



Harvesting Color: The Dyeing Process and Which Plants to Use

Read about the dyeing process -- and get a list of the types of plants you can use to create beautiful, natural fiber dyes.

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The Dyeing Process

Put the plant matter intended for dyeing into a pot of cool water, in amounts of about 1 part plant matter to 3 to 5 parts water. This ratio can vary depending on what you'll be using for the dye bath. What materials work for natural dyes? [Click here](#)> If it's vegetables, chop them coarsely. Leaves can be chopped up and added with their stems; berries can go in whole.

The more of the plant or vegetable material you have, the darker the color potentially will be. Powdered spices require much more water than the amount of spice.

Bring the mixture to a rolling boil over high heat, then lower the heat to medium-high and boil gently for at least an hour. You can cover it to minimize evaporation, but this isn't necessary.

When the boiling is done, carefully pour the entire mixture through a fine sieve into another large container.

Depending on the coarseness of the vegetables or fruits, you can use a regular kitchen strainer or cheesecloth, or a paint strainer for really fine stuff.

You want the resulting liquid to be as completely free of plant residue as you can get it (the leftover vegetative matter can go into the compost). The liquid you pour off into the lower bowl will be your dye bath.

Pour this liquid back into the cooking pan. Add the mordanted fiber to the dye bath and bring to a very gentle simmer. Do not boil—especially if you're using wool.

Simmer for 45 minutes to an hour or longer—again, the longer the fiber “cooks” in the dye bath, the more intense the color will be, up to a point. Be certain that all the fiber has equal time under the dye bath by stirring it occasionally.

As you stir, keep an eye on the color that is occurring. It will be darker than the completed, dried yarn, but this cooking time will give you an idea of how well the fiber is taking the color.

When you feel that the fiber has reached a color saturation point or a hue you like, carefully lift it out of the dye bath and place it into a large bowl. Take the bowl to the sink and fill it with cold water; rinse the fiber repeatedly, each time squeezing it and emptying the water in the bowl. When the liquid you squeeze out runs clear, you can give the fiber a final squeeze and hang it to dry.

Finally, make something beautiful with your fiber! Be careful when washing it—the mordant should have made it colorfast, but bleach and sunshine can still decrease the vividness and concentration of the color. Handwash only in cool water and hang it to dry.

Natural Color

The most amazing aspect of the colors we obtain from natural materials is the way they all complement one another; they seem to have a profound, subtle harmony.



No matter what the combination, there's something satisfying in each pairing.

I found the unions of the colors that resulted to be indescribably rich on a deep level. Perhaps it's that the colors nature chooses just all fit together with one another perfectly.

Every time I looked at them, I felt a comforted, warm, soothing feeling, as if I were out in the woods on a gentle day, looking at all the familiar colors of the outdoors.

I hope that whatever I end up knitting with my wool this winter will bring that feeling back to me, sitting by a fire, remembering warm days, flowers, herbs, fruits and vegetables, reminding me of the deep satisfaction of seasonal life on the farm.

What Can Be Used?

Many natural dye materials are listed in books and on websites, and once you start looking, it seems that everyone has tried to dye something with some kind of leaf or vegetable.

Many types of bark and roots can also be dried and used when ground up.

I used edibles and plants that people would tend to have in a normal kitchen or garden.

I also used vegetables and plants for dyeing that I noticed stain fingers or color the water when cooked.

There are lots of materials available, and it doesn't hurt to experiment and play around a bit, too! The colors listed below are what we got, but different results can be obtained with different fibers. Red cabbage: pink Onion skins: orangey-brown to green Strawberries, cranberries, raspberries and pomegranates: shades of pink and red Blueberries, blackberries: blue to purple Mulberries: purple Turmeric: vivid orange Cumin: yellow Paprika: orange to red Spinach: pale green to light yellow Cherries (frozen): peach to beige Barberry (all parts): yellow-orange

For more ideas, check out *A Dyer's Garden*, by Rita Buchanan or *Wild Color*, by Jenny Dean.

About the Author: Kelly Wood grows plants and flowers for dyeing and eating (but not together) in Portland, Ore. Rhoda Peacher is a freelance photographer and writer living outside Portland, Ore. She specializes in subjects relating to small farm and rural life.