



Trashmagination Podcast #51 – Plastic Clamshell Packaging / Berry Baskets

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

This week's episode is about plastic clamshell packaging. This packaging is made from plastic with a hinge. Sometimes the clamshell can be easily opened and closed, such as with berry packaging. Sometimes the packaging is thermoformed, meaning the packaging is fused by heat, often molded to the contours of the product. Today we'll talk about why it's so confusing whether you can recycle this type of packaging, and what you can do with clamshell packaging if it's not recycled in your area (which it probably is not).

Problems with Plastic Clamshell Packaging

From the product seller's perspective, this packaging is inexpensive and protects the product in transport. However, from the customer's perspective, this packaging is annoying. It's difficult to open, and once you open it, you feel like you can't return the product because you shredded the packaging. The worst part is that this packaging is not recyclable in many places. Even if they are made with a type of plastic that is typically recycled in your municipality, the machines that sort the plastic are often designed to handle a certain shape of plastic like a bottle. These random shapes of plastic gum up the process and become contamination, increasing the costs of recycling. You might have heard that companies in China are starting to refuse recycled materials from North America because of high levels of contaminated plastic [<http://mediaroom.wm.com/the-dangers-of-wishcycling/>]. According to the company Waste Management, 25 percent of items put in recycling bin are not correct and lead to contamination.

Perhaps you have heard the term "wishcycling." This is when people put items in their recycling bin that they are not sure are accepted by their local recycling program, but they just put the item in there without confirming it is accepted. The worst types of recycling contamination are those which fall through the recycling sorting machinery and cause it to break such as plastic bags, hoses, tarps, chains and wires. There is also a problem with small metal items like nuts, bolts and batteries. You have heard the story about throwing a wrench in the machinery, right? I have heard that batteries thrown in recycling causes fires in recycling trucks. As a general rule, most recycling facilities cannot deal with anything smaller than your fist [<http://www1.mwco.org/dep/gorecycle/ads.html>].

Wishcycling is so common because it's not clear what is recyclable in each place. For example, in my county, the website says "The only types of plastics that are required to be recycled are plastic bottles and jugs. Recycling any additional plastics is entirely voluntary. Ask your trash hauler for specific guidance. Many of them are now collecting additional plastics such as yogurt containers and margarine tubs – even pill bottles."

I don't know my trash hauler and I have no idea how to find out. As a result, I don't put any plastics in my recycling bin except bottles and jugs. I take my type 5 plastic to Whole Foods where they have a Gimme5 program with Preserve [<https://www.preserveproducts.com/recycle/programs/gimme-5-program-171>]. Any other plastic I try to avoid or to creatively reuse, but some goes in the trash.

Creative Reuse Ideas for Plastic Clamshell Packaging

Let's talk about ideas on how to creatively reuse plastic clamshell packaging. I'll focus berry basket packaging. The ideas are gathered on a Pinterest board. [<https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/clamshell-containers/>].

The best way to creatively reuse this packaging is to find a farmer who will reuse it or who doesn't use this packaging. Some farmers put the packaging around individual pieces of fruit or vegetables while they are still on the tree or growing on the ground. They do this to protect the fruit and vegetables from squirrels and birds. If you have tried this technique, can you let me know if it works well for you?

Some people reuse this packaging as a mini-greenhouse to start plants. Sometimes they leave the lid on to make it more humid like an actual greenhouse. Other people remove the lid and put it underneath.

Here's one benefit of this packaging that you maybe didn't know. You can wash the berries right in the packaging and they will drain like mini-colanders. Likewise, you can put items like bath toys in these containers so they drain.

Craft Ideas

The best craft storage idea was from a website called Sew Many Ways – it was to hold ribbon spools [<http://sewmanyways.blogspot.com/2013/07/thrifty-thursdayribbon-storage.html>]. You can see the ribbons through the packaging and pull out the ribbon through the holes that already exist in the packaging. This website also suggested putting your yarn in the containers and just feeding out the end that you need to keep the yarn from getting tangled.

The way that I most often creatively reuse this packaging is to insert it inside my crafts in order to give them more form. The best example is my TrashAnatomy shark. This is an anatomy model showing the inside of a shark made from a 2 liter soda bottle [<https://trashmagination.com/20-shark-anatomy-model-from-recycled-plastic/>]. Clamshell packaging is located inside the shark's fin and tail. I cut the packaging into the right shape and cover it with other materials. The clamshell packaging helps the shark's fin and tail stand up straight.

The most common craft idea for this type of packaging is to make Shrinky Dinks. This was a popular craft when I was a kid. Little did we know that it was just type 6 plastic which is a commonly used plastic in these clamshell packaging. To do this art, you cut out the flat pieces from the package. You scuff one side with sandpaper and then draw on the scuffed side with permanent markers. You can see through the plastic so you can trace any images you want. You punch a hole in the piece with a regular hole punch before shrinking it if you want to hang up your finished art. Then you bake it in a 325 degree oven for only a few minutes and it's done.

Here's an idea that combines the Shrinky Dink process with leftover bubble wrap from Parents magazine. First make fish from the clamshell containers. Then attach a line of bubbles from the bubble wrap to the fish's mouth. Then it will float in a clear container of water [<https://www.parents.com/fun/arts-crafts/kid/make-floating-faux-fish/?slideId=32079>].

Another popular craft involves cutting the plastic into shapes, punching a hole and then melting it to make colorful shapes for earrings [<http://www.poppyjuicelivingwellforless.com/2012/03/jewelry-made-from-recycled-plastic.html>]. This can be done with any type of plastic, not only clamshells. I saw a bracelet made from many square-shaped panels connected with small metal o-rings [<http://www.rustandsunshine.com/2012/04/shrinky-bracelet.html>].

Other craft ideas involve painting the containers or weaving ribbons through the openings to make decorative containers:

- Pirate's chest for a pirate-themed birthday [<http://www.theclassroomcreative.com/2014/06/pirate-treasure-chest-craft/>]
- "May Day baskets" by weaving ribbons through the sides of the packaging [<http://munofore.com/wp/2016/04/kids-craft-strawberry-basket-craft-may/>]
- Painted baskets, which look like 3-D gift wrap [<http://www.auntpeaches.com/2012/05/friday-flowers-kaleidoscopic-berry.html>]

I saw a teacher gift made from a recycled clamshell where the tag said “I couldn’t have picked a better teacher” and the container was filled with clean fruit [<https://dixiedelightsonline.com/2012/04/i-couldnt-have-picked.html>]. Teachers get a lot of sweets and I have heard from my friends who are teachers that healthy options are often much appreciated. If you really want to put baked goods, you could put strawberry muffins or chocolate covered strawberries.

Avoid Plastic Clamshell Packaging

A great way to avoid berry packaging is to get berries from a farmer’s market or U-Pick. Typically they are more than happy to pour the berries into your container. Or when you are getting take-out, plan on bringing your own container as much as possible. Slowly we are teaching companies that we want to avoid packaging every time we ask them to put the food in our own container.

When shopping, look for options which don’t involve this packaging. Reward companies that are using more recyclable packaging or none at all. A lot of items are wrapped in this packaging just so they can put more branding around the package, but it is not protecting anything at all. Why should a metal screwdriver be put in plastic packaging?

Thank you!

Thank you for listening! I would love to hear how you creatively reused plastic clamshell packaging at trashmagination@gmail.com.

If you live in northern Virginia, this is a reminder that my woven tree art is on display at the Broadlands Nature Center in Ashburn for one more week until June 30.

Until next time – may you see clamshell plastic packaging and berry baskets as a source of art in your life!