



Fashion Action

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Upcycle Your Life

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People often forget that reusing is one of the three Rs: reduce, reuse, and recycle. These days, another word for “reuse” is “upcycle.” To upcycle means to make something brand-new out of old products, like using an old T-shirt to make a new piece of [upcycled fashion](#). This saves your T-shirt from going into the waste stream, saves you money on the fashion you needed, and gets you something cool and brand-new.

Upcycling is one of our many passions here at Hearts – we *love* the creative process. Enjoy these ideas for greener, refashioning!

Quick Facts: Textile Waste

- **7 pounds CO2, 700 gallons of water+ wasted:** Every time you throw out a T-shirt, that represents 7 pounds of CO2, 700 gallons of water, one-third of a pound of pesticides, and a whole lot of cotton.^[i] That’s a lot of wasted natural resources.
- **3 years average life of clothing:** The average lifetime of most articles of clothing is just three years^[ii], with most tossed rather than donated or recycled. Out of all the garbage thrown out each year, approximately 5.3% of it is textiles.^[iii]
- **3-5% of all landfill space saved with textile recycling:** 2.5 billion pounds of textiles – 10 pounds per person – are recycled annually. If everyone donated, upcycled, or recycled their old T-shirts, it would mean 3-5% of all garbage would be re-directed from landfills.^[iv]
- **17,000 textile recycling jobs in the US:** There are more than 500 textile recycling companies that employ about 17,000 workers in the United States.^[v]
- **210 billion gallons of water:** That’s how much would be saved if 300 million Americans recycled just one T-shirt.^[vi] T-shirts that are not in a condition to sell or donate get turned into rags or form a component of high-quality paper.^[vii]

Take Action! Transform Your Own T-Shirts



1. **T-Shirt upcycling ideas:** Some things that can be made from old T-shirts: a [messenger bag](#), [fabric rosettes](#) for embellishing, [ruffled pillows](#), [reusable shopping bags](#), [braided bracelets or necklaces](#), [quilts](#), [dog tug toys](#), a [no-sew scarf](#), and a “[teekini](#).” Check out Pinterest’s [upcycled T-shirt ideas](#) for much more inspiration.
2. **Upcycle T-shirts in community:** Host an [upcycling](#) get together by getting together with a group to work on your projects together to share inspiration and make it fun. Or combine it with charity: have everyone bring their own old T-shirts and whatever else they will need to make their desired item they will donate for a good cause. You could even get together and make quilts for homeless shelters, or to sell at a craft sale, and then donate the profits.
3. **Donate T-Shirts to those in need:** If you don’t want to upcycle, donate your T-shirts that are still in good, wearable condition (and probably other clothing, too) to people in need. [Open Arms](#) donates them to new immigrants who escaped from oppression, violence, or persecution in their homelands (bulk donations are best).^[viii] [ClothingDonations.org](#) gives them to veterans and their families and [DoSomething.org](#) to homeless shelters. The [Red Cross](#) takes donated items and uses them in disaster relief in the United States. The [Salvation Army](#) also accepts clothing donations to help outfit those living in poverty.
4. **Recycle the scraps you don’t need:** Call your local textile recycle company to see if they’ll take scraps. Otherwise, you can cut them into strips and use them to tie up plants in your garden; stuff rag dolls or small pillows with the scraps; cut larger pieces into wash cloths for friends who cloth diaper; donate scraps to your local preschool or daycare center for use in crafts; or cut them into long thin strips and [crochet rag rugs](#) with the pieces.

Keep Digging: Recycling Your Textiles

- Find out more about the clothing we toss out in the US through [Resource Conservation – Common Wastes & Materials – Textiles](#) from the US EPA.

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