

Toilet Paper Tubes

Today let's take a few minutes to talk about toilet paper tubes. Yes, you heard me right!

At the advice of a friend last year, I started saving TP tubes for seed starting. I had never heard of this before, so I definitely had not done it before. I have used egg cartons and a lot of other containers, but this was new to me.

I decided to keep a simple grocery bag hanging in the bathroom cupboard. When the roll was empty, I just dropped the old tube in that bag and in springtime, VIOLA! A bunch of free seed pots to use.

I wasn't sure how they were going to work, so I didn't want to start ALL my seeds in them, just in case. I only used them for some of our cucurbit seeds – butternut, pie pumpkin, and cushaw. However, I have to admit – now I wish I HAD used them for everything!!!

I wasn't sure I was going to like them, yet as time went on and things began to grow, I discovered I LOVE them! I am now planning to start saving them for even more plantings. We are going to need a 2nd planting of green beans, cucumbers, and maybe even zucchini in a few weeks. I also want to start growing little "patches" of herbs like chamomile, dill, oregano, sage, and basil, as well as a crop of autumn peas. I am hoping we can save enough tubes by fall for some other cool crops, too.

Before I go into any how-to portions, let me go over a few of the pros and cons I found with the TP tubes. Then I will explain how I used the tubes, kept track of them and what was planted in each.

TP Tube Pros:

- ~ Easy to fill with soil – I placed a bunch in a larger container, and just shoveled soil into them. Then I moved the filled tubes into their more permanent seed tray.
- ~ DEEPER soil than egg cartons provide, even if only using half tubes. This helped the roots grow deeper and are more hardy than seedlings in any past year.
- ~ they are easily kept together in categories or seed types by using old veggie tubs to hold them.
- ~ Helped the soil maintain a good level of moisture to aid sprouting.
- ~ When planting into the garden soil, tubes peel away easily if you want to plant without.
- ~ When planting with the tube, it held together well enough to be planted with the plants; then deteriorated easily into the soil. Takes about a month total to be gone in our soil.
- ~ Soft enough for roots to poke through if they need to.

Cons:

- ~ A couple of the tubes fell apart in my hand as I was trying to plant in the garden.
Not enough to discourage me, though.
- ~ When I set outside the clear tubs holding which held tubes, the tubes DID pick up and hold a bit TOO much water during a big rainstorm. Caused me concern about seed and root rot.

However, the next days were hot and sunny, so rot never happened.

Those are the only things I did not like! They are a big win for us for gardening going forward.

Several videos I watched showed that you can use paper towel tubes, too. I was not comfortable with these, though, and didn't feel they would work for us – the brand we use is manufactured with a heavy glue holding the last paper towel to the tube. I don't know what is in that glue and don't want to take any chance it contains anything bad for the worms, garden or us. Especially worms – It took several years and great blessings to get a good, healthy community of worms in our gardens.

Online and in other's videos you will see a lot of ideas on how to organize your tubes. I like to use things we have laying around or that will just end up in the trash – you know recycle or upcycle everything we can! I save large plastic tubs from bulk greens we buy for salads as well as from other fruits and veggies. Often, I simply use these tubs by adding soil and planting directly into them.

For this project, though, I took the TP tubes, cut four slits from the bottom, up about 3/4 of an inch. Then folded the bottoms closed to hold the soil. (See photos) If you would like to tuck the fourth flap under a corner of the first flap, it does then to stay flatter when you fill it with soil. Also, creasing the tube to the top along that same line as you cut the slits will help shape the tube into a little square – these fit nicely in the tubs. Finish by organizing them in the tubs and, if different types of seeds, remember to label the sections of pots with sticks or on the outer surface of the veggie tub. We own an Epson Labeler which has come in very handy this year in the garden! It prints the perfect size labels to attach to skinny sticks for marking the pots.

I do not glue or tape the bottoms. I don't want to mess with the glue, for one, and tape in the garden would just be a mess and more trash in our soil. Having them simply folded somewhat loose makes the bottoms easily opened to expose the roots as I plant them into the soil. I also liked the loose bottoms on tubes that would be directly planted into the soil. The roots could break through more easily and set deeply into the garden soil.

Another quick thing I did to ensure I didn't get anything mixed up if the tubes shifted in our plastic tubs was to place a piece of paper, cut to size, in between each section. In one plastic tub, I had six of each squash variety. So each section of six was labeled on the front with our labeller, then I separated each section of six by a simple notecard. Cardboard cut to size would also work.

The cushaw were the first seedlings read to go into the garden. I simply took the container with me into the garden, pulled each tube from the tub, peeled the tube off then, planted the seedlings. For the Cushaw, since they are a LARGE squash, I wanted to ensure that they set good strong root systems with nothing hindering their growth. With this my first year using TP Tubes, I wasn't sure how easily the tubes would deteriorate. A day or so later, I planted butternut and others that were also started in toilet paper tubes, only these I left the tubes on. And NOW I know! The tubes deteriorate fairly quickly in our garden soil and were almost gone after about 2 weeks in our soil!

For those I wanted to try without, I broke away the TP tubes very easily by unwinding the tube like one of those grocery store biscuit cans! The roots were thick and strong inside, which held the soil in a sort of plug. I stuck the plug inside a “squash sock,” then planted that into the ground, and VIOLA! The cushaw are growing on their own now! I can’t wait to see their first blossoms come in a few weeks’ time.

Already thinking of cushaw and butternut in soups, breads, pies, and even autumnal DÉCOR!

BTW, when you save a lot of TP tubes, it may seem like a daunting task to fold all those bottoms, but in reality, it doesn’t need to be. Start early in the winter getting them ready for spring plantings. Pick a day or evening when you are just sitting watching TV or listening to podcasts. Grab your bag of tubes, a pair of scissors and an extra bag or bucket to toss the folded pots into. Then fold while you enjoy your latest programming!

Most people I know remember to save the little 4 or 6 pack planters that hold the annuals or perennials added to gardens in spring. We wash and reuse those which aren’t broken. Over the years, though, many of these have ended up in the trash, leaving me with several trays with no little 4 or 6 packs. NEXT planting, I plan to re-use several seed starter trays and fill them with TP tube starts rather than 4 or 6 packs. I am hoping this will provide another way to minimize cost and maximize production from our garden.

And that’s it in a nutshell! Or rather in a toilet paper tube! If you are looking for a way to cut some corners or costs, I would say that saving the TP tubes is an idea that can easily be incorporated into your gardening plan.

Happy gardening!

Blessings and Shalom!

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