

Activity: Design Goal: Psychological/Emotional Populations: All

## TH Activity Plan – Upcycling Plastic Containers

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### Materials

Plastic containers all shapes

Plants, soil, trowels

Scissors, markers, twine,  
wire, paint, sandpaper

Gloves, wipes



**ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION:** Participants will recycle and repurpose a variety of plastic containers for personal or program/garden use. The theme of recycling will be prominent in the TH session.

### THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

**Cognitive/Intellectual:** Create or replicate repurposed items from discarded plastic containers

**Physical:** Manipulate plastic materials by cutting, punching holes, painting

**Psychological/Emotional:** Explore sense of renewal & growth metaphors; use community activity as mechanism for emotional well-being

**Sensory:** Enhance sensory stimulation with visual & tactile inputs

**Social:** Support efforts for environmentally friendly practices; reduce plastic garbage; sustain community initiatives of recycling, reducing & re-using plastic items

### STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Accumulate plastic containers.
2. Facilitator begins session by leading a discussion about upcycling, specifically upcycling plastic containers. The group brainstorms ideas for re-using assorted plastic containers gathered in the work area.
3. Facilitator sets out group-appropriate work tools (scissors, awl, twine, twist ties, wire). Participants upcycle containers into other items like plant centerpieces, containers for transplanting tender perennials, plastic bottle planters, bird feeders, plastic spoon dragonflies, water bottle bottom flowers & water bottle wind spirals. Facilitator may choose a specific purpose/activity/product to suit the needs of the participants and the type of available containers.
4. Upon completion, the upcycled items are admired by the group. Discussion of upcycling plastic into repurposed items as a metaphor for human experiences can address life's challenges.
5. An additional goal doing a community service project upcycling plastic containers into usable items at schools, social service agencies, or retirement facilities can be integrated into session.

### APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS:

The theme of recycling can resonate with most populations. In particular, populations who have experienced adversity and are working towards second chances or new vocational paths, people who are incarcerated or managing addictions can relate to new chances, renewal and making something from very little. Finding meaning or repurposing items can be symbolic for many reasons on emotional, personal, intellectual and community levels.

**SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS:** Avoid containers that may have been used for toxic, poisonous ingredients or that may still contain spoiled food/pathogens. All containers should be washed thoroughly before use. Do not use

cracked, broken or sharp-edged containers. Some tools may not be appropriate for some populations. Take care with sharp edges when cutting plastic or after it is cut – sandpaper can smooth the edges.

**NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:** All types of plastic containers can be upcycled and useful for TH programming. These include small and large yogurt containers for growing plants (add drainage holes). Clear plastic cut-fruit half-bowl containers from grocery stores are excellent for creating centerpieces with rye grass, mixed plantings or seasonal themed plantings. Containers of all sizes can be used for storage at a program’s worksite or garden or decorated and taken home by participants as pencil or straw holders. Gallon plastic pails (ice cream and plant containers) have been used as workshop or classroom storage for gathering papers or supplies - add twine handles. Plastic ketchup bottles and gallon milk jugs can be made into bird feeders. Discarded plastic plant containers can be used as fillers for large garden planters to reduce soil volume.

Children and youth including at-risk youth enjoy the creative elements this TH activity offers. In recent years, as environmental projects, some schools have gathered and upcycled plastic containers used on site, collectively making large art pieces or functional garden furniture from plastic bottles, cups and cutlery. Similarly, the University of Minnesota Extension’s [4-H Plastic Sculpture Challenge](#) seeks to increase awareness about environmental impact and social change using single-use plastics, integrating educational and outdoor activities into multi-faceted school-wide projects (2023).

**REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:**

Fleming, L. & Morgan, S. (2021). Plant activities using garden materials for upcycling. *Digging In*, 7(3).  
Teaching Expertise. (2023). 35 Recycled art projects for middle school.  
<https://www.teachingexpertise.com/classroom-ideas/recycled-art-projects-for-middle-school/>  
University of Minnesota. (2023). 4-H Plastic Sculpture Challenge.  
<https://extension.umn.edu/4-h-showcase-events/4-h-plastic-sculpture-challenge>



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TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2023.