



Trashmagination Podcast #124 – Plastic Laundry or Cooking Oil Tubs

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown. Today's episode is about the creative reuse of large plastic tubs used for laundry detergent or cooking oil. These are made from extremely sturdy thick plastic with lids that screw on tightly. These are mostly type 2 Plastic or HDPE (High-Density Polyethylene). Let's start with easy ideas that you can do at home, then move on to more crafty uses and finally end with the mind-blowing projects done by artists around the world.

But first - it is great if we can all avoid purchasing products that come in this type of plastic tub. There is a trend of zero-waste stores offering soap, oil and other heavy liquid products in bulk so you can refill your own container. This has always been the case, but it can be difficult to find these stores. I'm grateful that more small business owners are opening these stores [<https://practicallyzerowaste.ca/064-%e2%80%a2-starting-a-zero-waste-shop/>].

Reusing at Home

Let's start with what you can do at home, and there are pictures of these projects on the Trashmagination Pinterest board which I will link in the show notes [<https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/plastic-laundry-tubs/>].

First, since these tubs are designed to hold liquid, they make great storage containers for items such as leftover paint. Some of them have a little spout so you can set it up in your laundry room and pour out just what you need, and that kind makes a wonderful hand-washing station that you can take with you to outdoor activities. As a Scout leader, one of the activities we often do to teach Scouts to teach knots is to make a hand-washing station, and these tubs can be a great addition to that activity. Or if you are playing with bubbles outside at a birthday party, you could make it into a bubble liquid refill station.

You can also drill holes into the lid of these containers to make them into a great watering can for plants.

These containers are also great to store substances that come in a plastic bag, but which tend to spill out of the bag once the bag is opened. I'm thinking about sand, ice melting crystals or organic gardening supplies for example.

Another great use for these tubs is to fill them with water or sand and use them as weights. You can use them for your exercise routine or to help weigh down a tent or tarp on a windy day.

If you cut off the top section of these containers but leave the handle on, they become a useful scoop or bucket. You could bring it to the beach instead of buying a new plastic bucket, or you could use them to scoop feed for animals. You can play a game of catch with two of these containers where you try to toss a small ball from scoop to scoop.

Crafts from Plastic Tubs – Stickers and Paint Only

Next, let's talk about crafts you can make from these plastic tubs. One creative reuse idea is to make a large geocache. When my kids were ages 5-10, we spent a lot of time looking for geocaches, which are like treasure chests hidden all over the world. People put little toys in them and then put the latitude and longitude up on the website geocaching.com. It's all free and a great way to help add whimsy to your life. There is a Scout merit badge for Geocaching as well. Tide Pod laundry tubs make good geocaches because they are waterproof with an easy to open lid.

Tide Pod containers can also be handy to make holiday decorations because they are round. They come in orange, yellow and white.

- The orange ones make a great pumpkin [<https://www.hometalk.com/10403200/tide-pod-pumpkins>]. You can stick stickers on the container for the facial features of the pumpkin or carefully cut them out with a craft knife so a light can shine through. But I would not suggest you use these to hand out or gather Halloween candy because you don't want kids to associate the Tide Pod containers with candy.
- The white ones make a great snowman head or you can add bunny ears to make a bunny head [<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/cb/38/f8/cb38f8f7554515a263b2f8e8083d5120.jpg>]. I even saw that someone stacked three white containers on top of each other to make a full snowman [<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/20/ef/27/20ef27e86c980e8c562a4d90b8b79f1d.jpg>].
- The yellow ones make great emoji faces or Lego heads [<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/e7/68/a5/e768a5c188fb96639f4a600d350e9e80.jpg>].

Another type of craft to make with laundry tubs are masks. One artist made a project which he called Tiki Statues, which were a series of masks made from plastic jugs [<https://sawsonskates.com/coffee-container-tiki-statues/>]. He made his from coffee containers which have a similar dense plastic with a handle. Lots of artists make masks from plastic jugs because the hole where the liquid pours out looks like a mouth in the shape of an O and the handle makes a great nose. Since laundry tubs come in so many shapes, you can make masks in lots of shapes.

Cutting, Melting and Riveting

Next I want to talk about crafts that involve more intensive manipulation of plastic jugs – where you will be cutting, melting or riveting together the plastic jugs. As you can imagine, it is not easy to cut these containers. The plastic is designed to be very strong so liquids do not spill.

It does vary from product to product. Some are easier to cut. For example, if you have a plastic jug with a handle that is relatively easy for you to cut with strong scissors, you could check out this tutorial showing how to make a elephant craft. The handle on the side forms the elephant's trunk [<https://youtu.be/GiGKH9-F4us>]. This involves cutting off the bottom of the container so the handle forms the elephant's trunk. In another elephant tutorial, they show how to shape a laundry tub to make a cute plant container that looks like an elephant [<https://youtu.be/77fFD3KVbvc>].

Many years ago, I attended an Earth Day festival where I purchased a bracelet made from laundry tubs and gift cards. The way the artist made it, she said she used punches like you might use to cut leather, and she punched out plastic circles. Then she drilled a small hole in each circle, added an O-ring and attached it to the bracelet. The result looks like a charm bracelet where all the charms are made from colorful plastic circles. I'll post photos of the bracelet but I have long since lost the name of the artist who made it unfortunately. Later I tried to do what she said but I could not consistently cut a nice circle from laundry tubs. I am guessing her punches were nicer quality than mine.

