

# “Solutions for Your Life”



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## Recycling Household Products into your Garden or Landscape

By Lisa Hickey, Master Gardener Program Coordinator

There are many household items that can be recycled and reused in your garden or landscape. Here are some quick projects instructions to help recycle household trash into new uses in the landscape. Many ideas are great for teachers in the classroom... feel free to use them as part of the school's curriculum. The household products are listed below, followed by their new purpose and abbreviated "how-to" instructions.

❖ **Egg shells** – multiple uses in the garden: 1. **Finely crushed shells** used as a compost or soil amendment for extra calcium source and drainage medium. 2. **Roughly crushed shells** sprinkled around the plants that snails and slugs love to feed on. Snails/slugs do not like the sharp edges and will pick another food source. As time passes, the shells will work through the soil and benefit the plants. Rinse the shells after use and allow them to dry. Use a coffee bean grinder to crush the shells into fine dust. **Grocery food trays** – liner for garden pots. The plastic trays come in many shapes & sizes and are very durable. Garden pot liners are priced from \$2 - \$15 and up, depending on the material used. Recycling the plastic trays provides huge savings and reduces landfill waste

❖ **Newspapers** – 1. **Weed Barrier** under landscape mulch. Use all parts but **not** the glossy inserts which break down slowly--place them into your normal paper recycling bin, only paper with soy inks should be used with food plants. The portion that is not glossy can be stacked about 2" thick as a base to your regular mulch. Soak the layers with water. The newspaper layer serves as a weed buffer. Place regular mulch on top of the newspaper to conceal the paper. The newspaper will break down and become part of the humus layer providing future benefits to the plants. 2. **Compost**. Newspaper can also be shredded and added to your composter as a "brown" source. Take a composting class at the Extension Office for more information on how to compost.

❖ **Old fish aquarium** – A worm farm. Call the extension office for detailed instructions. You will be creating layers of newspaper, soil, sand, and kitchen vegetable waste inside the aquarium. You must place a few "starter" worms (from your garden or the fish bait store) onto the top layer. The worms will eventually make the aquarium their new home and will produce "castings" as a homemade fertilizer. This is a great science project for kids in the classroom. The worm farm can be displayed on a counter and everyone can watch the worms at work.

❖ **Old bathtub** – Planter or bog garden. For a bog garden – dig a hole large enough and deep enough to completely bury the tub 4 inches below ground surface. Close the drain. Fill the tub to the top edge, and then add water to the soil until the soil becomes spongy but not flooded. Top off the last 4 inches with soil and then add wetland plants to the planter. Keep the soil moisture wet enough to mimic wetlands. This may require topping off the tub with water about once a month or more frequently during the dry season. An excellent wetland plant that does well in this type of "bog garden planter" is the Pitcher plant (*Sarracenia species*). For a planter – you do not have to sink the tub completely into the ground. Also, for a planter, keep the drain open so you can plant a variety of annuals and perennials in the planter.



❖ **Old wicker chair** – Planter. Remove the wicker seat area. Staple the chicken wire to the bottom of the seat area in a basket shape. This will become the base of the planter. From the top, line the chicken wire with coconut husk or some type of lining that will hold the potting soil inside the planter. Add potting soil. Choose plants that will not become too large and outgrow the planter area. The basket portion will provide excellent drainage for the plants. Place the planter where you will get many compliments and don't forget to water the planter.

❖ **Old work boots** – Excellent planters. Soak an old leather pair of work boots in water for a few hours to make it pliable. Fill the boot with potting soil and add your plants. Vines look nice and herbs do great in the boot.

❖ **Phone Cord** (interior or exterior phone lines) – plant supports. Cut the cord (a cord that is no longer in use) into 18 inch pieces. You can use the entire piece as is or you can dissect the cord to remove the many wires within the casing. The inner wires are colored. This individual wire works great when you have lighter support work.

❖ **Sabal Palm Tree Trunk** – Landscape planters. When a Sabal Palm tree dies, you can recycle the trunk. The trunk stays intact for a very long time. Cut the trunk into sections anywhere from one foot in length to the desired length you want. Allow the trunk sections to dry out for a few months. Core out the pulp center of one end deeply enough to add potting soil and a plant. Sink the trunk into the ground deep enough to anchor it. As the trunk breaks down, the interior core will form humus which is a source of plant nutrients and a substrate for the roots to dig into.

❖ **Pine Cones** – Squirrel or Bird Food. Follow the stale peanut instructions below; however, use pine cones and string up the cones. Coat each pine cone with a layer of peanut butter. Then roll the cones in bird seed. Hang the stringed mobile from a tree branch and watch the squirrels and birds feed on the peanut butter and seed. This is great for the winter months because peanuts are full of fat necessary for providing extra fat (insulation) on the birds to keep warm.

❖ **Stale Peanuts in the Shell** – Squirrel or Blue Jay Food. String the peanuts individually with jute/twine spacing the peanuts about 8 inches apart. Tie about 6 strings of peanuts to a hanger and hang from a branch. The squirrels and blue jays will feed on the peanuts and hopefully stay away from your bird feeders. They also give your family and you many hours of enjoyment watching them hang from the string as they feed.

