



Trashmagination Podcast #41 – T-shirts

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

Today we're talking about t-shirts. I have creatively reused t-shirts in a lot of projects over the years. This month, I had two experiences that gave me even more ideas for what to do with t-shirts. Before I share those stories, I want to share some mind-blowing facts about the environmental impacts of t-shirts. In the show notes, I'll embed a TED-Ed video that shows a t-shirt's life cycle. It says that:

- It takes 2700 liters of water to grow enough cotton to make one t-shirt.
- Cotton plants rely on more chemicals than any other crop in the world.
- Organic cotton makes up less than one percent of cotton grown in the world.
- From 1994 to 2014, garment production increased by 400 percent.

In addition, there are many concerns about the labor standards for those who sew the t-shirts. In this "fast fashion" world where clothes are very cheap, people buy way more than they could ever wear. (Source: <https://www.facebook.com/TEDEducation/videos/1736518323028033/>)

Those facts illustrate why we likely should reduce the number of t-shirts we consume. And later in the podcast, I'll mention a whole bunch of project ideas for your existing t-shirt collection. But first I want to tell you about some activities I have been doing in the past month related to t-shirt creative reuse.

Customizing Your T-Shirts Rather Than Buying New Ones

I don't have much experience with garment sewing and t-shirt or jersey fabric can be challenging to sew. I haven't experimented with adjusting my t-shirts to fit me better. But I became intrigued with this idea after meeting a one-of-a-kind taiko performer and composer named Kris Bergstrom.

If you have been listening to this podcast for a while, you know that I play taiko with the group Nen Daiko. If you want the whole story, you can listen to episode 12. But in case you missed that one, Nen Daiko has been performing around the Washington DC area since 1994. Our big performance season is coming right up this month with the cherry blossoms that bloom around our region in March and April. We perform at festivals every weekend starting around mid-March.

Getting back to how this relates to t-shirts - a month ago, I attended a Meet the Artist event with Kris Bergstrom. Obviously, most of my attention was on his fascinating style of composing and playing taiko. But for the purpose of this podcast, I want to focus on what Kris was wearing. Kris dresses very consistently in a t-shirt and shorts. I had watched many videos of him playing so this was not the first time I saw him wearing this clothing. However, now that I had time to really examine his shirt up close, it looked like his sleeves were made from three sections - a regular short sleeve, a central sleeve and then an extra-long sleeve that could wrap around his thumb. After the performance, someone asked about the sleeves, and he noted that he likes to adjust the position of the sleeve for different songs. Sometimes he likes the sleeve to wrap around the thumb because it can change the way the drumstick or bachi makes a sound - and playing with sound quality is part of what Kris does.

Later I found that Kris had written a paper about taiko costuming where he talked about his pursuit of the perfect taiko shirt [<https://ectc2018com.files.wordpress.com/2018/02/kristoferbergstromessay.pdf>]. This document is called “Interpreting Tradition: The Exciting Possibilities of Taiko Costuming.” In the essay, he reviews the history of costuming, as well as his own designs.

Anyhow, most of you don’t play taiko, but I wanted to take these ideas and apply it to my every-day experiences of wearing clothing that doesn’t feel quite right. Even though I’m not sure I want to make my own clothes, I am noticing the trends of home sewing and me-made clothing. I have been hearing about this through a podcast called the Crafty Planner hosted by Sandi Hazlewood. In one episode, she interviews Sonya Philip who developed basic patterns for her project called 100 Acts of Sewing [<http://www.craftyplanner.com/2016/06/27/sonya-philip/>]. I admire how she mixes patterns and layers of clothing. In another episode, Sandi interviewed Meg McElwee of Sew Liberated who started her pattern company making aprons and tunics for her Montessori classroom [<http://www.craftyplanner.com/2018/02/26/meg-mcelwee/>].

Inspired by these stories, I tried sewing two shirts together and quickly found this was not going to be easy. I did not like my first experiments. But I have been searching Pinterest for ideas and added some to my board about the creative reuse of t-shirts. In particular, I would like to make all my t-shirts longer in the body because when I’m drumming and raising my arms above my head, I don’t want my shirt to come up too high.

I am tackling this question of sewing shirts together for a couple of reasons. First, I think it could spur creative solutions to our over-consumption of clothing if we took some of Kris’ attitude that the shirt must be perfect, and we can make it perfect through experimentation. Why should I have 30 shirts that I don’t really like? If there is one that I do like, perhaps I deconstruct it and adjust the others to follow its lead?

If we customize our existing shirts, maybe we’ll stop buying more – always looking for the perfect shirt. We have all experienced buying a shirt that fit great in the store and then it gets all wonky after washing. Why not customize shirts that are already washed, so we already know how that fabric responds to laundry?

Here’s an idea for those of you who might not want to take apart a whole shirt, but you do want to salvage the graphics on the front of the t-shirt. My friend Maggie used to have a business where you mailed her your favorite t-shirt that was falling apart, and she would take the design and sew it on a fresh new t-shirt. There are also many businesses who will sew your t-shirts into quilts. In the United States, this is a popular high school graduation gift for a student to take to college – so they can remember all the fun things they did back home.

