



Trashmagination Podcast #103 – Fairy Gardens from Recycled Materials

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown. Today's episode is about making fairy gardens from recycled materials. The idea is to make it look like fairies live in your garden by making a tiny fairy-sized landscape. This is an activity that you can do in a garden or window box to add a little whimsy to your neighborhood.

Most fairy gardens come in three types:

- 1) Those made from materials from nature such as twigs, leaves and pebbles.
- 2) Those made from pre-made products purchased at garden stores or dollar stores.
- 3) Those made from DIY crafts with non-recycled supplies purchased at a craft store

I have concerns about all three. For those made from natural objects, the concern is that people might disturb natural habitat when gathering supplies. In particular, it's important not to move rocks from aquatic ecosystems like a stream. That's where all sorts of important creatures find shelter [<https://friendsofthesmokies.org/blog/dont-move-rocks/>]. Now when my kids were little, we did make fairy gardens from a log that we cut into slices, along with bark, rocks and twigs. We tried to use only items from our firewood pile or playground areas so hopefully we did not disturb habitat.

For fairy gardens made from dollar store statuettes, the concern is that these materials are typically not made in a sustainable way. For fairy gardens where items are put together with a glue gun, the concern is that glue is new plastic.

I am always going to encourage you to use what you have in your home, or what you can collect from friends that would otherwise go into landfill or the recycling bin. All the projects I'm going to suggest are made from recycled materials. At the end, I'll talk about how to host a fairy garden party for a birthday or just for fun.

Reusing What You Own

To start, let's just put this point out there – the best fairy gardens are made from items you already own. If you already have tiny animal toys or porcelain statuettes, I say put them in your fairy garden! Any time you pull something out of a drawer and make it fun, that's a great thing.

To illustrate this point, let me tell you about a fairy garden contest that I saw online. So fairy garden contests are real events hosted by garden centers and at garden shows. At this contest, the winner made her garden in a tire with the theme of the Cars movie. Her children's Cars toys are driving all over this landscape [<http://www.fairygardenexpert.net/2018-fairy-contest-winners>]. I'm guessing this garden was far more interesting to her children because it incorporated what they already had. The second place winner made a garden that looked like a jungle with plastic animal toys hidden amongst the plants. So make your fairy garden relevant and low impact for your family by using what you have.

Getting Started

Okay – so how do you get started making your fairy garden? Number one, what is the goal of your fairy garden? Is it to display something amusing to make your neighbors smile? Is it to make a play space for your children? Is it an art project? Or do you want a small garden for inside your home with succulents? I'm going to tell you about three artists who make fairy houses, and how their approaches and materials differ depending on their goal.

Birdy Heywood's Fairy Houses

The first artist is Birdy Heywood [<https://www.birdydragonbirther.com/>]. Last summer, a friend suggested that I reach out to Birdy to learn about her fairy houses that she makes from recycled materials. Birdy generously shared with me a booklet she made about her techniques, which involve making fairy houses from recycled plastic milk bottles and cardboard egg cartons. Birdy said it would be okay to share her instruction booklet with you! So I will post that in the show notes. If you learn best by working with an instructor, Birdy teaches workshops so I'll link you to her workshop page [<https://www.birdyheywood.com/workshops>].

To summarize Birdy's fairy houses, they have a plastic milk jug as a base. She cuts windows and door shapes out of the plastic. She then uses a sculpting material called Powertex [<https://www.powertexart.us/>] or Sculptin [<https://www.sculptin.co.uk/>]. These products are hardeners, meaning that they soak into porous materials like fabric or cardboard and then harden. They can also be mixed with sand or sawdust to make something like a dough that you can mold into a shape that hardens. They adhere to most surfaces except plastic, so to make her fairy houses, Birdy covers the plastic milk jugs with masking tape. These hardeners are water-based and yet the final product is fine in wet weather. Every website I reviewed says that these products are environmentally-friendly.

Anyhow, the wonder of these products are that you can take many items like fabric or cardboard and sculpt them into really amazing sturdy, weather-resistant shapes. This is great for fairy houses, but really any type of sculpting. It opens up a whole other type of creative reuse that I have not tried before. Thank you for your generosity and inspiration Birdy!

Laura Ramie from the Pittsburgh Center for Creative Reuse

The next artist is Laura Ramie from the Pittsburgh Center for Creative Reuse which I visited about five years ago. It's a wonderful and large creative reuse center, which is like a secondhand store for art and craft supplies. Laura posted a video in May 2020 showing how she makes fairy gardens [<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=663728947525707>].

