



Trashmagination Podcast 3 – Weaving Plastic Bags

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown.

For the past few months, my Trashmagination obsession has been mostly focused on weaving plastic bags on my floor loom into gorgeous colorful mats. You can see photos of these mats and the process of weaving at the Trashmagination Instagram account.

I want to share three ideas that are dear to my heart when it comes to Trashmagination.

Idea #1: When you learn how to make things with non-trash materials, chances are high that you can use trash materials instead.

In the case of my plastic bag weaving project, I started from the place of wanting to learn how to weave on a floor loom. I had an idea of weaving trash, but working with trash can add a level of complexity, especially since most teachers are not going to be familiar or comfortable with trash materials. So typically I learn first with non-trash materials.

The first time I wove with a floor loom, I was a teenager and my family took a trip to Finland to visit my uncle and aunt. In Turku, there was a place where you could rent a floor loom for a day or two to make a project. I would love to find the name of it but I have no idea what it was called or if it exists still today. The premise was so cool – skilled weavers put the warp on the looms, and then people like me who had no training would learn enough to throw the shuttle back and forth to make something. I made a blanket and I'll post photos of that at Trashmagination.com.

I didn't think about weaving again for decades. Then three years ago, I left a job after working there for almost 15 years. I wanted to take a few months to collect my thoughts before deciding my next steps. I thought, "What would be the most amazing thing I could learn in a few months?" And the first thing I imagined was using a floor loom. So I took a class at the Workhouse Arts Center, which is a place for artists to collaborate here in northern Virginia. I learned from a weaving teacher named Marilyn Harrington. You can see step-by-step tutorials on Trashmagination.com.

Learning to weave on a floor loom opened up a whole bunch of ideas about creative reuse because in theory I could weave any pliable material.

Idea #2: Ask for help and trust the universe will bring you what you need.

Often for Trashmagination projects, I ask friends to collect a certain type of trash for me. For this project, I asked my friends to collect colorful bags – reds, blues, yellows, oranges, greens – because there are tons of white, beige, black and gray bags. But that’s not the only thing that a friend gave me for free.

When I decided to learn how to use a floor loom, I began to research purchasing a floor loom, but that was a pretty big investment. I asked my weaving teacher Marilyn for tips on what I might look for when evaluating secondhand or firsthand looms. And she said, “I have a loom in my garage – would you like it?” I thought she wanted to sell it to me, but no, she said I could have it if I could just take it. Her rationale was that she is given looms on a regular basis by families of weavers after the weaver passes and there are no more weavers in their family. But honestly, I think Marilyn was the universe telling me that I was on the right path.

The loom was all in pieces that I could fit everything into my Honda Fit. The challenge arose when it was time to put it together. It was not a brand name loom where I could download a PDF to put it together. It took my husband and me a whole year to get it to work. We put it together by matching the rubbing marks on the loom. The hardest part was figuring out how to get all the various springs and chains to have the right tension. But we figured it out and I only had to replace one part that was rusted beyond salvage.

So ask – put it out into the world – and what is a big thing for you might be an easy thing for someone to give.

Idea #3 – You don’t need to know the answer to ask the question.

When I started making woven plastic bag mats, people would ask, “what are you going to do with these?” That question made me uneasy. I was not sure if anyone would want the mats I was making or whether I could transform them into something cool.

On social media, perhaps you have seen videos of volunteers who crochet mats from plastic bags for the homeless. I haven’t tried to sleep on the ground with these mats, so I hope they work for that purpose. It’s not my intent to donate my mats for that purpose.

I am just going to trust that it will become clear what should happen with my mats or this technique in general.

I have learned it is okay to experiment with making something even if I don’t know what will happen to the final product. This goes against my training as a marketer and product developer. In business, we start with the customer problem.

I have learned there is a cool side benefit to weaving these mats. It has become a critical part of my creative process. Whenever I am stuck, I weave, and usually within less than an hour, a solution comes to me. It has worked so many times that I know, I just have to keep doing this. Clearly weaving triggers good stuff to happen in my right brain – stuff I need to get my job done.

So if you have a creative reuse project that is fuzzy in your mind’s eye, just start making it. The result might be great. The process might be great. It doesn’t really matter as long as you give it a try and learn the lessons as they flow.

Thanks for listening and sharing this podcast with others. You can follow Trashmagination on Facebook or Instagram. Until next time – May you see your trash as just another source of art in your life.