Seed Starting with Recycled Materials



There’s no need to use fancy equipment to start seeds. You have plenty of perfectly suitable materials lying around the house—probably about to end up in the trash or recycling bin. Seed starting with recycled materials is easy!

Don’t spend a ton of money on trays and flats. Save your hard-earned money and reduce, reuse, and recycle. A little bit of frugal know-how is all you need to germinate and sprout seeds for free.

Starting seeds now?

You might be wondering why I’m talking about seed starting when summer is on our heels. Isn’t seed starting reserved for the late winter and early spring?

Of course not!

If a productive garden is what you seek, you should always have something ready to replace harvested plants. Think of it cyclically. The wheels are always turning in the garden. If they stop, you'll have less to harvest.

Now is the perfect time to start thinking about what the fall garden will look like. It's also important to consider succession sowing.

I'll offer up an example. In the spring, I planted spinach seeds in a patch of my garden. Last week, I harvested them because they were starting to dislike the hot weather and most were mature and ready to pick. That left the squares previously occupied squares empty. Uh oh!

There are two options when this happens; one requires a bit more prep than the other.

1. Replace the harvested plant with transplants that are ready to go (which involves seed starting)
2. Sow seeds (this time of year, quick-growing plants or stuff that will be ready for harvest in the fall is ideal)

For this spot, I chose to sow kale and carrot seeds, but I also have several seedlings growing in a tray to put in the next vacated garden square.

Recycled seed starting

Okay, you're ready to prep seedlings and do some seed starting with recycled materials. Here are some free, DIY container ideas to consider:

Yogurt and applesauce cups: Small single-serve containers are ideal for starting small plants like lettuce. Use big tubs for larger plants like tomatoes.

Fruit clamshell packaging: These are perfect for seed starting

because they feature built-in drainage.

Solo cups: Or any type of party or paper cup, for that matter.

Egg cartons: Don’t toss these in the recycling bin. Use them to start seeds!

Drink cartons: Whether for milk or juice, cartons are great because they provide a bit more real-estate than other recycled seed starting options. Just be sure to clean the cartons thoroughly before adding soil and planting seeds.

Recycled plant trays: When you buy plants in bulk at the nursery you’ll usually gain a few free plant trays in the process. If you don’t have any on hand, ask around. Most people toss these out without a second thought. In the late spring, you might even find plenty of these on the curb.

Takeout containers: Next time you indulge in takeout food, don’t throw away the containers. Wash them by hand (if they’re sturdy enough they might survive the top rack of your dishwasher) and use them to start seeds.

A quick note that many recycled seed starting vessels don’t have any drainage holes so be sure to poke a few to prevent root rot. Set your containers on some kind of tray to prevent water from pooling on the counter, table, or other surfaces.