

Ask EcoGirl

By Patricia Dines

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Keeping Clothes Out of the Trash

Dear EcoGirl: I have a bunch of old clothes that I don't need. How can I keep them out of the landfill? *Signed, Marc*

Dear Marc: Thanks for your great question. Yes, the production of our clothes impacts our environment and health in many ways, so it's important that we make full use of each item.

Sadly, though, Americans throw out 85% of our clothes and textiles, trashing 13 million tons a year. This makes up 5% of our country's overall solid waste.

Key terms to know

So how can we divert our clothing from the garbage? First, let's look at three key words to know in this conversation:

- **Reuse:** When your item is kept in its original form, i.e. a shirt goes to a new owner.
- **Upcycling:** When value is added to your item, i.e. someone turns an everyday shirt into a creatively expressive shirt.
- **Downcycling:** When your item loses some of its embedded value, i.e. a shirt is treated as just fiber and we lose the resources used to make it a shirt. Most "recycling" is actually downcycling.

So my advice is to first look for ways to reuse or upcycle your items, before downcycling/recycling them.

Developing your system

So how do we put this into action? Here's the system I developed for myself; it helps me aim for full use via easy habits in my everyday life.

STEP 1: Setup labeled boxes. I have four major categories:

- Repair.** I split this into boxes labeled "Repair by me," "Repair by another," and "Repair for giveaway." (A flawed item usually won't be sold for reuse.)
- Grubbies.** I put damaged clothes that aren't worth repairing here.

Then they're ready for me to wear for grubby tasks.

c) Rags. If damaged clothes don't fit in the first two categories, but are good rag material, I cut them into usable pieces and put them in my Rag box.

d) Giveaway. I put both nice and damaged items here.

Note: My Grubbies box is attractive and in my bedroom. The rest are cardboard boxes in my garage. Computer-printed box labels help this all stay orderly.

STEP 2: Regularly process the system.

- Sort clothes into the boxes above.**
- Repair items, or drop them with an expert.** So you might sew on a button, fix a hem, or replace the heel of a shoe.
- Look for ways to upcycle or creatively reuse your discards.** This can include shortening a skirt or making jeans into shorts. You can make bigger changes with damaged items, say by turning a t-shirt into a produce bag, a sock into a hacky sack, or gloves into wrist warmers. Clothes might also be converted into a pillow, apron, iPad cover, pet bed, wine gift bag, toy, woven rug, or quilt.

For lots of inspiring ideas, just Google "reuse" + *your item type*, such as "reuse blue jeans." See wearable art inspiration at www.etsy.com/shop/katwise. Or find a local fabric artist seeking donations. (Please let me know if you are one!)

d) Sell or donate clothes.

• **Damaged items.** Ask your local animal shelter if they'd like old sweaters, sweatshirts, sheets, towels, blankets, etc. You can also drop damaged items at a thrift store if it distributes into the textile recycling stream. For instance, Goodwill bales and resells all kinds of cloth, even torn, as long as it's not smelly or moldy. In our region, it diverted three million pounds of textile discards overall in FY2013.

• **Nicer items.** You can offer these to friends or sell them through yard sales, craigslist, or consignment stores. Or bring them to a clothing swap (see LITE Initiatives, www.liteinitiatives.org). I also donate professional clothing to Goodwill's Yolanda site (marked for "Clothes Closet"); they're then offered to financially-disadvantaged job seekers.

I use options like these before donating nice items to thrift stores, to increase the odds that they'll be reused. Thrift stores receive many more items than they can sell, and the textile recycling system usually sends wearable clothes overseas, where it can supplant local clothing makers, or be downcycled as rags.

STEP 3: Reduce future clothing discards. The earth can't sustain our high rate of consumer product throughput. So buy fewer clothes of longer-lasting quality, and buy used. Also choose organic and fair trade clothes, to reduce the harm to people and planet, and support the folks taking care of our world and future.

For more information and resources, see www.patriciadines.info/EcoGirl7d.html. And please feel free to share your projects and ideas with me.

Ask EcoGirl is written by Patricia Dines, Author of [The Organic Guides](#), and Editor and Lead Writer for [The Next STEP](#) newsletter. Email your questions about going green to EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info for possible inclusion in future columns. Also see "Ask EcoGirl" on Facebook! And contact EcoGirl for information about carrying this syndicated column in your periodical.

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