



Harvesting Color

Use nature's bounty to create beautiful, natural fiber dyes.

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Page 3 The Dyeing Process What Can Be Used? Natural Color In nature, where there's no common, spoken language to facilitate contact, color can send a clear message. Color speaks to the brain in a way unlike any other form of communication.

Red can be a warning for poison or a lure as food. Blue can indicate nourishment in the shape of berries or flowers. Bright green signals fresh, new plant growth, tender and tasty for hungry herbivores.

Without color, it would be difficult to see differences in nature—or in life in general. We can determine food—and definitely its ripeness—by its color; animals can distinguish predator or prey by being attentive to color variations on the body. Most living things have and use color as an identifier—skin, hair and eye colors or leaf, berry, stem and flower colors.

I recently purchased a new, Orchard Mason Bee nest block and the bee specialist recommended painting different stripes of color across the front of the many-holed block to help the bees determine exactly to which hole they were returning.

Color can move us on a profound level—think of a glorious, golden sunrise or crimson sunset, the striking contrast of a bright-yellow dandelion against its nest of rich, green leaves, or a pristine, white cloud floating in a pure azure sky.

During Victorian times, certain colors of roses were used as messages, sent to convey feelings to the recipient—red meant passionate love, white meant purity of intention, yellow could be jealousy and orange signaled desire. Color can be metaphorical, as in “green with envy” or “red with rage”; it's used to typify different people, such as a “greenhorn,” a “redneck,” a “yellow coward” or a “blue blood.” Aliens—the proverbial “Martians”—are referred to as “little, green men” even though we now know Mars is a red planet.

The eye is drawn to color. Plants use color as a warning, an attractant or a decoration, all of which serve to ensure future offspring. Children are taught that some red-leafed plants, such as poison oak, emit skin irritants. By giving them a wide berth, humans leave them to grow and reproduce unhindered. Flowers decoratively stand out from green foliage, indicating to insects and birds that there is nectar or pollen to be found there. The bright colors entice pollinators to collect pollen, fertilizing the plant to produce fruit that turns color when ripe. Animals then eat these brightly colored fruits; by passing the seeds in their waste, new plants are spread and fertilized to begin the cycle anew.

Nature wraps itself in color seasonally: Spring brings new growth and early flower blooms, summer has a wider variety of flowers and fruits, autumn revels in a cloak of brilliant hues as the leaves sing their swan song, and winter, although bare of growth, still has much to offer the eye. We think of snow as white, but it actually has many shades of blue in it as well. Red- and yellow-twig dogwoods stand out in the barren climate, as do the berries of certain shrubs. Persimmons ripen and are vivid on branches devoid of foliage. Everywhere around us in nature there is color. So it's only natural that we as humans, at some point, would have wanted to imitate this and clothe ourselves in a variety of colors found in nature. What better way to do this than to borrow the colors from nature directly?

An Ancient Art

The origins of humans using color go as far back as human history. Cave paintings around the world show that humans



drew before they had cohesive, written alphabets. Paint was applied to the skin to symbolize characteristics of the wearer or to inspire fear or awe in the onlooker. Charcoal and various minerals were used to color pictures on ancient walls. To this day, tribes in areas of Africa mix together minerals, leaves or berries with animal fat, using the resulting paste as paint to decorate and mark caves and other dwellings.

Although quite different from surface painting, dyeing is also a very ancient art, first recorded during the Bronze Age. The clothing fibers used for dyeing have an equal history: The use of wool and linen dates back to 5000 B.C., cotton to 2000 B.C., and silk from the Orient around 2600 B.C., the same time and place from which come the earliest records of dyeing. Many different substances besides plants and foods were used for dyes, including minerals and insects, which were dried and then ground up. One of the most famous and highly prized colors through the ages was Tyrian purple, a dye obtained from certain shellfish. Deep red could be gotten from the cochineal insect, which is indigenous to South America. Because of the expense and difficulty of obtaining the dyestuffs that yielded the strongest colors, those colors became associated with nobility. This is the derivation of the term "rolling out the red carpet" as a show of great honor.

The mid-19th century brought the advent of chemical dyes, which, with their vivid color ranges, ease of use and lower costs, soon rendered natural materials less desirable and eventually obsolete. The knowledge of dyeing with natural materials was not lost, however, and the craft is something anyone can do easily, safely, and most likely with things already found in the kitchen and garden. While many of the strongest colors for dyeing textiles come from special dye plants, there's a large range of colors that can be derived from ordinary vegetables and fruits. You'll be surprised at what you can do.