Laura's fairy house approach is very different from Birdy's. While Birdy's houses look like they come from a storybook, Laura's houses look like little mounds of mud covered in grass and flower petals. Both have their merits. Birdy's houses would appeal to an artist interested in artistic sculpture. Laura's fairy houses would be a fantastic project for kids who want to play with mud and really enjoy digging in with their hands. It depends on your goal.

The base for Laura's fairy houses are juice cartons. She covers the cartons with a material called cob, which is a natural building material made from sand, clay and straw. This method of building has been around for centuries all over the world. Laura shows how to mix your own cob and apply it to your cartons. She mixes the ingredients with her feet!

Lindsey Boardman from Filth Wizardry's Fairy Gardens

Next I'll tell you about the fairy houses made by Lindsey Boardman from Filth Wizardry. So, many fairy gardens do not actually include fairies. They just look like a place where fairies *might* live if you use your imagination. But if you have kids, they might want actual fairy toys to play with. And one way to transform a regular toy into a fairy is to make wings.

If you have been listening to Trashmagination before, you know I love to make things from plastic milk jugs. The plastic can be cut with regular scissors into any shape. I first learned about this from Lindsey Boardman. Lindsey's tutorial for making butterflies from plastic milk jugs is one of my all-time favorite creative reuse crafts [<http://www.filthwizardry.com/2009/07/fairy-houses-and-fairy-wings-for-your.html>]. I have cut thousands of butterflies from milk jugs which I bring to events to teach families about creative reuse.

But Lindsay doesn't only share ideas about making fairy wings. She has her own unique approach to fairy gardens. Lindsey and her kids make their fairy gardens indoors. On a table, they make simple fairy houses by cutting windows and doors from plastic milk jugs and decorating them with markers. Then they create a colorful world with a million textures by pressing homemade dough all over the surface of the table, and then pressing objects into the dough [<http://www.filthwizardry.com/2009/07/play-dough-mermaid-kingdom.html>]. These are objects that they use over and

over again in the creative play such as pretend jewels, glass beads and sea shells. This is a fun way to make a fairy garden on a day that is too hot to play outside.

So you can make a fairy house from a milk jug or juice carton as your base, or you can take a wooden birdhouse kit and repurpose it. I challenge you to think of ways to do this that avoid glue, but I also understand that is the most popular way to make fairy houses.

If you don't want to make a whole house, you could just put a fairy-sized door on a tree, which makes it seem like the fairies live in the tree trunk. Most of these fairy doors are made by gluing wooden craft sticks or scrap wood. Some craftspeople on Etsy specialize in making very artistic doors that you can purchase [<https://www.etsy.com/search?q=fairy%20door>].

Fairies

So here's something interesting about fairy gardens – many do not contain actual physical fairies. This allows people to imagine the fairies any way they like. It allows you to make a world in whatever size you want – unlike railroad enthusiasts who have to make tracks that exactly fit their trains.

If you have kids who want to play with the fairy gardens, it will likely change how you design your fairy house. They will likely play with it longer if they have actual fairies that fly around in their garden and have little fairy dramas.

When my kids were little, they had small dolls with wings or we would make them wings from milk jugs. For this podcast episode, I set myself a challenge of designing a fairy from my plastic recyclables. The way I approached this project was to gather all my pink plastic items such as shampoo bottles, plastic caps and a device that you use to hold your dental floss which our dentist gave my kids.

I also gathered pink shopping bag handles. I go around on recycling day to see if my neighbors have put their paper recycling in a paper gift bag or shopping bag with handles made from string. Those just contaminate the paper recycling, so I pull them off and they are an essential component of my recycled crafts as a way to avoid glue. I use a technique where I make holes in my recyclables either with my drill press or a hole punch. Then I string the handles through the holes to make something like a spine for my designs, or to tie on items like wings.

My recycled pink fairy is nine inches or 20 centimeters tall including her crown. Her skirt is made by cutting off the spout of the shampoo bottle and turning it upside down, then drilling a hole in the bottom of the bottle. Then I drilled holes in the caps and used my shopping bag handle through the holes to make the spine of the fairy. I added a fun detail to her head with that flossing tool. It looks like a two-pronged crown or maybe she has tall bunny-like ears? Her arms are made from a piece of pink sock that I got from the rag bin. I also made wings from a plastic milk jug and tied them on her back. The nice thing about using shampoo bottles is that they are type 2 plastic, which is not recycled near me, nor in many places. Plus the colors of shampoo bottles are often very vibrant. I used pink plastic for this fairy, but you could gather materials to make a fairy in any color, such as turquoise, orange, blue, yellow or red.

