

PLASTIC POLLUTION

Plastic pollution has a big impact on the environment, but plastic waste isn't unavoidable. Every time we make the choice to avoid or recycle plastic products, we help to lower the risk of environmental damage. We can all do our bit to reduce plastic use on our plots.

Here are some hints, tips and simple swaps that will help minimise the amount of plastic used with more details below (From RHS website and other sources listed at the end of the article).

- Use plain cardboard and mulch instead of black plastic to suppress weeds during winter months
- Only cover plots during the winter, sun will degrade plastic at a faster rate
- Coir or fibre pots can be used instead of plastic pots.
- Larger pots can be recycled at Brackenwood
- Try wooden or bamboo seed trays
- Make your own root trainers from newspaper or toilet paper rolls
- Swap plastic string for jute or hemp.
- Metal mesh can replace plastic netting.
- Use lolly sticks, wooden or slate labels
- Re use compost bags for rubbish, leaf mulch or grow bags
- Buy compost/soil improver in bulk (details of providers on allotment noticeboard)
- Make your own compost
- For plant protection avoid bubble wrap or fleece by using cardboard, hessian or straw.
- Instead of buying fertiliser in plastic bottles make your own (comfrey, nettles and borage 'tea' make excellent fertilizer)
- Use companion planting to avoid use of pesticides.
- Reuse plastic as much as possible until it reaches the end of its useful life.

Plastic sheeting



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While plastic sheeting suppresses weeds, it also keeps moisture from getting to your plants and can leach chemicals into the soil. Commonly-used landscape fabric, while more porous, is also made out of woven plastic. During the summer months plastic will biodegrade more quickly due to

exposure to sunlight adding more microplastic fragments to the soil. If used at all it should only be during the winter months and of good quality so that it can be reused over several years. A better option is to use plain cardboard covered with mulch. (Avoid inked cardboard and remove any plastic tape before laying it on the soil). The cardboard will break down over winter, suppressing weeds and adding nutrients to the soil.

Pots



Plastic plant pots are lightweight and cheap, but difficult to recycle once broken. Local garden centres (Brackenwood) offer recycling of clean pots of a certain size. Alternatives include terracotta, coir, fibre, Vipots, bamboo and waste cardboard.

Single-use biodegradable containers are widely available. They are not removed before planting, avoiding root disturbance, but this means they must be bought anew each year. Coir is made from imported coconut hulls, so has a high carbon footprint. It can also be slow to decompose in dry soil. Fibre pots, made of cellulose, break down more quickly

Terracotta containers are handsome and last years, but they're heavy and, like most of the biodegradable containers, dry out more quickly. Lightweight options, reusable for 3-5 years, include Vipots, made of rice and grain hulls, and bamboo. All are expensive, but you can make them for free: cut out 7cm (3") square boxes from waste cardboard, tape together with paper masking tape, then plant.

Seed trays



- Seed trays last well and are lightweight but once broken are difficult to recycle. Swap them for wooden or bamboo seed trays.

You can buy wooden seed trays or make them yourself from scrap wood. They are easily repaired, so last indefinitely when well looked after. Wooden trays are heavier and must be stored somewhere dry over winter. They need more watering, but it's easier to re-wet dry compost as wood is absorbent so doesn't let water run straight through as plastic can.

Bamboo seed trays give the look and feel of plastic and are lighter than wood. But they aren't repairable and you can't make your own.

Modules



Modules are often flimsy and shatter easily; they are rarely recycled. Swap them for newspaper pots, soil blocks, toilet roll inners or pulp modules.

Buy biodegradable pulped cardboard modules or make them for free from newspaper or cardboard toilet roll inners (best for larger seeds). Plant seedlings without removing containers, which rot away in the soil.

Soil blocks are cubes of compressed blocking compost, shaped using a soil blocker; sow into the top and the seedling's roots bind the compost into a natural module.

Plastic-free plant labelling



Plastic plant labels are easy to write on and reuse but degrade and break quickly and are difficult to recycle. Swap them for wooden lollipop sticks, bamboo plant labels, slate labels, copper or aluminium metal labels.

