Reusable Plastic Containers
The use of reusable plastic containers (RPC’s) by fruit and vegetable growers has recently become more popular as the push for sustainability increases. As more producers become concerned with decreasing the amount of waste created throughout the supply chain, sustainable options become progressively more relevant. The movement away from corrugated cardboard as the primary containment through transportation and distribution has become a viable option as growers look to RPC companies for a multi-purpose, more sustainable option.

RPCs can be used more successfully in different applications than corrugated cardboard throughout the supply chain. Growers are able to use RPCs from harvesting the product, to transportation, to distribution and sales as the display making their operation more efficient. This efficiency paired with the sustainability of a product that lasts for multiple uses, is the very option producers are searching for.

RPCs have been around for more than a few years and have always been a popular choice of packaging for large scale produce manufacturers. Lately small local producers are turning to RPC companies for a more sustainable source of packaging for their Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), auction sales, or farmers market vending businesses.

Corrugated Cardboard
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Estimates 30.1 Million tons of corrugated cardboard are generated each year
- In 2013, 89% of those boxes were recycled
- Cardboard is the third largest disposed-of product by weight
- Second largest item in landfill by volume
- Recycled Cardboard uses 76% of the energy needed to produce new cardboard

RPC Companies
There are several different companies that produce and distribute quality RPCs. (Companies not limited to list.)

Sustainable Transport Packaging
Their headquarters are located in St. Petersburg, FL. with various stocking locations around the U.S. They are a reseller, distributor, and custom manufacturer of various RPCs for a number of applications.

Rehrig Pacific Company
With their U.S. corporate headquarters in Los Angeles, CA Rehrig has been serving the Agriculture industry with RPCs since the 1980’s. Their products are designed to help producers safely and effectively transport products to desired markets.

IFCO
Known for being one of the leading RPC companies in North America the IFCO headquarters is located in Tampa, FL. With 6 service centers located around the U.S. they are working towards creating the most cost effective sustainable RPCs in the Market.
Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages
- Promotes sustainability.
  - Reduction of waste (i.e. corrugated cardboard)
- Faster and more efficient ventilation
- Easier storage capabilities
  - More stability when stacked
- Ease and speed of handling
- More efficient
  - Reduction in energy
  - Reduction of long term packaging cost
- Prompt return on investment
- Decrease in post-harvest lost

Disadvantages
- Initial cost associated with the implantation of RPCs
- Cost associated with backhauling
- Cost associated with washing/sanitizing
- Additional storage for unused RPC inventory
- Potential loss or damage of container

Resources to help get the Right RPC:

“Returnable Plastic Crate (RPC) systems can reduce postharvest losses and improve earnings for fresh produce operations” - Dr. Lisa Kitinoja (April 2013).
http://postharvest.org/RPCs%20PEF%202013%20White%20paper%2013-01%20pdf%20final.pdf

“RPA Issues Guidelines and Best Practices to Strengthen Safety of Returnable Containers in Food Supply Chains” (March 2015)

“New Food Safety Protocols Published for Reusable Grocery Containers” - James Andrews (March 2015)

Sources
- Sustainable Transport Packaging http://www.sustainabletransportpackaging.com/ 111 2nd Avenue NE, Suite 802 St. Petersburg, FL 33701
- Rehrig Pacific Company http://www.rehrigpacific.com 4010 East 26th St. Los Angeles, CA 90058
- IFCO https://www.ifco.com/na/en/ifco/55dd1ce50ec41c8 3030 N Rocky Point Dr. Tampa, FL 33607

Recommendations for Producers
- Inspections procedures
- Store under cover
- Cleaning and Sanitation:
  - pre-scape, rinse, or soak
  - Wash: 110°F with detergent
  - Rinse
  - Sanitize: 75°F with 50ppm chlorine for 1 minute (12.5ppm iodine or 200ppmQAC may also be used, ppm may vary based on product)
- Wrapping clean containers in plastic for protection
- Cover during transportation