And while I was discouraged using punches to cut plastic jugs, I have had more luck with techniques I learned from the book [Fantastic Recycled Plastic](https://www.amazon.com/Fantastic-Recycled-Plastic-Creations-Imagination/dp/1600593429/ref=sr_1_1) by David and Robin Edgar [https://www.amazon.com/Fantastic-Recycled-Plastic-Creations-Imagination/dp/1600593429/ref=sr_1_1]. David Edgar had been sculpting with steel for many decades when he started sculpting with plastic tubs. Most of his designs were inspired by fish, and so he started a series which he called Plastiquarium [<http://www.plastiquarium.com/>]. He has shared tutorials for how to make fish shapes and many other fun items from plastic tubs in his book. Plus I found one Youtube video where he shows his techniques which I will put in the show notes [<https://youtu.be/YOv4PSNvswg>]. Some of the key points I learned from David was how a heat gun is a really helpful tool when sculpting with plastic. I have never used a heat gun but it is a tool that looks like a drill but blows very hot air out one end. Another important point about making items with plastic tubs is that the crafts will hold together longer if you connect the components with metal rivets rather than glue. You can also use a drill to drill holes where you can connect components with metal wire or rope.

Artist Who Creatively Reuse Plastic Tub

Aurora Robson is an artist I have mentioned many times before in my podcast because I am a huge fan. Many of her sculptures are made from plastic and like David Edgar, she uses metal rivets to hold the pieces together. In the show

notes, I'll share a video where she talks about making one of my favorite sculptures called Kamilo in Hawaii from plastic picked up from the beaches [<https://youtu.be/zEaxn05uOZk>]. She made that sculptures in collaboration with students. She tied some parts of the sculpture together with fishing rope also recovered from the ocean, and built the armature for the sculpture from plastic crates that had washed ashore.

Another artist inspired by the plastic that washes up on the beaches of Hawaii is Kat Crabill [CRAY-bill] from Nurdle in the Rough Jewelry [<https://nurdleinthorough.com/pages/about>]. A nurdle is a tiny nugget of plastic. They are shipped all over the world to be molded into various forms, but sometimes a ship loses a container of nurdles and they spill into the sea. They look like fish eggs so many creatures eat them. On some beaches, it seems like half the beach is made from sand and rocks and half is made from nurdles. You can imagine how difficult it is to clean those beaches. Anyhow, Kat has invented a way of creatively reusing heavy plastic tubs. She is a metalsmith, so she makes the base of jewelry pieces from fine metals and then she cuts and buffs the plastic down into shapes that look like gemstones. Since these pieces of plastic sometimes spend years at sea, they are covered in lines from their long journey. Using her ingenious technique, these chunks of plastic end up looking nothing like an old plastic tub.

- <https://www.instagram.com/nurdleinthorough/>,
- <https://youtu.be/1DZ6rKDX9uY>

The last artist I'll mention who works with plastic tubs is Serge Attukwei Clottey [a-TOOK-way CLAW-tea]. Serge is from Ghana and his work is about the migration of people and objects. Serge does many types of art but his signature technique is to cut up thick plastic tubs into squares, then drill holes in them and then connect them with wires into giant tapestries. These tubs are called "Kufour gallons" in Ghana. They are imported from Europe containing cooking oil. Once the oil is used up, people use them to carry water and even gasoline. They are essential for life during times of scarcity. Since his work focuses on using these gallons, Serge invented the term Afrogallonism, which he defines as "an artistic concept to explore the relationship between the prevalence of the yellow oil gallons in regards to consumption and necessity in the life of the modern African."

Most of these tubs are bright yellow. The yellow plastic squares have great variation of color depending on what happened to the plastic tub.

Serge tackles many political topics with his artwork. He wanted to address questions of gender roles after his mother died. In his tribe's tradition, once someone's mother has passed away, her possessions go to her daughters a year after her death. But Serge was his mother's only child. He challenged the tradition and asked to receive her items. He and his team of artists wears women's clothing when they collect materials to encourage conversation about gender roles.

In another performance piece, Serge wanted to make a statement about land ownership in his community. His family was promised a certain area of land many generations ago, but there is no legal documentation. In one of his performances, his team took his giant yellow tapestries made from plastic gallons and spread them all around the area where his family lives, covering all the roads between the buildings like a yellow brick road. The tapestries are strong enough that people can walk on them. He also hosts an annual festival where they line the roads and buildings with the tapestries. Serge has taken this material and made it part of his community's culture and now his work is also being purchased and displayed all around the world, such as a huge piece at Facebook headquarters.

- <https://www.afrogallonism.com/>
- <https://www.instagram.com/afrogallonism/>
- https://youtu.be/gMu0iC7_dLk
- <https://youtu.be/iv6O6Phxphc> - very informative lecture

Thank you!

Thank you for listening! I'll remind you that my fluffy rug course for recycling t-shirts is still available on my website and some of my fluffy rugs are also available for sale. Until next time, may you see plastic tubs as a source of art in your life!