

Green and Growing: Five ways to reduce, reuse, recycle when starting seeds



Connecticut recycles plastic pots and trays, but make sure they are dirt-free. The dirty pot in the center is unacceptable in the recycling process. Did you know? Connecticut now recycles clean black plastic pots, though it wasn't always the case. (photo by Kathy Connolly)

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Kathy Connolly, Special to The Times

There's hope! Already, seedlings are beginning to sprout on windowsills. Fruits and blossoms? We can't wait!

Our growing season is only six months long, but the plastic pots, trays and liners that hold our short-lived plants may last for decades. If you would like to change that, here are five approaches to consider.

Biodegradable pots

Biodegradable pots do a disappearing act, generally, in one season. They contain diverse renewable materials such as peat, wood fiber, recycled paper, or manure. Some companies are even experimenting with brewer's spent grains and bamboo. None of these pots needs to be stored, washed, recycled or thrown in the trash, and they have other advantages, too.

All biodegradable pots feature porous walls. The benefit may not be obvious, but porosity helps stop roots at the pot wall through a process called "air-pruning." It keeps roots from circling, also called girdling, a problem common in plastic pots.

Besides, all biodegradable pots go directly into the soil and decay. The plant never leaves the pot.

"There's no need to crush or tear the pot, eliminating trauma to the roots," said Amanda Freund, sales manager for CowPots and a member of Freund's Farm, a third-generation vegetable and dairy operation in Canaan, where Matthew Freund invented CowPots. "That eliminates most transplant shock."

Freund's Farm produces and uses the product, of course. Amanda Freund says that when a seedling is ready for potting-up, they place the small CowPot into a larger CowPot with potting soil.

"The roots continue to grow uninhibited," she said.

"We grow 1,500 tomato seedlings every year. When they were in plastic pots," said Freund, "it would take us three days to gingerly transplant them into grow-bags in our greenhouse. But we eliminated the step and now do the transplant job in just a day and a half."

There are important differences among biodegradable pots, most notably that they dry out and decay at different rates.

For instance, Freund said that CowPots usually require less water than other pots during cool, damp times, but when we have very hot, dry days, they may require more water.

A 2016 study by Mississippi Agriculture and Forestry Experiment Station compared the decay rates of four products, including rice hulls, peat, wood, and manure. After three months in the ground, rice hull, peat, and wood pots remained more than 80% intact, while only 12% of the manure-based CowPots were in the same condition. You can read the study at bit.ly/compare-biodegradable-pots.

Four more options

Kitchen containers that would otherwise be recycled or go into the trash can easily grow seedlings and plants. See ideas from the Winter Sowers at wintersown.org/Containers.html or visit their Facebook page.

Find garden centers that will take pots back. Before you shop, call ahead and ask. If they don't take pots, consider calling around.

Alternatively, find an organization or grower who can reuse nursery pots and trays. Many garden clubs, for instance, collect plastic pots for their spring plant sales.

Store pots for reuse later in the season. If you do, though, be sure to sanitize them before plotting a new plant. It's not difficult. Visit bit.ly/clean-planters to learn how to sanitize planting pots.

If you'd like to grow some plants but shrink your footprint this growing season, consider the options. It's easier than ever to get away from one-time-use plastics.

Kathy Connolly writes and speaks on horticulture, land care, and landscape design. For more information, visit speakingoflandscapes.com.

More on biodegradable pots

CowPots are available at independent garden centers. Also, find them at freundsfarmmarket.com/store or cowpots.com.

EcoForms contain rice hulls, ecoforms.com

Fertilpots contained 80% wood fiber, 20% peat, fertil.us

Jiffypots contain peat and wood fiber, jiffypot.com

Other biodegradable pots? There are many, but generally they are only available in larger quantities for growers.

STORIES THAT MAY INTEREST YOU



My Pet Pal: Gypsy (</local-news/20200302/my-pet-pal-gypsy>)

Gypsy is a shy little angel.

Waterford considering police body cameras, townwide camera system (</local-news/20200301/waterford-considering-police-body-cameras-townwide-camera-system>)

Both projects now await approval by the Board of Finance and Representative Town Meeting.

