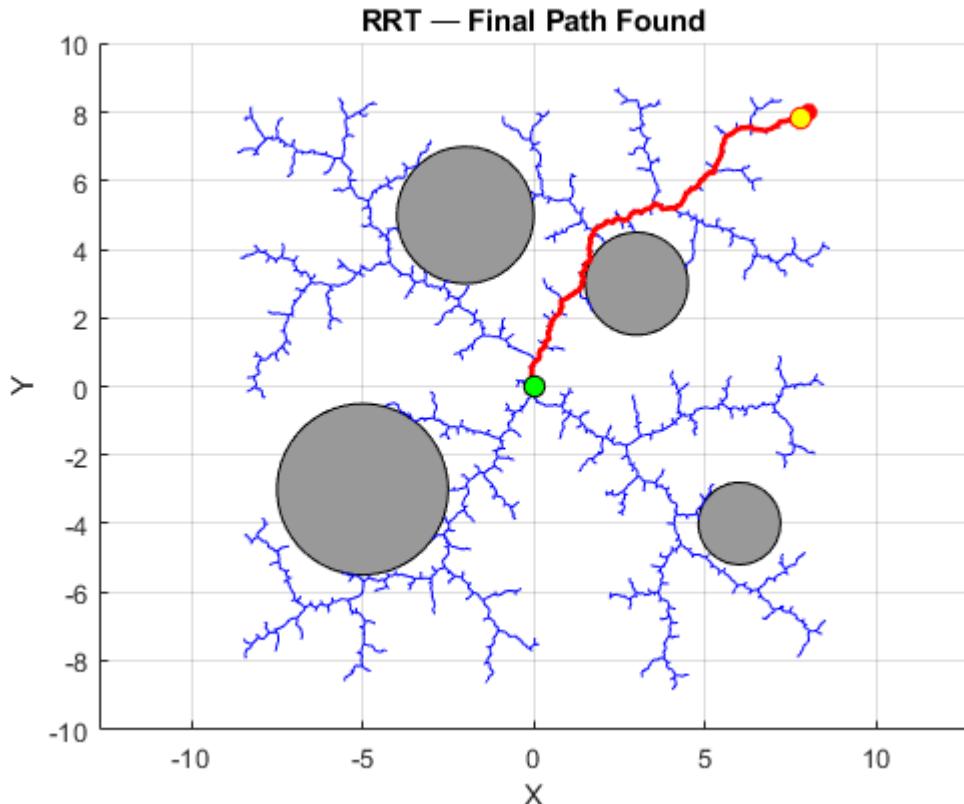
    % Highlight final path
    plot(px, py, 'r-', 'LineWidth', 2);
    plot(px(1), py(1), 'ko', 'MarkerFaceColor', 'g', 'MarkerSize', 8);
    plot(px(end), py(end), 'ro', 'MarkerFaceColor', 'y', 'MarkerSize', 8);

    title('RRT – Final Path Found');

else
    disp('Goal NOT reached within iteration limit.');
end

```

RESULTS



8 Conclusion

This implementation demonstrates the core mechanics of RRT:

1. **Grows** a random tree.
2. **Avoids** circular obstacles using vector projection.
3. **Detects** the goal state.
4. **Reconstructs** the valid path.

Future Improvements:

To further enhance this planner, consider implementing:

- **Path Smoothing:** Post-process the path to remove jagged edges.
- **RRT-Connect:** Grow two trees (from start and goal) to meet in the middle (significantly faster).
- **RRT (RRT-Star):*** Optimize the path length asymptotically.