

Garden Activities- Reducing, Re-using and Recycling in the Garden

By Annie Warmke

Gardening is naturally an activity that lends itself to reducing, re-using, and recycling. In any garden, the first goal needs to be to reduce what we use. Next, we should recycle, especially by composting as much plant material as possible. Finally we should strive to find ways to reuse items that would otherwise be discarded.

Below you will find a few tried and true ideas from Annie Warmke, former KidsGardening Advisory Board member and co-owner of Blue Rock Station, a sustainable living center in Philo, Ohio. Not only can these earth friendly activities engage creativity, you can also incorporate them into science, math, English and art lessons. Whether at home or at school, let your young gardeners' imaginations go wild.

Ideas for reducing, reusing, and recycling in the garden:

Canning Jar Lids:

- Make a hole in used canning jar lids and thread with heavy string. Hang these in the garden to spook birds and deer and help keep them out of the garden.
- Nail used canning jar lids to a stick to create plant markers; paint or use permanent marker as needed to write plant names, dates of planting, germination time, etc.

Tin Cans:

- You can use the tops and bottoms of tin cans to scare birds and squirrels out of the garden, by punching a hole in them and tying them to a post or tree branch. (Be careful when handling the lids; their edges are sharp!) When they move in the wind, the wild animals are spooked.
- Cover coffee cans with wallpaper samples or contact paper to create lovely vases to offer to a friend filled with flowers.
- Tin cans make handy and durable seed scoops for wild birdseed and or scooping compost into pots for seed starting.

Campaign Signs:

- Metal hoop sign frames from campaign signs work well to support short vegetables. The wire is stronger than regular coat hangers.
- You can also use them to make short tents to protect your plants from the cold by covering with garden cloth or an old towel.

Baby Food Jars:

- Nail the screw lids of baby food jars to a square of plywood. Nail the board to the underneath side of a garden workbench. Fill the jars with seeds, twist ties and other tiny items from the garden. If you fill these with seeds you will want to place the jars in a dark location or paint the jars black until you are ready to plant.

Metal Baskets:

- Use old metal baskets out of a chest freezer to keep the cats off seedlings until they get big enough to protect themselves and off the catnip when it's trying to rebound.
- Use them under a cover cloth over tender seedlings on a really cold night or light frost so they don't get smashed in case it rains.

Plastic Sandwich Bags:

- Stick plant cuttings into used plastic bags to be rooted, then add some water. Zip them mostly closed and hang them from a curtain rod or clothes line with clothes pins. You can see when roots have formed.

Soda bottles or milk jugs:

- Wash and dry; cut the bottom 1/3 off. Bury the neck of the bottle down in the ground next to a plant that requires a lot of water (tomatoes, pumpkins) and fill with water daily. This gets the water right to the roots.
- Vases rarely fit in the cup holder of the car. So when taking someone a bouquet, use a soda bottle to hold the flowers until you get there, then put them in the proper vase.
- Cut off the bottom of a gallon milk jug, and use for paint trays or seed starter trays.

Grocery Store Bags:

- Hang grocery store plastic bags from the tie on a garden apron for stashing weeds that have gone to seed, diseased plants, trash or whatever until you get back to trashcan...saves a lot of steps.

Old Feather Pillows:

- On a dry day, place a handful out on a piece of cardboard - birds will use to build nests. If they blow away, don't worry, the birds will find them! (PLEASE, do not use dryer lint for nesting material...it gets wet and dries hard. It would be great added to a compost pile, though.)

Pieces of string and twigs:

- Hang around the yard in old falling apart baskets for birds to use as nesting material.

Waste Paper:

- Newspaper and all unneeded mail can be composted. Worms love it! Cover with grass clippings and eventually the worms will find it and over time the paper will rot. Start a worm-composting project with just a small garbage container. The "worm castings" left by the worms, make free rich fertilizer for plants.

Cereal Boxes:

- Cut cereal boxes up to create great little organizers for seed packs, cards, or desk drawer dividers.

Junk Mail Envelopes:

- Use junk mail envelopes for seed collecting.

Old CD's:

- Use them as sun catchers, or bird-detractors (only in the berry patch).

Coffee Filters:

- Use them over and over for collecting and drying seeds, and when they won't stand up anymore, use them for sprouting seeds in plastic bags.

Old Bed Sheets:

- Use them to keep deer away. Just wrap the clean old sheet around a used towel (by a human or dog) and then place along the edge of the garden. After it rains, you'll have to put the human/dog scent back onto the cloth – just let the dog take a nap on it again. This really works!

Toilet Paper Tubes:

- Use to start seeds. Cut one end into 4-inch long sections and fold it under to make a bottom for the pot. Fill with dirt and seeds. Plant the entire tube outside later. Great for sensitive-root things like morning glories or cypress vines. They can get moldy, so either give them more light or transfer them outside, with a cover if it's cold.

Old Carpet Remnants:

- Uses as weed barriers under a layer of mulch for pathways...thick layers of cardboard, and old newspapers work great too.

Old Tube Socks:

- Old socks can be cut into strips and used to tie up tomato plants.

Old Ice Chests:

- Use to store small garden supplies.

Newspaper:

- You can make seed starter pots from newspaper by wrapping two or three strips (about 3x12 inches) around the sides of a can, like a soup can, fold the bottom down over the bottom of the can, tape the bottom, tape the side, then slide it off. They hold up quite well through watering and can be planted right in the soil.

Old garden hose:

- Use an old garden hose to help with earwig control. Place pieces of old hose a foot or two long, around the areas where they burrow, and next day, shake them into a can of soapy water. You don't want to get rid of all the earwigs because they are good at controlling some bad bugs.

Used Dryer Sheets:

- Place them in the bottom of pots to keep the soil from running out or slugs entering to harm plant roots.

Umbrellas:

- Use to shade your tiny plants if you must plant them on a sunny day.

About the Author: Annie is co-owner of Blue Rock Station, a sustainable living center in Philo, Ohio. She also teaches gardening workshops in elementary and secondary education settings. Her goal is to create opportunities for children to learn math, science, geography, and ecology through gardening experiences. She began her youth gardening efforts while living in France and England. Since her return to the United States she has worked with a variety of children's groups and schools to create natural gardens. Recent projects include a program designed to teach math through Colonial gardening methods and cultivation of raised winter garden beds to grow produce for a salad feast.
