



## Trashmagination Podcast #67 – Bicycle Inner Tubes or Tyre Tubes

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

In today's episode, we're going to talk about creative reuse of inner tubes. In the UK, I have heard these are sometimes called tyre tubes with the word tire spelled with "Y". But they are the rubber tubes found inside bicycle wheels.

Like wine corks and milk jugs, inner tubes are a perfect material for creative reuse because they can be transformed into SO many things. When you cut or sew it, it behaves a lot like leather. That's why it's sometimes called "vegan leather." Inner tubes are made from synthetic rubber, meaning that they are not made from rubber tapped from trees, but they are manufactured from petroleum. I talked about this in my episode about chewing gum [<https://trashmagination.com/chewing-gum-wrapper-creative-reuse/>] because the same material is involved in both inner tubes and most chewing gum.

If you have a pile of inner tubes that no longer hold air, the question is – where can you bring them so they can be made into new items? It is possible to recycle them, but as you can imagine, it would take a lot of energy to melt and reform them into new items, so most municipalities do not offer a recycling program for inner tubes. In Boulder, Colorado, I visited a place called the Center for Hard-to-Recycle Materials or CHARM and they did collect inner tubes. But they were not melting them down. They were diverting them to artisans who would make them into items like what I'll describe in this episode. For example, down the road from CHARM is a company named Green Guru which I also visited and they make awesome messenger bags from recycled inner tubes.

So today I'll share ideas for inner tube recycling projects that involve sewing, and others that don't involve sewing, and then some really out there designs by talented artists. As always, I made a great Trashmagination Pinterest board where you can go see photos of these ideas [<https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/inner-tubes-and-other-hoses/>].

### Sewing Inner Tubes – My Bracelet or Cuff Project

I had never made anything from inner tubes but I had saved three punctured inner tubes from when I was a daily bicycle commuter. My first project was a bracelet or cuff. As you know if you listened to past episodes, I perform with a taiko or Japanese drumming group, and many taiko groups wear dramatic-looking cuffs at performances. My group has not done that, but I thought it would be fun to try making one.

Many artisans make inner tube bracelets, necklaces and other jewelry by cutting cool designs directly into the inner tube with an Exacto knife. I didn't love the idea of the rubber being up against my skin, so I made a design where I sewed the inner tube to a rectangle of fabric. First I punched a design into the inner tube with leather punches so the colorful red fabric would show through. I used a snap fastener to hold it on my wrist.

This project gave me a lot of insight into the challenges of sewing inner tubes. The main one is that inner tubes do not easily feed through my sewing machine. I found a great blog called Bicitoro by Jessie Kwak [<http://www.bicitoro.com/bike-craft-tutorials/inner-tube-tutorial-series/>]. She hasn't updated this blog lately but it is a wonderful resource with step-by-step tutorials. The big takeaway is that if I wanted to sew a lot of inner tube items, I should invest in something called a Teflon presser foot and titanium sewing needles. For those of you who don't use a sewing machine, the presser foot is part of the machine that holds the fabric down as you sew. With regular fabrics, the fabric is slippery enough to feed through evenly. But unfortunately, inner tubes get stuck against a regular presser foot.

There is also a more advanced type of presser foot called a walking foot which helps move fabric evenly through your machine. I have used one on my machine for 20 years and last week it fell apart as I was sewing. So I need to go get a new walking foot and a Teflon presser foot before I can do a lot of inner tube sewing projects. For my cuff project, the way I made it work was to put a thin piece of plastic right beside my machine's needle which mostly covered up the inner tube and allowed it to slide through, but it slowed down the process to keep moving the plastic in place and it's not a long-term solution.

Jessie shared other helpful tips for working with inner tubes that helped me. She said that when you cut open the inner tube to make it into a flat piece, you will find they contain a white powder which is talcum powder. So it's a good idea to cut the tubes over a garbage can and not over your sewing table where it will make a mess.

Another reason why I hesitated to creatively reuse inner tubes in the past was because I am sensitive to smells, and I don't like the rubber smell. Jessie says the smell can be reduced if you wash the inner tubes with soap and I did find it helped. On other online crafting forums, people suggested putting your inner tubes in the sun which increases the off-gassing of the smell. They also suggested wiping the tubes with vinegar.

## **Creative Reuse Project Ideas for Inner Tubes that Involve Sewing**

There are so many artisans who make items from recycled inner tubes. It behaves like waterproof leather, so it makes very hardy bags. Some bags are designed to attach to bicycles, which is a nice touch because bicyclists will tend to value a bike bag made from recycled inner tubes. My favorite designs attach to the metal tube that connects the handle bars to your saddle or bike seat, also called the "top tube" and others connect to a rack you house behind the seat [<http://www.bicitoro.com/tutorial-oilcloth-inner-tube-shopping-pannier/>].

