



Trashmagination Podcast #27 – Halloween Costumes from Recycled Materials

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

Today's podcast is about making Halloween costumes from recycled materials. Before we jump into that topic, I want to share a big announcement which is that Trashmagination now has the shark anatomy model pattern available! Check out the Shop link at trashmagination.com. Now is the time to get started if you want to make a shark anatomy model as a holiday gift for a shark aficionado in your life.

So now let's talk about Halloween costumes from recycled materials. This is a special topic because Trashmagination began with Halloween costumes. At my previous workplace, there was an annual costume contest where you could win a day-off-with-pay. I wanted my costume to stand out, and I decided that a costume made from recycled materials would show extra creativity. And most years, it worked!

I learned a lot about making Halloween costumes from recycled materials so today I'll walk through my costumes and share what I learned that you can apply when making your costumes from recycled materials.

Octopus Costume (2002)

The first time I made a Halloween costume from recycled materials was in 2002. My workplace had introduced Keurig coffee makers and I was concerned about the plastic cup dispensers. I went around my workplace gathering up the cups from our Keurig coffee makers bringing them home. I would use a knife to remove the foil and put the grounds in my compost. I safety-pinned the clean cups on to the stuffed arms of four gray sweatshirts.

The lesson from this costume is to **make your costume easy to de-construct after Halloween**. I pinned the Keurig cups in my sweatshirts rather than gluing them so I could just as easily un-pin those cups. I didn't need buy new shirts or have an octopus costume forever. You can avoid buying new clothing for Halloween costumes if you use your current clothing but just attach the costume components in a way that doesn't destroy the clothing.

Armadillo Costume (2003)

The next costume was an armadillo made from metal lids from frozen orange juice. I punched holes in the lids and attached them to each other with twist ties. Then I made the head from a milk jug, using papier maché to give it shape.

The lesson I want to emphasize for this costume is that **you can get your costume ideas by looking at what trash you are already generating**. In this case, my family drank frozen orange juice and I was saving the metal lids from that packaging because it seemed like something that could be used in craft projects. I saw that they were like components of armor, and that generated the armadillo idea.

Raiser's Edge Database Costume (2004)

The next year, I was the Raiser's Edge database, which is software that many large non-profit organizations use to keep track of constituent information. I stuck a bunch of used name tags all over myself with pretend data inside each one.

The lesson from this costume is to **pay attention when people are throwing things away at your office, school or any organization**. In this case, a big box of nametags was headed to the trash after an event. I intercepted that box and it became my costume. Over time, my colleagues learned to check with me when they were throwing items away to see if I had suggestions for how to use it.

Spider Web Costume (2005)

This costume is made with six-pack rings attached with twist ties. It stuck out from my neck in a big circle that I had built from bendy tent poles. On the web were flies made from black Keurig cups. I also made a spider costume for my daughter by sewing long tubes of fabric scraps on her black t-shirt.

The lesson from this costume is to **think about your Halloween costume long before Halloween so you can gather enough materials**. For this costume, I was at the cafeteria at my workplace and I saw that the cashier was collecting six-pack rings as she would stock the shelves with drinks. She would then cut them to ensure they did not choke wildlife when thrown away. When I looked at the rings, I thought how they would look if they were all joined together and came up with my spider web costume idea. I asked if I could have the six-pack rings going forward, which she was happy to do because it saved her cutting them.

Another lesson from this costume is that **sometimes you can have more fun with Halloween costumes if you make them big**. This works best for adult costumes because kid costumes need to be more practical for trick-or-treating. But at least in my case, I was designing the costume to win a contest and I would wear it for only an hour – so going big makes you stand out. I had in mind those incredible Trinidadian costumes that are worn in parades during Carnival. The tent poles provided a light and flexible infrastructure to build on.

Renewable Energy Costume (2007)

For this costume, I made a pretend solar panel from the same metal lids as the armadillo costume. The wind turbine was made from cardboard and attached to my bike helmet. The geothermal pipes running down my legs were made from the tent poles I used in the spider web costume.

The lesson from this costume is that **you might be able to recycle old Halloween costumes into new ones**. In this case, I took the metal lids from the armadillo costume and attached it to a piece of cardboard covered with shiny paper. It meant my costume came together very quickly.

Zebra Costume (2008)

Once again, the disposable Keurig cups were a key component of this costume. I pinned hundreds of cups in black and white stripes. The zebra head is recycled from the 2003 armadillo costume with stripes painted on.

The lesson from this costume is that **a Halloween costume can be more abstract and still work**. People knew I was a zebra even though I did not take black and white paint and put stripes. The lines of black and white cups, combined with the zebra head, made for a more humorous costume. Plus the cups made a satisfying clip clop sound when I walked.

Snow Storm (2009)

For this costume, I cut a bunch of snowflakes with an exacto knife from yogurt container lids. My hat was a swirl of cardboard painted light blue with cotton batting for trim.