❖ **Styrofoam coffee cups** (16 ounce size) – 1. **Mini planter** for your kitchen. Pierce several holes into the bottom of one cup for drainage. Stack 2 cups together. Add some potting soil then add one of your favorite spring bulbs or any small flowering plant. Add it to your kitchen window or table to perk up the kitchen. Remember to occasionally water it. You can separate the cups and check to see if you are overwatering the plant. You do not want to have standing water in the base of the cup.

2. **Mini greenhouse** – Follow mini planter directions except add a seed or a propagated cutting (like rosemary). Recycled plastic newspaper sleeves and chopsticks are used to create a tent over the inner cup creating a sealed environment. The chopsticks keep the plant from touching the plastic. Invert the sleeve and place it over the cup and chopsticks.

Tuck the tail of the plastic sleeve into the outer cup and push the cups together. This will seal the plastic to mimic a greenhouse. As your plant grows, lift the inner cup and add water to the bottom of the outer cup but do not over water. The plastic should hold in most of the moisture. Remove the plastic after the plant grows to a good height. Increase to a pot 4” – 6” diameter pot after roots start to grow through the drainage holes.



❖ **Styrofoam egg cartons and shipping peanuts** – Drainage for the bottom of gardening pots. You will need approximately 2” – 3” of cut up egg carton in the bottom of the garden pot. Cut apart each egg holding trough and cut the lids in 2 inch segments. Place the segments into the bottom of your gardening pots then add the potting soil. The segments can be easily rinsed off and reused when changing pots. Packaging peanuts are also good for this purpose. Make sure not to use the peanuts that get sticky when wet; this type of peanut is made from cornstarch and will dissolve. Cardboard egg cartons do not work because they decompose. Save the cardboard cartons for your compost pile as a “brown” source.

❖ **3 or 5 gallon buckets** – Patio gardening containers. Come to our “Bucket Brigade” class (refer to quarterly event calendar for the next class) and learn how to convert these buckets into useful gardening containers. The buckets are excellent for plants like Hydrangeas that need extra water and fertilizer, acidic soil, or are cold sensitive. If you have pest nematodes in your garden soil, the use of these containers prevents the nematodes from entering your planter and feeding on your plants’ roots. You can also move the containers indoors when the weather gets cold. Sources for the buckets: Pizza restaurants - the tomato sauce bucket; grocery stores/deli department – the pickle and frosting buckets; cat litter buckets from friends that have cats. There are many sources – you just need to seek them.

❖ **Toilet** – Landscape Planter. When your old toilet needs replacing, clean, paint, and then convert it into a planter. Seal the painted layer with a crystal clear enamel spray. Place the toilet in your garden where you are not going to move it again. Fill the tank portion with potting soil. For the bowl portion – jam an old rag into the drain area to keep soil in the bowl. Select trailing plants for the tank portion to provide a nice visual effect. Remember to water the bowl and tank as they dry out quickly in the hot weather.



❖ **Tuna or cat food cans** – Catch cans to measure the quantity of water that your irrigation system is putting out. Come to our “Irrigation 101” class (refer to quarterly event calendar for the next class) and learn use this method. Collect 10 or more cans. Clean them out and dry them. On the inside surface, use a permanent marker and draw a line 3/4 inch up from the bottom of the can and then

again at 1 inch. Place 10 or more marked cans around one irrigation zone at a time. (Repeat this process for each zone you have). Turn on that zone and measure the time period that it takes for the cans to fill with water to the 3/4 inch mark at a minimum. Refer to the University of Florida publication “How to calibrate your sprinkler system” for more details.

❖ **2-Liter soda bottles – 1. Mini gardening pot.** Make a cut in the bottle 4 inches up from the bottom. The top portion will be the planter portion. Place a cotton ball into the neck of the bottle to prevent the soil from falling out and to allow water to wick up into the soil. Add potting soil and desired plant or seed. Then place the top portion, neck side down, into the bottom portion (the bottom is only a support and well to hold water). The mouth of the bottle should be in contact with the bottom of the bottle. Remember to water your plant or seed, keeping the soil moist until the plant grows. Transplant when plant is ready.



2. **Terrarium or greenhouse.** Make a cut in the bottle 4 inches from the top (sharp scissors work best). You may want to draw a “guide” line to cut on. Add potting soil and the desired plant or seed, water the soil or plant. Place the top section into the bottom. There will be a slight gap between the top and bottom parts – this works for air circulation. Place the screw top back onto the bottle. As the plant grows, open the top and add water. Transplant when plant is ready.

❖ **Wine bottles –** Turn them into wind chimes. If you know someone who has a glass cutter, you can convert the bottles into small vases or into wind chimes. There are many more ideas and examples on the internet.

As our society becomes more sustainable, this project sheet will be updated. Many of these projects have been successfully completed in my garden and landscape. A few of the “white” wares (toilet & tub) have been borrowed from the Manatee County Community with permission from their creators. The projects are not endorsed by the University of Florida but are of my own gathering. For more ideas or to share your ideas please contact, Lisa Hickey, the Master Gardener Program Coordinator at the Manatee County Extension Office at (941) 722-4524 (lisa.hickey@ufl.edu).