

Upcycling: Save Money, Prevent Waste, Forge Connections

Sourcing affordable materials and supplies is an ongoing challenge for most youth gardens. In addition to start-up materials to build a new garden (or expand an existing one), there are ongoing needs for mulch, compost, and other supplies.

One way to fill some of those needs is to upcycle. The term upcycling refers to taking an object or material that would otherwise be discarded and giving it a new life, often as something completely unrelated to its original use. Upcycling saves money and prevents waste by keeping materials out of the landfill. (“Upcycling” is similar to “repurposing” but can suggest that the new use has a higher value than the original use.)



Most information on garden upcycling focuses on fun and popular ways to transform everyday objects. Colanders and birdcages are transformed into hanging baskets, while old wooden ladders, wrought iron gates — even bedsprings! — are upcycled into fascinating trellises. There are loads of ideas for creative transformations like these on the internet. Projects like these can also be a great way to introduce sustainable thinking in the classroom or garden space. Ask kids to consider objects destined for the dumpster and brainstorm a new use for them instead of throwing them away.

Connecting with your community:

Upcycling can also be a way to fill more utilitarian needs, and one often-overlooked source is in your local business community. For example:

Local restaurants often welcome the chance to hand off 5-gallon pails once emptied of ingredients. Drill some holes in the bottom and you have free planters.

Printers of newspapers use large, wide rolls of paper and, often, there’s a lot of paper left on the roll when they’re done with a print run. This paper is a handy way to control weeds: Roll the paper onto vegetable rows and plant seeds or vegetables in holes cut at intervals in the paper. Or use it under mulch in a pathway as an extra weed barrier.

Upcycling efforts probably won’t replace the need for fundraising and in-kind donations (donations of goods and services). But they can be a valuable source for some garden needs. As a bonus, by approaching businesses and organizations with ways you can take materials they’d normally discard (and save them disposal fees), you’ll be forming important relationships in your community and spreading the word about the value of youth gardens. And who knows, this may one day lead to financial donations and other support!

KidsGardening is a nonprofit educational organization. Support provided by sponsors and donors is critical to our ability to provide free garden-based resources for parents and educators. All gifts are tax-deductible.

Consider some of these additional materials and sources:

- Your local coffee shop might be happy to give you buckets of used coffee grounds that are ideal additions to the compost bin.
- Tree services create truckloads of wood chips and might be willing to drop off a few loads that you can use to mulch pathways.
- Wooden pallets abound, and many businesses will be happy to have you haul them away. They can be used to create wall gardens, garden furniture, and so much more. (Search the internet for ideas.) Look for pallets made from untreated wood.
- Wood shavings from furniture makers and woodworkers are handy for mulch or to use as “brown” materials in your [compost bin](#).
- Wood scraps, metal roofing, PVC pipe, and other supplies left over from construction jobs are valuable raw materials for garden projects. Communicate with the construction companies and/or contractors beforehand and always get permission before entering and/or taking any materials from a job site.
- Delis and food-service organizations may be happy to hand over large jugs that once contained pickles, ketchup, mayo, and other condiments. These can be used to craft cloches, planters, and bins for holding garden supplies.
- Building supply companies and fencing companies can be a ready supply of raw materials, such as lumber scraps and rebar, for making raised beds, bean poles, and trellises.
- Lawn-care companies are sources of endless supplies of grass clippings and fall leaves. (Check to make sure the plant source material wasn't sprayed with pesticides or herbicides.) These are ideal for use in compost bins and [lasagna gardens](#).
- Utility companies regularly trim trees and shrubs around utility lines. These trimmings are ideal for making [hügelkultur](#) mounded beds.
- Cardboard is used by just about every business, and most will be glad to hand over flattened boxes. Use only non-glossy cardboard and remove all labels prior to installation. Use these to create new gardens using “sheet composting” or as weed control in paths.

Spread the word about your upcycling wishes and needs through local media, neighborhood chats, your local chamber of commerce, and word-of-mouth. Send out requests on social media or through local regifting networks like Freecycle or Buy Nothing. Engage garden volunteers in sourcing and transporting materials. Invite kids and adults alike to brainstorm materials and sources, and to find ingenious ways to turn “trash” into “treasure.”

KidsGardening is a nonprofit educational organization. Support provided by sponsors and donors is critical to our ability to provide free garden-based resources for parents and educators. All gifts are tax-deductible.