Here's something to consider. I have been collecting plastic caps for 20 years. Caps come in many colors, sizes and qualities. But as with all things, some colors are more rare than others. In general where I live, it is challenging to find caps that match skin tones in all variations. But a nice thing about fairies is that they can be whatever color caps you have. The way I made my fairy was to gather all the pink plastic items that I had, which were about 15 items, and then move them around until I could imagine them as a fairy.

One way that people make fairies is with acorns. I recently read an article about a woman in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia who was creating a series of small fairy scenes in her front yard where all the fairies were made from acorns [<https://www.thechronicleherald.ca/lifestyles/local-lifestyles/aspreys-acorn-people-creations-bring-smiles-to-pleasant-street-pedestrians-455152/>]. I especially love how she sculpts bark into a camper and a canoe! Of course acorns are from nature and a food source for animals. So I would say use up trash first, but do check out her designs for inspiration.

Fairy Furniture and Decorations

Next let's talk about fairy-sized furniture and decorations. The more detail that you add to your fairy world, the more it will make people smile. You can get ideas for making fairy-sized furniture from my podcast episode about making dollhouse furniture, but today I'll highlight projects that would hold up well even outside.

The first idea is to make fairy-sized rugs. My kids used to make these from scraps of burlap that they would paint. Also if you are teaching your kids to knit, crochet or weave, a tiny fairy-sized rug is a very achievable project. You could make yarn from plastic bags or plarn to make your rugs more waterproof.

Another cute idea is to make tiny bunting from fabric scraps. Bunting is a decoration made from a long string and you attach triangle-shaped flags that hang down. To make one for fairies, you need only very tiny fabric bits. You can take a very thin strip of fabric and just sew a straight line down the strip to hold down the triangles for your fairy world.

Fairy Landscaping

A fairy garden is really just a miniature landscaping project. So next I'll share creative reuse ideas related to landscaping.

There is a concept called a fairy circle which is a circle of mushrooms in the forest. The idea is that the fairies come to that spot to have their meetings and parties. So one way to make a fairy garden is to make a whole bunch of mushrooms from recycled materials and place them in a circle.

I made mushrooms from plastic caps. They are made from a large red plastic cap on the top, with a stack of small white plastic caps as the stem. I drill down the center of each cap, and string a cord up through the middle, nice and tight. I finish the mushroom by dabbing on little white circles of paint, using the wooden end of a paint brush.

Some people make fairy houses in a pot or on a tray so they can move it around. One way to creatively reuse is to make your fairy garden from broken terra cotta pots. Those are the orange clay pots which unfortunately do tend to crack if they are left outside in cold weather or dropped. The clay retains water so you can use the broken pot chunks to make a world for fairies by layering them with soil inside a larger pot. I have seen fairy gardens made in old fountains, tires, wagons and sinks. It can be a fun way to creatively reuse a large object that doesn't work anymore.

Another fun way to add detail to your fairy garden is to make a pretty garden path. Most people do this by placing flat stones or slices of a log. I saw an especially beautiful garden path on the blog *Beneath the Ferns*. This artist made many tiny pebbles from bake-able clay and then laid them in a swirling pattern. I wouldn't suggest using bake-able clay because it's made from plastic, but instead, I think you could use little beans that come in all different colors. I do recommend checking out the design made by *Beneath the Ferns* for inspiration [<https://beneaththeferns.com/fairy-garden-tutorials/tutorial-miniature-garden-path-mosaic-pebble-swirl/>].

The other way that people add landscaping to their fairy gardens is to choose plants that stay very small such as succulents. The challenge is choosing plants that fit your climate and would survive outside if you have your fairy garden outside. Other people build their fairy garden in the roots of a tree that already grows in their yard.

Fairy Pets

Some people like to make pets for their fairy gardens. The most popular critters are frogs, ladybugs and hedgehogs. Some people make the pets by painting small rocks. I encourage you to make them from plastic caps. It's easy to make a ladybug from a red plastic cap and a black marker. I'll share a cute bunny craft that I made many years ago from plastic caps and a shampoo bottle in the show notes. You can make caterpillars for the fairies to ride by drilling plastic caps down the center and then stringing them together with – of course – a shopping bag handle. I call these cap-erpillars and it is a craft I love doing with younger children.

