



“trash”
into
treasure

LET’S BEGIN with an object lesson.

First, we need an object. See, over there? About three feet of a 4x4 board, sticking out of a pile of rubble in the vacant lot across the street . . .

It should be instantly recognizable as a fence post, or as the corner of that tool shed you need, or as the support you’ve been looking for to put under that rain barrel.

It’s obvious, isn’t it? Just takes a little time and practice.

“Store bought” fencing, trellises, benches and soil cost lots of money. Chances are good that your cash supply is limited. Not to worry – you need only a trained eye and a little ingenuity to manufacture

these necessities of life out of what many people consider “hopeless trash”. With unlimited access to dumpsters and other receptacles, city dwellers can furnish and beautify their gardens very inexpensively.

My motto is *IF IT’S FREE – USE IT!* This may be a slight exaggeration, but it reflects the attitude you need to acquire to become a truly efficient “trash-scrounger”. Simply adjust your attitude and exercise your imagination.

Chances are good you’ll never strike it rich picking through trash. But if enough of us get involved, it might become a respectable hobby. At least they still haven’t found a way to tax it.

Look for the use

You don't require an advanced degree in Garbage Science to profit from scrounging and recycling. Nevertheless, a few basic theoretical pointers from the experts won't hurt. Even if he wasn't speaking of community gardeners doing trash prospecting, philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein hit the recycled nail on the head when he famously said, "Don't look for the meaning; look for the use."

If they ever start a major in Garbagology at the university, Phil Winter would become Dean. Winter, Curator of Education for the Bergen Museum of Art and Science in Paramus, New Jersey, is an expert on what he terms "found objects". He makes original playgrounds and learning toys for children out of junk and has even practically remodeled his entire home with found objects. ACGA stalwarts Tessa Huxley in New York and Sally McCabe in Philadelphia would join Winter as senior faculty. Both women boast a proud tenure as skillful scroungers going back decades. Here are some guidelines from this creative trio to help formulate your own strategies for found objects:

- **RECYCLE IDEAS!** Share garden recycling ideas with other gardeners and give garbage new life in your garden.

- **FOUND OBJECTS** aren't "garbage".

If you can't think of a use for it, it's garbage. Ask yourself, "Do I know what I will do with this, or how I'm going to use it?" If the answer is, "No", leave it alone.

- **SOMETIMES** it makes more sense to buy something new than it does to waste a lot of time and energy trying to gather and assemble odd pieces.

- **LOOK FOR "STACKABLENESS"**.

Consider how well objects stack, especially if you may need to store them while waiting for more. Objects that nest inside each other, the way Russian dolls do, take up less space.

- **STORE AND ARRANGE** things in such a way that you can use them or at least get to them when you need them.

- **FIVE OR MORE** of a single object usually makes a something.

- **"SECONDARY RESOURCES"** are worth watching for, such as glass bottles, scrap metal, and tin cans. Although you wouldn't ordinarily want to build fencing out of them or turn them into planting boxes, you can collect and sell them in bulk to raise money for pet projects (and in the process reap PR benefits for being such proactive good citizens when it comes to neighborhood cleanliness and recycling).

Old bathtub used as a planter



SALLY MCCABE • JCG Summer 1989 • TESSA HUXLEY • JCG Spring 1983

Scrounge everything your garden needs

Gold lies uselessly under the ground until it is dug up: Useful trash is only there until “The Trashman Cometh”. You have to be there when it’s there.

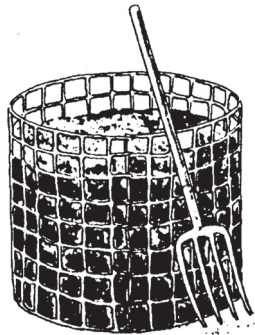
- **IT’S NOT ENOUGH** to know when to put out your own trash. If you stick to your own neighborhood, it makes for mighty dull picking. When are collection days in wealthier neighborhoods? Spy on your well-to-do friends, and don’t be afraid to make the rounds. Apartment complexes make for healthy trash, since apartments seldom have adequate storage space. Commercial strips often have daily collection and need to be watched regularly. Some communities have a

special “big trash” day once or twice a year, when it’s possible to furnish a house, fully equip a garden, and do your Christmas shopping – if you’re prudent enough to borrow a truck or van.

