

What Is Upcycling?

You've probably heard the word "upcycling" thrown around a lot lately. But upcycling is more than a buzzword, it's a practice that helps reduce the amount of waste that ends up in our already overburdened landfills.



So what is it exactly? Upcycling is when you take something that's no longer being used and alter it in some way to give it a new life and purpose. When you upcycle an object, you're adding to (or at least maintaining) its value. Essentially, upcycling is making treasure out of trash.

Upcycling isn't a new method for reclaiming old materials, but it has taken on new life in the past 10-15 years. Its popularity has risen along with the increased rates of recycling. The economic downturn of 2008 also helped people realize the importance of reusing discarded objects. Its boost in popularity can even be tracked through sites like Pinterest and Etsy, where [usage of the hashtag "upcycled" increased 275%](#) in just one year, from 2010 to 2011.

How is upcycling different from recycling?

Both recycling and upcycling take old objects to make new ones, but the difference is in how that's accomplished. Recycling is the process of taking an item, breaking it down to its basic elements, then using those elements to create a new object. This process requires a considerable amount of energy (and money) to achieve.

It's also not a perfect system. Some materials are recycled in a closed loop, where components are used to make the same item they came from, like a used glass bottle becoming a new glass bottle. But the quality of other materials, like plastic, doesn't hold

up quite as well and degrades over time. That means more of the material will need to be created to replace what was lost in processing.

With upcycling, nothing is lost. Instead of breaking something down through a complicated and expensive process, upcycling adds to the object to increase its value and give it new life.

What is the impact of upcycling?

In a culture that encourages consumption, many of us have fallen into the trap of tossing things too quickly then buying a replacement just because it's convenient. But we all know that the convenient choice often turns out to be disastrous for our planet.

The tendency to toss has cost us dearly – the average American produces [1,704 pounds of garbage](#) every year. That's three times the global average! Looking at numbers worldwide, more than 2.3 billion tons of municipal solid waste is generated every year – the equivalent of 822,000 Olympic-sized swimming pools. And with the global population and standard of living increasing, that amount is expected to keep climbing.

All of this waste is terrible for the environment. The majority of the things we throw out [end up in a landfill](#). While we might like to think that throwing garbage in a big hole then eventually covering it up will make it all go away, that's simply not the case.

[Landfills often leak](#), polluting the land, groundwater, and waterways with toxic chemicals. They also release methane, a greenhouse gas that's 25 times more potent than carbon dioxide, making landfills the third largest source of human-related methane emissions in the U.S. And as if that's not bad enough, emissions from local landfills have also been linked to birth defects and other serious health problems.

That's one reason why upcycling is so important: because it keeps items out of the trash, reducing the amount of garbage we throw away every year.

Finding a new purpose for items also saves vital natural resources. Manufacturing and transporting a new product require a lot of raw materials and energy. By upcycling instead of buying, you're protecting the environment (and saving money!) You also get to flex those creative muscles, which can be a fun way to spend a Saturday afternoon.

What materials can be upcycled?

A wide variety of materials can be used for upcycling; the only real limitation is your imagination. Some of the most popular materials for upcycling include:

- Glass
- Ceramic
- Plastic
- Cardboard
- Wood
- Paper
- Metal cans
- Styrofoam
- Clothes & other fabrics
- Furniture

How can these materials be used?

The possibilities for upcycling are truly endless, but here are just a few ideas.

Clothing or Other Fabrics: You can turn your [old clothes](#) into a variety of new treasures, such as tote bags, pillows, quilts, headbands, rugs, and more.

Paper: [Old maps](#), books, sheet music, and other paper can be upcycled into framed art, coasters, lamp shades, jewelry, gift tags, magnets, wreaths, and picture frames.

Wood: [Discarded wood](#) can become a new headboard, coffee table, porch furniture, wine rack, storage bin, planter, cutting board, picture frame, shelf, or serving tray.

Metal: You can [transform empty cans](#) into candle holders, Christmas tree ornaments, utensil holders, wind chimes, vases, planters, and lamp shades, among others.

How do I start upcycling?

The first step is to simply decide. Once you make the conscious decision to start upcycling, you'll start to see objects in a whole new way. You can then look up suggestions online (or use the links provided above) to start generating ideas. After that, it's just a matter of keeping your eyes open for items that need a second chance and putting your creative energy to work.