Fairy Wands

This next idea is to make fairy wands. I have seen many variations on this idea, but here are some that emphasize creative reuse.

You can take small twigs and have your kids paint them. This is a great way to use up the dribbles at the bottom of paint bottles that are almost empty. You can also tie on fabric flowers that you already own.

The next idea is to gather beads, buttons or other tiny craft supplies you already own. Then you take a bit of craft wire or very thin dowel and slide on the beads. Some people combine these two ideas and wrap the wire around the stick.

Planning a Fairy Birthday Party

I'll finish with recommendations for how to do a fairy garden theme party. I'm going to assume this party is for a child. When I plan birthday parties for that age range, I arrange activities with this flow:

- 1) Quiet activities that someone can do individually – This is great for when guests arrive so they have something to do while they wait for everyone to arrive.
- 2) Circle activities
- 3) Larger activities where the guests move their bodies
- 4) Food!
- 5) Craft activities where the guests make something to bring home

So for the quiet activity to offer while guests arrive, you could have a variety of fairy wings cut out from plastic milk jugs. You could ask your guests to bring a toy that they want to make into a fairy, and then they get to decorate the wings and transform their toy. The challenge with this activity for smaller children is that you need to use permanent markers on the milk jug plastic. Washable markers will just wipe off on to their hands. So you might have the kids put on old adult t-shirts to protect their clothing or aprons if you have those already. You could also have the guests make ladybugs from red plastic caps.

Next comes the circle activity. For this one, we used to play a game that is sometimes called "Pass the Parcel." You first need a small box and inside you put small items for the guests. For a fairy garden theme party, the box could contain special jewels for fairy wands. Then I would wrap the box in many layers of newspaper. On each layer, I would write an activity. We play music and whoever is holding the package when the music ends will do the activity. For fairy-themed activities it could be:

- Invent a fun fairy name for yourself
- Do five fairy jumps
- Do three fairy twirls
- Walk around the circle while pretending to fly
- Name three animals that would be good fairy pets
- Name a fairy from a movie or story
- Make a wish
- Make up a recipe for a fairy's favorite snack.

Next comes the larger activities where they move their bodies. My favorite activity is to do a blindfold walk, where you string a rope from tree to tree. Then one guest puts on a blindfold and their partner does not. The blindfolded guest follows the rope on their adventure, while the guest who is not blindfolded gives them tips about how to proceed safely. This works well if the person who is not blindfolded is an older child or adult who is more responsible, and you have coached them on how to look for tripping hazards without taking away any of the magic of the blindfolded walk.

Another fun idea would be to make a fairy walk at night. Many birthday parties are during the day, but if you have one in the evening, a magical way to move the guests from one place to another would be to string some holiday lights over a

path. I did this for my 10 year anniversary. I connected every string of lights we owned and my husband followed them to our anniversary meal which was set up as a surprise in my neighbor's garden. She had such a pretty garden and we could still hear the baby on the baby monitor from her yard. Setting it up in her garden meant I could keep it a secret and she loved being a part of my surprise. So you could use fairy lights to take all the guests to a new place (like your front door to your backyard) where you have set up the food or the next activity. If you are doing this party during a time when it snows, you can fill paper bags with snow and then put a small candle inside. The snow kept the bag from catching on fire and makes a magical trail. We used to do this at a winter camp I attended when growing up in Canada.

The next activity is food, and of course you are going to make food you like the best. One idea for fairy parties is to cut out fruit or cheese in shapes like stars and hearts. Then you can stick them on skewers or metal straws to make them like fairy wands. I did an activity at my kids' school where we made ladybug treats from strawberries cut in half and decorated with dabs of melted chocolate for the dots. Of course sprinkles on cupcakes are great for fairy garden parties.

The last activity I like for parties is a craft activity that the guests will bring home. In this case, you could have them make fairies or fairy pets from plastic caps, fairy wands or fairy furniture – any of the items I talked about already in this episode. I hope that inspires you to make a fairy garden party!

Thank You for Listening!

Thank you for listening! If you have made a fairy garden from creatively reused items, please let me know what you figured out at trashmagination@gmail.com. Until next time, may you see trash as a source of fairy gardens in your life!

<https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/fairy-gardens-from-recycled-materials/>