



## Trashmagination Podcast #115 – Weaving Rugs from Recycled T-shirts

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown. In today's episode, we'll talk about how to weave a rug from a recycled t-shirt. There are actually lots of ways to make a rug from recycled t-shirts, including crocheting, twining and even knitting. But I'm going to talk about weaving rugs. When I made a rug this month, I posted videos and photos on Instagram and Facebook. A few people wrote in the comments that they wished they could make one too. So I decided this episode would tell you how to do it since this is a very accessible creative reuse craft.

### Make Your T-Shirt Yarn

First you need to make yarn from recycled t-shirts. I have reviewed many videos about this and I will share my favorite which is by Mindful Makers [<https://youtu.be/vmj7aDMo0>]. The first half of this video is about how to tie dye your t-shirt to make very colorful yarn. Then at around the 35 minute mark, there is a demonstration of how to make the t-shirt yarn. When I first started making t-shirt yarn, I cut my strips too thin and the yarn was not hearty enough. Also I used scissors which was quite tedious. I recently changed the blade in my rotary cutter to make my t-shirt yarn faster and wow, it made such a huge difference! I make t-shirt yarn really fast now!

So should you wash your t-shirts before you weave them? Normally I weave secondhand t-shirts that have been washed plenty of times. However, for the rug I just made, I used t-shirts that had not been washed. They were made by an organization that changed their logo, so they no longer wanted that old logo in circulation. I could have washed the t-shirts before using them, but I decided to see if it might work just fine without washing them. The result was that the whole rug shrank a bit. I saw that as a benefit actually it made the rug nice and dense. My rug shrank by 2 inches on the short side and five inches on the long side. And because I used the same new unwashed t-shirts fabric through the rug, it shrank evenly. I think the key is to use all new unwashed t-shirts or all secondhand washed t-shirts if you want it to shrink evenly and continue to lie flat.

### Make a Loom

Next you need a loom. I have a super cool loom that my husband made for me in 2015. He had not done a lot of carpentry, but he loved making this loom. It's called a Story Loom and it was designed by Susan Barrett Merrill and her husband Richard Merrill from Weaving a Life [<http://www.weavingalife.com/tools-downloads/#downloadstoryloomplans>]. They sell the pattern on their website. My husband built it at our local community wood shop where you can pay \$10 and get access to all these huge tools that we could never afford for three hours. Plus there is a woodshop supervisor who can lend their expertise if it's not too busy. But the good news is that you don't have to build a huge wooden loom to weave a rug for your floor. You can go to a thrift shop and buy a big picture frame.

I recommend a wonderful video series by Annabel Wrigley that she made with CreativeBug. These are available for free on Youtube. Video 1 is about setting up your loom - <https://youtu.be/26y73FuFuJ8>. Annabel is a fiber artist who lives right here in Virginia near me. She makes her loom by removing the canvas from painting canvas. When you see her video, you'll see that you can make a loom from any large rectangular or square wooden frame. There are also of course commercially available looms.

## Put the Warp on the Loom

Next you put the warp on your loom. Here's the some important weaving lingo jargon. The threads that go up and down are called the warp. The threads that go side-to-side back-and-forth are called the weft. You can see a video on my social media where I am putting on my recycled t-shirt warp in a time lapse video so it looks like I'm doing it a super speed [<https://www.instagram.com/p/CJjQ8HnLV/>]. The main reason why I can put in the warp so fast is because my husband put screws at the top and bottom of my loom where I can quickly wrap the warp threads. However, if you are using a wooden frame and you don't want to add screws or nails along the top and bottom, you can also just tie off the threads at the top and bottom. That's what my mom did when she did her first weaving (photos in August 2016 album). If you are wondering how much t-shirt yarn it takes to make a warp, I can tell you that it took two XXL t-shirts or three Large t-shirts worth of yarn to make my warp for a rug that is about 2 feet by 3 feet.

## Start Weaving

Next you are going to start weaving back and forth. I do this by just picking up every second string with my fingers. I pick up maybe six or eight strings and then pass my ball of t-shirt yarn under those threads. When you pull out every second string, the gap that you create is called the "shed." I loosely place the yarn in the shed and continue across the row. I then use my fingers and a small stick to push the yarn down flat.