Sewing T-shirt Strips Into Designs

Moving on to a new t-shirt reuse topic, each month I try something new with creative reuse and this month it was an experiment related to t-shirt yarn. This is when you cut a t-shirt in one long spiral and then roll it up into a big ball of yarn. This is a great way to reuse t-shirts that you definitely do not want to customize.

I am not new to t-shirt yarn. Some of my early weavings on my floor loom were made with tie-dyed t-shirts because it creates this awesome gradient effect. This month, the new technique that I tried was to sew swirls of t-shirt yarn down to fabric. I learned later that this is called “couching” in embroidery jargon. I sewed the swirls upholstery samples because I figured that is some very strong fabric which could stand the density of stitching. Once I had a bunch of swirls sewn down, my mom suggested I add beads. So I started sewing those and I’m sure my mom did not mean to fill in every single square inch with beads, but that’s what I did. I decided to make the whole design a circle, and by the time I was done, it felt like a medallion or a coat of arms – the colors and textures were so rich. Once again, I discover a new addictive craft using the materials from my own house. I encourage you to check out my first two medallions made from recycled t-shirts in the show notes. I also made my grandmother a little Valentine’s broach with two hearts.

T-shirt Creative Reuse Projects

I collected project ideas for creatively reusing t-shirts on a Pinterest board [<https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/t-shirts/>]. The most popular idea is to sew or tie the bottom of the t-shirt, cut off the sleeves and make it into a shopping bag. My favorite ideas are:

Clothing for all ages

- Washable Diapers - <http://www.instructables.com/id/T-shirt-Diapers/>
- Skirts - <https://www.makeit-loveit.com/the-10-minute-skirt-re-purposing-old-shirts-into-skirts>
- Toddler Pants - <http://hammerandthread.blogspot.de/2011/06/easy-lounge-pants-tutorial-with-pattern.html>
- Headbands - <https://www.redtedart.com/easy-t-shirt-yarn-hairbands/>
- Dress that looks like swirling roses - <http://www.starsforstreetlights.com/diy-t-shirt-flower-dress>
- Drawstring Backpack - <https://www.chicaandjo.com/2009/04/27/make-a-drawstring-backpack/>

Housewares

- Shag Rug - <http://www.lookatwhatimade.net/crafts/yarn/crochet/t-shirt-shag-rug/>
- Woven circular rug on a hula hoop - <https://www.apieceofrainbow.com/make-rag-rug-from-old-t-shirts/>
- Crochet rug - <https://www.1dogwoof.com/crochet-rug-from-t-shirts/>
- Coiled basket - <http://www.we-are-scout.com/2012/10/make-a-neon-fabric-coil-bowl.html>
- Knot pillows - <https://loldamn.com/wp-content/cache/all/cool-knots-pillow.html/index.html>

Fun Seasonal Crafts

- Bunny Craft for Kids - <https://www.redtedart.com/easy-t-shirt-yarn-bunny/>
- Giant Pompoms - <http://www.craftaholicsanonymous.net/t-shirt-pom-poms-tutorial>
- Christmas tree ornaments - <https://funcraftskids.com/t-shirt-yarn-christmas-tree-decoration/>
- Halloween spider web - <http://twitcheets.com/2015/10/upcycled-halloween-wreath.html/>

Personal Care

- Tissues – <http://www.funinthemaking.net/2009/03/31/soon-no-sew-t-shirt-tissues-and-hankie-hamper/> - including little boxes called “hanky hampers” where people can put tissues after use
- Face Wipes - <https://livesimply.me/2015/02/15/diy-homemade-reusable-facial-cleansing-wipes/>
- Dryer Sheets - <http://sixdollarfamily.com/save-money-on-laundry-with-these-diy-reusable-dryer-sheets>
- Feminine Hygiene Products - <https://craftingagreenworld.com/articles/how-to-make-cloth-pads-in-30-minutes/>
- Hot and cold packs or hand warmers - <https://www.youtube.com/embed/9fiYaYSdnYA>

I saw a video showing how someone insulated a tiny home with t-shirts (https://www.youtube.com/embed/ldbrA6K_XqM).

Purchasing Items from Recycled T-Shirts

If you want to purchase items made from recycled t-shirts, check out Rethreaded [<https://www.rethreaded.com/>]. This company hires survivors of human trafficking locally and globally to make beautiful items from recycled t-shirts. They are best known for a product called the Grace Scarf which looks like many strings intertwined. They are also partnering with Southwest Airlines to make jewelry from recycled leather seat covers. I also admire an artist in Maine called One Woman Studio who makes T-Skirts – skirts sewn from recycled t-shirts [<http://www.onewomanstudio.com/>].

So I hope you are inspired to creatively reuse your t-shirts. I am sure it will not be my last word on this as I do want to create my own perfect taiko t-shirt. I have quite a different shape than Kris so this will take some experimentation. If you have creatively reused t-shirts in an unusual way, please let me know at trashmagination@gmail.com. Until next time – may you see t-shirts as a source of art in your life.