Buy lollipop sticks cheaply from craft shops; wooden plant labels are also widely available (sold in the trading shed). Bamboo and wooden plant labels can be composted at the end of their usefulness

Untreated wooden labels wick up water from damp compost and writing becomes blurred, so they're perhaps best for short-term labelling such as vegetables sown in a greenhouse then planted out. Bamboo is less absorbent, so labels stay legible all season. Slate labels are expensive but handsome and easily reused; metal labels cannot be reused once engraved.

Plastic string and netting



Natural twine is less likely to cut into plants as the stems grow

Plastic string and netting are strong and long-lasting but rarely recycled; wildlife can become entangled in plastic netting, too. Swap for: jute or hemp twine, jute netting, metal mesh. Natural twine is readily available and kinder to plants than plastic ties as it won't cut into stems. It needs replacing every couple of years. Jute pea netting looks beautiful but again, you can only reuse it once or twice.

To protect fruit and vegetable crops from birds, you can make individual cages from fine 1cm ($\frac{1}{2}$ in) gauge galvanised metal mesh stapled onto wooden frames. It is more expensive and heavier but doesn't tear like plastic can, so lasts many years.

Compost bags



Compost bags could be reused as rubbish sacks, making leaf mulch or growing new potatoes for example. They can be recycled but only if cleaned first. Better to avoid plastic use by making your own compost.

Buying growing media in large quantities, such as bulk bags or loose loads, cuts plastic use. Details of local providers of compost/soil improver are on the information board at the allotment.

Make your own potting compost by blending topsoil, garden compost, leaf mould, grit and fertilisers in a bucket or wheelbarrow according to requirements.

Watering equipment



Watering equipment comes in multiple types of plastic, including vinyl (used in most hoses), linked to harmful toxins. Swap plastic for metal watering cans and water butts for galvanised troughs.

Metal watering cans are heavier and watering takes longer, but hand watering uses water more economically and targets irrigation more efficiently – plus metal cans have a much longer lifespan than plastic ones.

Plant protection and insulation



Glasshouse insulation and plant protection consisting of bubble wrap, polythene cloches and woven plastic meshes and fleece shred easily into fragments and cannot be recycled. Plastic-free solutions include glass cloches, hessian and straw and cardboard insulation.

Delay planting frost-sensitive plants to avoid using horticultural fleece and wrap tender plants such as bananas in hessian or newspaper stuffed with straw over winter. Lining greenhouse walls with cardboard also offers some insulation over winter.

Plastic-free packaging



Growing your own from seed is the best way to go plastic-free

Most gardening purchases come packaged in plastic, from mail order blister packs to fertiliser bottles. New plants also bring more plastic pots as most are single use and difficult to recycle. Look out for plastic-free mail order nurseries, buy bare root plants and grow your own from seeds, cuttings and divisions.

Careful shopping choices help: fertiliser, for example, is often offered in cardboard boxes. Home-made fertilisers are also very effective. Details of how to make home-made fertiliser can be found here: [Fertilisers / RHS Gardening](#)

Buying pesticides

Instead of buying pesticides in plastic packaging find a natural balance with how you cope with pest and disease within your environment. If you are growing certain plants that get a lot of problems from pest and disease stop growing them (cabbages are a classic example) and look for alternatives.

Research companion planting, for example blackfly would much rather live on artichokes than beans. Then when the ladybird larva arrives it's a focal point for their activity. More information about companion planting can be found here:

[Companion Planting Chart and Guide for Vegetable Gardens \(thespruce.com\)](#)

What to do with existing plastic in the garden

Continue to reuse plastic pots, trays and other equipment until they reach the end of their useful life to keep them out of the waste system as long as possible. Compost bags can be put to multiple new uses as rubbish sacks, weed-suppressing ground cover or for growing new potatoes.

Once they need replacing, substitute for biodegradable alternatives and recycle spent rigid plastic wherever possible to keep the plastic in circulation.

References

<https://www.rhs.org.uk/garden-inspiration/get-gardening/how-to-go-plastic-free-in-your-garden>

<https://learn.eartheeasy.com/articles/12-easy-ways-to-reduce-plastic-in-the-garden/>

<https://www.gardenersworld.com/how-to/gardening-with-less-plastic/>

[Companion Planting Chart and Guide for Vegetable Gardens \(thespruce.com\)](#)

[Fertilisers / RHS Gardening](#)