There are some tricks to this part. The biggest challenge with a rug like this is that you pull too tightly on the yarn when you make the turn to do the next row. Then your rug starts getting skinnier and skinnier. It is no longer a rectangle. The way I avoid this is that I tie a skinny dowel to my two outer warp threads on each side of the rug. When I finish a row, I actually wrap my t-shirt yarn around that dowel. That helps me keep the rug rectangular. Another tip is to keep a tape measure nearby and to measure your rug often to make sure it's not getting skinnier. This is a skill that takes practice. I'm still working on it. But to summarize, do not pull your yarn too tight when you finish one row and start the next.

The next trick is called bubbling. When you put in your weft thread, you don't bring it straight across. It needs to have some slack. You place the yarn in an arcing motion like a rainbow. Then you push it down with all that extra weft in there. If you don't bubble or put in that extra weft, that will also cause your rug to get skinnier and skinnier.

Now you might be wondering – do I really have to pick up every second thread one at a time by hand? Isn't there some kind of tool that will make it go faster? And the answer is yes of course there is! These systems are called shed systems because as I mentioned earlier, that space which is created when you pull out every second thread is called a shed.

There are so many kinds of shed systems – I will link to a blog about it [<https://www.mirrixlooms.com/blogs/mirrix-blog/what-is-a-shedding-device>]. The simplest is called a "rotating heddle bar." When you turn the bar in one direction, it open the first shed. And then when you rotate it again, it opens the second shed. If you search on Etsy, you'll see many rotating heddle bars for sale in all different sizes and not very expensive – like \$15-\$25.

There are also other kinds of looms that are much more involved. This method of weaving on a simple frame is called tapestry weaving, and it requires the least amount of equipment. I also have a floor loom where you step on pedals on the floor and then it opens up the shed for you. But setting up the warp on the floor loom takes me at least 2-3 hours, not 10 minutes. The reason it takes so long is because I have to feed each warp thread through these tiny items called heddles, which lift and lower the threads. My heddles are actually too small for my t-shirt yarn to fit. I can make a t-shirt rug where the warp is made from regular thread, but I wanted the warp and weft threads to be the same in my rug. I may experiment with the other method but I think this will be a much stronger rug.

If you want to have a pattern in your rug, it is more complicated than if you just weave with all one color. I recommend watching Annabel Wrigley's video Part 4 to learn how to add a pattern to your rug [<https://youtu.be/dh098NumM8A>].

One way that people plan their pattern in advance is to draw it on a large piece of paper and then hang that paper because the warp. The lines of the pattern are visible through the warp, and that can help you remember when you need to change colors [<https://youtu.be/mS0uohJSjDA>]. Or another technique is to cut the shape from a piece of paper.

You weave the paper into the spot where you want the shape to appear, and then weave around it. To see what I mean, I'll link to a video in the show notes by Spruce and Linen [<https://youtu.be/ezgAbPTwGbo>].

## Finish Weaving

Once my rug was a good size, the way that I finished it was to snip every second warp loop and tie them off with a double knot. I did that along the top and along the bottom. Then I went back and did every second loop again and onwards until all the warp threads were tied off. The t-shirt yarn made a cute fringe. I then washed and dried my rug. That's one reason why these rugs are so practical. Not only do they use up extra t-shirts but they are easily washed.

## Thank you!

Thank you for listening! If you are looking for additional inspiration, I have talked about weaving and creative reuse of t-shirts in at least three past Trashmagination episodes:

- Episode 3 – weaving plastic bags [<https://trashmagination.com/podcast-3-creative-reuse-lessons-from-weaving-plastic-bags/>]
- Episode 13 – trash fashion where I showed the dresses I made by weaving plastic bags on my tapestry loom [<https://trashmagination.com/trash-fashion/>]
- Episode 41 – creative reuse of t-shirts [<https://trashmagination.com/t-shirts/>].

I also wrote a series of blogs when I was first learning how to use a floor loom, and those are very popular on my website. One of the first things I wove on my floor loom was tie dyed t-shirts - <https://trashmagination.com/first-weavings-on-my-floor-loom/>.

Let me know if you have ever woven a recycled t-shirt rug at [trashmagination@gmail.com](mailto:trashmagination@gmail.com). Until next time, may you see recycled t-shirts as a source of woven rugs in your life!