Some of my favorite inner tube projects are made by a Peruvian company called Rika who makes wallets, bags, baskets and even animal sculptures from recycled inner tubes [<http://rika.pe/en/>]. Their website has not been updated since 2012 so I don't think you can buy their designs, but if check it out for inspiration.

If you don't want to sew inner tubes, there are lots of places to buy inner tube bags and wallets. Check out Etsy or the website Kuttlefish which is like Etsy but only features items made from recycled materials. On Kuttlefish I found hundreds of inner tube bags and even one that carries beer bottles on your bicycle. I also recommend a French company called Fantome which weaves inner tubes and wicker to make baskets [<http://www.maison-fantome.fr/>].

Another popular item that people make from inner tubes are belts, and I'll link to Bicitoro's tutorial on how to do that [<http://www.bicitoro.com/tutorial-reflective-recycled-inner-tube-belt/>]. She adds reflective tape to her belt which is great for a cyclist who rides at night, but you can also make a belt without the tape for regular use.

## **Creative Reuse Project Ideas for Inner Tubes that DON'T Involve Sewing**

While my bracelet or cuff design did involve sewing, many designs of inner tube jewelry do not require sewing. Most involve just cutting the inner tube into shapes and adding a snap or earring hook. Search the hashtag #innertubejewelry on Instagram and you'll see thousands of ideas. I really like the work done by ArtCycle Bali [<https://www.artcyclebali.net/>] who also offer workshops with kids in Bali.

If you already do leatherwork, you can likely use the same tools. I would love to hear from anyone who has worked with leather and inner tubes about how inter-changeable they are in terms of tools.

In terms of other creative reuse projects that don't involve sewing, I found great videos by bicycling enthusiasts showing how they creatively reuse inner tubes when fixing or storing their bicycles. For example, they wrap inner tubes around the tubes of their bike to protect the paintwork from flying debris for example. Bicitoro made a mud flap from an inner tube which is a great idea for bicycle commuters especially [<http://www.bicitoro.com/tutorial-reflective-recycled-inner-tube-mudflap/>].

- Seth's inner tube hacks - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9RSdsMLWRs>

- Global Cycling Network - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3L\\_MPUd07jc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3L_MPUd07jc)

Here are five non-sewing projects from inner tubes to help around the house:

1. Garbage bag holder – If your garbage bag tends to fall down inside your can, an inner tube around the top keeps the bag in place.
2. Exercise resistance band – This idea I'm particularly excited about because I have to lead my drumming group's warm-up soon, and it's fun to mix it up, but buying exercise bands for everyone is expensive. So I'm hoping to get some inner tubes for the group.
3. Plant Hanger – Bicitoro uses macramé techniques to tie a cool plant hanger & I'll link to that tutorial [<http://www.bicitoro.com/tutorial-inner-tube-plant-hanger/>].
4. Swing or bench – The blog called The Naughty Mommy shows how she made a platform swing for kids by putting together some PVC pipes in a square and then weaving a platform from inner tubes. I'll put the video in the show notes. <http://thenaughtymommy.com/diy-platform-swing/> - <https://youtu.be/7BZJBV6699w>
5. Rubber bands, big and small – If you need small rubber bands, you can cut inner tubes into small circles. If you need a really big one, you can use the whole thing as a giant rubber band. For example, we use an inner tube to keep large boxes closed during transportation.

Finally, here's an idea related to education. It is challenging for some kids to sit at a desk for a long time. There is an organization called Bouncy Bands which sells a product which looks like an inner tube but fancier, and it is tied across the legs of the desk at the height of the feet [<http://bouncybands.com/>]. The students can then push against the band during school so they get some movement while working at their desks. I would be curious whether any teachers have tried this product and whether recycled inner tubes might do the trick?

## Artists Who Make Items from Recycled Inner Tubes

The last topic for today is about artists who incorporate recycled inner tubes into their work. In the past I talked about trash fashion, which is clothing designed from recycled materials. It's not for practical everyday use but more for the fun of design. One show that features trash fashion is called World of Wearable Art [<https://www.worldofwearableart.com/>]. Quite a few designs over the years in that show have been made from recycled inner tubes, but I'm going to fangirl over one designer in particular named Grace Duval. Grace has made many inner tube dress designs and won awards in the World of Wearable Art show [<https://www.graceduval.com/wearable-art>]. If you want to see how far you can take inner tubes, check out her site.

Another way artists incorporate inner tubes into their work is in furniture design. Nir Ohayon makes panels with abstract shapes covered with inner tubes, as well as furniture made from inflated inner tubes. The inflated furniture looks like giant ants. You can see examples on the Trashmagination Pinterest board for this episode [<https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/inner-tubes-and-other-hoses/>].

## Thank you!

Thank you for listening! I would love to hear what you think about creative reuse of inner tubes at [trashmagination@gmail.com](mailto:trashmagination@gmail.com). Until next time – may you see inner tubes as a source of art in your life!