



## Trashmagination Podcast #92 – Mylar Balloons

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

Today's episode is about creative reuse of Mylar balloons. These metallic foil balloons are usually filled with helium. I recently learned three surprising things about Mylar balloons. First, they are made from a mixture of metal and polyester, and since they contain metal, they conduct electricity. Electric utilities have put out warnings begging people to make sure that they don't lose or purposefully release Mylar balloons outside because if they float up to a power line, they can cause a power outage! There are videos showing what happens when a Mylar balloon hits a power line [[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/mylar-balloon-power-lines\\_n\\_59701ea1e4b0110cb3cba10d](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/mylar-balloon-power-lines_n_59701ea1e4b0110cb3cba10d)]. There is a big poof of fire and smoke!

The second surprising thing I learned about Mylar balloons is that helium is a non-renewable resource. It is captured in mines and we know mining has tremendous environmental impact. But even more upsetting is that helium is necessary for some medical devices like MRI machines to cool down the superconducting magnets. It is also used in scientific experiments such as with particle accelerators<sup>1</sup>. If we ran out of helium, we would not be able to use these critical devices. A few years ago, people were predicting a helium shortage, but in 2016, there was a huge stockpile found in Tanzania<sup>2</sup>. But even if we currently have enough helium, we need to remember it will not go on forever.

The third surprising fact I learned about balloons is that they are a leading cause of seabird death. A study in 2019 showed that "balloons are the highest-risk debris item.... 32 times more likely to result in death than ingesting hard plastic."<sup>3</sup> Balloons squeeze into stomach cavities and then open up and block them. They also look a lot like seafood.

Some balloons are marketed as biodegradable but this takes months or years, and the seabirds die long before then. Also Mylar balloons will never break down because they contain metal. So never encourage your organization or community to do balloon releases. Releasing balloons is the same as littering.

### Alternatives to Mylar Balloons

There are lots of ways to decorate without balloons, such as flags, garlands, pompoms and bubbles. You can put ribbons on a stick when encourages dancing! If you want an activity to commemorate someone, a better idea is to plant native plants<sup>4</sup>. If you want to blow bubbles, avoid buying the individual bubble wands and containers, which creates a lot of plastic waste. You can make bubble wands from recycled materials [<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/734227545469372692/>] or rent a bubble machine. Avoid companies which make bubbles with helium called Bubloons, for the same reasons we already discussed.

### Crafts from Mylar Balloons

If you have Mylar balloons already from past celebrations, then here are craft ideas to creatively reuse them.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/startswithabang/2019/05/24/humanity-is-thoughtlessly-wasting-an-essential-non-renewable-resource-helium/#6bde0c1429f8>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/jun/28/huge-helium-gas-tanzania-east-africa-averts-medical-shortage>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-018-36585-9>

<sup>4</sup> <https://balloonsblow.org/environmentally-friendly-alternatives/>

Think of a Mylar balloon as a big piece of shiny fabric or paper. Most crafts that you make with shiny fabric or paper you could make with a Mylar balloon. Some creative reuse centers accept Mylar balloons in their donations such as Upcycle Recycle Creative Reuse Center in Alexandria, Virginia [<https://www.upcyclecrc.org/materials-donations1.html>].

The easiest way to reuse Mylar balloons is to use it instead of wrapping paper - it might even say happy birthday. Another easy craft is to make pompoms or party tassels [<https://studiodiy.com/2012/12/18/diy-fringe-mylar-poms/> and <https://pagingsupermom.com/recycled-party-tassels/>].

Some people make them into garlands. My favorite garland design from Mylar balloons is by Kathleen Ballos from Oh Happy Day [<http://ohhappyday.com/2013/09/mylar-garland-diy/>]. She cuts the balloons into 1 and a ½ inch strips. Then she threads a needle and pushes the needle through the end of a strip. She slowly folds the strips back and forth, sewing each fold. The final result looks like ribbon candy.

Some people sewed Mylar balloons into blankets or curtains. The blankets are similar to the emergency reflective blankets you put in a car kit. The curtains act as black-out curtains meaning that they completely block out the light.

Another way to creatively reuse Mylar balloons is to deter wildlife from eating your garden or damaging your home. You can cut them into strips and tie them around your garden or in fruit trees to deter birds. According to Paul Curtis from Cornell University, people put them on their homes to deter woodpeckers<sup>5</sup> but that doesn't always work. (By the way, if you have a problem with woodpeckers, something that worked for us was to replace sections of the cedar siding with concrete siding that has a wood grain, and it worked really well, plus it was less expensive than cedar siding.)

## Artists Who Creatively Reuse Mylar Balloons

Lastly, let me tell you about three artists who creatively reuse Mylar balloons.

The first is Beth Kindle who makes bowls from fabric, plastic bags, candy wrappers and Mylar balloons. Her business is called Recyclabowls [<https://www.facebook.com/Recyclabowls/>] located in Cincinnati, Ohio. She makes bowls by coiling materials around a cord and then sewing them in a spiral [<https://www.facebook.com/Recyclabowls/photos/a.975828655885525/1532343646900687/>]. She also incorporates trivets, like the type woven from straw and shaped like a flower. They sometimes form the base of her bowls.

The next artist who creatively reuses Mylar balloons is Linda Thomas from the United Kingdom [[https://www.instagram.com/linda\\_eco\\_design/](https://www.instagram.com/linda_eco_design/)]. I talked about her work in my episode about the creative reuse of rope because she made a dress from ropes she found at the beach. She also made a dress from Mylar balloons she found at the beach called the 99 Dead Balloons dress [<https://www.instagram.com/p/BfV1tkYjg3v/>]. Another amazing dress she made was from the covers removed from cheap polystyrene surfboards.

The last artist I'll mention who creatively reuses Mylar balloons is Suzanne Tick. I talked about her work in my episode on my favorite TED Talks about creative reuse (which is also one of the most popular episodes). Suzanne picks up Mylar balloons at the beach and weaves them into exquisite mats. She was commissioned by the Temple Emanu-El in Dallas to make a tapestry for the doors of the ark holding the Torah scrolls, which she made from Mylar balloons [<https://www.wallpaper.com/art/perfect-foil-artist-suzanne-tick-tightly-woven-wonder>].

## Thank you!

Thank you for listening! You can see these ideas for creative reuse of Mylar balloons on my Pinterest board [<https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/balloons/>]. Please let me know if you have creatively reused Mylar balloons at [trashmagination@gmail.com](mailto:trashmagination@gmail.com). I hope some of your new year's resolutions relate to creative reuse. I would love to hear about that! Until next time – may you see Mylar balloons as a source of art in your life – but don't buy any new ones!

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.newyorkupstate.com/outdoors/2019/04/what-to-do-when-a-woodpecker-is-drumming-away-on-your-house.html>