- **DUMPSTERS:** Consider them gold mines, conveniently located around the neighborhood. Goodies are dense-packed and generally easy and safe to recover. Do not miss odds-and-ends left over at construction sites – lumber, nail kegs (great planters!), salt hay, pallets, cinder blocks, bricks, sand, and sometimes whole sections of fencing. Many times it’s easier for builders to leave the stuff than it is to haul away small amounts.

FREE ORGANIC GOLD

Don’t neglect organic matter when scrounging. You can get free mulch and materials for making compost – the best way to improve your soil.



- **FLAG DOWN** a power company truck or commercial tree trimmer who’s been chipping and offer a convenient drop zone. Often, it’s easy enough to do and a “win-win”.
- **YOUR NEIGHBORS** probably don’t care what happens to their grass and leaves, so go ahead and borrow them. Is there a specific dump site for leaves in the fall?
- **IS MANURE AVAILABLE** at stables, meat-packing plants, rabbit or chicken farms, or even zoos?
- **TRY SOME UNUSUAL** options. What about the vegetable waste thrown away behind supermarkets? What happens to wood chips after the electric company trims around the wires? Will the local coffeehouse give you grounds? This stuff is worth a fortune when composted and used to improve what too often passes for soil in urban community gardens.

- **DEMOLISHED HOUSES:** This may be hazardous, so check if you require permits for scavenging. A house in the process of being torn down may provide joist boards, bricks, endless lath, and other goodies too numerous to mention. Giving cold beer and sandwiches to workmen sometimes induces sorted, stacked, and delivered merchandise.

- **MARKETPLACES:** Farmers’ markets, food-distribution centers, and supermarkets are all good places to find useful stuff. Pallets make good fencing and compost boxes. Fish boxes (from any fish market) are about the greatest invention since the paper cup. Any store that buys in bulk will usually have large inventory of 20-liter (five-gallon) plastic or metal food containers, ideal for tomato and large-plant pots, water storage, or to keep things consolidated in your car or on public transport.

- **FOR TYING PLANTS** onto stakes or trellises, nothing beats old cotton clothes, nylon stockings, and other recycled fabrics.

- **RECYCLED NYLONS** are also ideal for storing bulbs such as garlic and daffodils until planting or eating time. Simply fill them up and hang them from a rafter in a cool, dry spot. They provide the air circulation needed to prevent rotting, and stay safely out of reach of mice and other pests.

- **SAVE CUT-OFF MILK CARTONS** made of biodegradable waxed cardboard, plastic trays used for prepared foods, styro-foam trays or cups, and metal cans. They are all suitable for starting plants in a greenhouse or windowsill.

- **RAISED BEDS AND TERRACES** Almost anything can be used to hold soil in raised beds, or to form steps or retaining walls. Joist boards, bricks, stones or odd lumber are best. Old brick and concrete chunks from torn-up sidewalks and pavement make excellent stepping stones for paths, pavers for patios, or blocks for dry stack walls, and for benches, planters, and other garden features.

- **EMBED OLD CAR TIRES** in soil to stabilize slopes, create planting wells, provide frameworks for structures and build up new terraces from steep, unusable areas. Not everyone likes tires as planters or in playgrounds, objecting for understandable aesthetic and health reasons – but North Americans now waste most of this potential resource, burning tires (a certain source of pollution) or piling them up in vast eyesore dumps that breed mosquitos.



- **SINK OLD BATHTUBS** in the ground to create small water features, or to contain bamboo and other spreading plants.
- **BUILD A COLD FRAME** to fit any framed piece of glass or plastic. Plastic beverage jugs with bottoms cut out make nice cloches for individual tomato, pepper, and eggplant seedlings in the springtime.
- **FENCING** Since only barbed wire and land mines will keep out the truly determined thief or kid, most fencing merely marks off territory and keeps honest folks honest. Formidable and ugly barriers can be constructed of pallets and/or odd lumber; attractive basketweaves can be created from lath and posts. Some people opt to do without fencing, trust to God, and plant a little extra just in case.

Photo • Gardener Ray Issac and the bottle tree at the Urban Ministry Community Garden in Charlotte, North Carolina. A bottle tree is a Southern traditional version of a stained glass window. Since most of the gardeners here are homeless (and referred to as “neighbors” at Urban Ministry), this community garden gives Ray and other neighbors a healing opportunity both to garden and create. Neighbors made this bottle tree using recycled bottles from Charlotte/Mecklenburg County’s PLANT home composting, waste-reduction and recycling program. (Don Boekelheide).