The lesson from this costume is to **use the recycled material that is easiest to manipulate and which is clearly recycled**. If I had made my snowflakes from paper and cardboard, it would have gone much faster. Cutting yogurt lids took forever, and so I had fewer snowflakes and my costume looked less impressive. Also, the audience could not tell they were plastic lids so the surprise factor was not there.

Double Rainbow Costume (2010)

In 2010, there was a viral video of a man who was oohing and aahing about a double rainbow [link to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQSNhk5ICTI>]. It had 44 million views. Here's some audio from that. ... I made an mp3 of the audio and played it on a small audio device. My rainbows were cut from a very large cardboard box, painted and decorated with plastic lids. I sewed some straps so I could wear it like a backpack.

The lesson from this costume is to **connect your costume with something happening in the news or on social media**. If I made this costume today, it would have no impact because everyone has forgotten this video. But back in 2010, this costume got a big laugh as so many people had enjoyed that video. This is also a great example of the go big lesson, because the rainbows were like huge wings sticking out of my back. Finally, the rainbow had colorful plastic caps stuck on the rainbow stripes, which made the costume much more interesting than if it were just cardboard.

Four Seasons Costume (2011)

To make this costume, I found four sturdy branches and attached them to a piece of wood with straps so they formed a backpack. Then I covered the branches with packing paper. The seasonal decorations are:

- spring – pink yogurt flowers
- summer – dried fruit green packaging leaves
- fall – Cheetos leaves
- winter – cotton batting snow

This costume did not win the contest and I think that's because it wasn't visually big and impressive, it wasn't tied to a current event and the recycled materials were rather subtle. I didn't listen to my own lessons when I made it.

Green Roof on PS41 School in New York City (2012)

A month before Halloween, I had the honor of visiting PS41, an elementary school in New York City that worked super hard to get a green roof installed [<https://www.newyorkgreenroofs.com/ps41>]. I was so inspired that I made a Halloween costume of it.

The top of the school was thick cardboard with a hole cut out for my head. The green fabric for the roof came from an old Tonka tent that my son destroyed playing with it. I sewed the four walls of the school hanging down using recycled plastic bags for windows and a pair of my husband's old pants for the walls. The plant growing out of the roof were made from chocolate wrappers stuck on twist ties, and then jabbed into the cardboard. I later donated this costume to a company in Maryland that builds green roofs called Up Top Acres [<http://uptopacres.com>].

This costume is a great example of the "go big" lesson and it was fun to wear because people are quite interested in green roofs.

Atlas the Greek Titan Costume (2013)

The Greek Titan Atlas was punished by Zeus to carry the weight of the world on his back. I made my costume by building a globe from plastic caps. I had visions the caps would form a nice sphere, but unfortunately they did not and I had to stuff the globe with plastic bags to make it round. This project took a long time where I drilled holes in the caps with my hand drill and connected them with twist ties.

The lesson from this costume is that **there are a lot more mythological characters than we typically see at Halloween**. For inspiration in this direction, I recommend a costume contest called Take Back Halloween which is about costumes showing strong women [<https://www.facebook.com/TakeBackHalloween/>]. Past entrants did not necessarily make their costumes from recycled materials, but maybe that is one way you could win!

I stopped making costumes for myself once I started my own company as a solopreneur. Also Trashmagination evolved to include more than Halloween costumes. I am grateful these Halloween contests inspired me to make Trashmagination. The contests provided a deadline and a motivation.

I have made costumes for my kids over the years, however not many of their costumes involved creative reuse of trash. They chose what they wanted to wear & often they had a vision that involved purchasing costume components. The costumes I sewed for them included a fox, raccoon, bat and Thomas the Train. Those were all sewing projects with fabric from my fabric stash except the bat. I used the fabric from a broken umbrella to make the bat wings, although I took out the metal and plastic components because they were somewhat dangerous.

Through all these Halloweens, my husband always helped make my costumes. A few years ago, he made my son's costume, which was a Pacman arcade game. My son loved the costume but unfortunately it was not fun to wear because other kids would run up to him and grab on the joystick or punch the buttons.

Hopefully hearing about my costumes inspired you to create your own. I recommend Pinterest for ideas but here's a tip - search based on the material you want to recycle. Whatever type of trash, just search for "Halloween costumes from cardboard" or "Halloween costumes from milk jugs" and you'll get LOTS of ideas.

If you do make a costume from recycled materials, check out the website Inhabitat which has an annual green Halloween costume contest [link to <http://inhabitat.com/voting-has-begun-in-the-green-halloween-costume-contest/>]. Most of the entries in past years were handmade, not necessarily made from trash, but they are still fun.

Thanks for Listening!

I have photos of my costumes up on my blog so you can check it out. Please drop me a note at trashmagination@gmail.com and tell me about the Halloween costumes that you have made from recycled materials. And consider leaving a review on iTunes if this podcast inspired you to have a green Halloween.

Also check out a Halloween wreath I just made from black socks with holes in them – it's up on Instagram and Facebook.

Until next time – may you see trash as just another source of Halloween costumes in your life.