



Rust Dyeing Fabric

Rust need not be a nuisance. Learn how to rust dye to create unique designs on fabric using rusty objects.

Article and photos by Maggie Howe

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My mom and I own a small herb farm in central Iowa. We purchased it years ago. As with many older farms, it came with outbuildings full of old junk, and an ancient, abandoned garbage burning pile.

We've spent years gradually cleaning up the farm, and over the years unearthed many rusty objects such as frying pans, weathervanes, and what seems like endless buckets of nails, wire, tools and bolts.

I used to view these rusty items as a nuisance, but now that I've discovered the fun art and craft of rust dyeing, I enjoy finding these rusty "treasures."

What Is Rust Dyeing?

Rust dyeing is an easy, fascinating way to dye fabric. You can dye wonderful imprints on cotton, silk, wool or even synthetic fibers using rusty "stuff."

I've dyed: Cotton quilting fabric Silk scarves and shawls Flannel fabric for sewing

You can achieve batik-like effects and wonderful color shifts by over dyeing colored fabrics. I've even dyed silk ties and shirts to give as gifts – all using rusty nails, bolts, sprockets, hinges, wire and other rusty objects found on our two-acre farm.

What Is Rust ... and What Will Rust?

Rust is the common word for several naturally occurring iron oxides. These iron oxides are formed by the corrosion of iron or steel; this corrosion happens when iron is exposed to oxygen and water.

Rust will permanently dye a variety of fabrics, and can even dye other materials such as leather and paper. The resulting fabric is completely colorfast, washable and totally unique.

How Does It Work?

The rust-dyeing process is extremely simple. When a rusty object is in contact with fabric, fiber or paper, it leaves an imprint. We place our rusty items on our fabric, wet it with water and vinegar to hasten the oxidization (rusting) process, and leave the fabric and rusty item together until we are satisfied with the color or pattern. Then we remove the item, wash the fabric and use it however we choose! The whole process takes only a few days and requires little effort.

What do I need?

Only a few simple items are needed for rust dyeing. To begin dyeing, you should assemble: Fabric Plastic kitchen gloves Spray bottle filled with a mixture of 50 percent water and 50 percent vinegar Plastic bags or wrap (optional) Plastic bin, box or tray Rusty items or steel wool pads (new ones are fine)

Place your rusty items on the fabric in any pattern you like.

Lightly spray your fabric with the vinegar/water mixture. You can add extra vinegar at any time, to help speed the dyeing process



Now, wrap loosely ...

The scarf is folded or wrapped around the rusty item(s), and placed inside a plastic bag. The plastic bag is simply to help keep the project moist, thus hastening the dyeing process. I have found that cotton and silk are the best fabrics for dyeing, but you can experiment with cotton blends. Even some synthetic fibers will dye well; you can experiment to find out which ones. Wool fabric will take dye, but the rust tends to color it a bit harshly; a wool/cotton blend can be a better choice, if that works for your project.

Find, buy or assemble a collection of rusty items. Wire, nails, bolts, tools, sprockets, pans, cooking items, irons, tractor or car parts, chain, hinges... the list is endless! And once you begin rust dyeing, you'll be scouting garage sales, thrift stores, antiques shops and auctions for uniquely-shaped or -patterned rusty items. You can also use brand-new or used (but clean) steel wool pads. You can use these items over, and over, and over again.

You can even rust non-rusty iron items. I found a bike sprocket that was in pristine condition, but I wanted it to rust! I put it outside in a shallow pan with a bit of salt, water, and vinegar, and in a few weeks, it was fabulously rusty and ready for dyeing.

Think Outside the Box

You can use white cloth for the purest rust colors and clearest designs, but don't be afraid to experiment with colored or even patterned fabrics. Scraps of sewing or quilting fabrics in assorted colors are wonderful for rust dyeing; you can achieve batik-like effects and wonderful color shifts by over dyeing colored fabrics.

Look for neutral-colored natural fiber shirts, t-shirts, skirts, tablecloths, or fabric scraps at garage sales or thrift stores. These can be turned into one-of-a-kind designer works of art with the application of a little rust.

Let's Dye!

Follow these steps: Assemble your items on a workspace. You may want to cover your table or bench with plastic bags or wrap. Rust will also dye your clothes, so wear old clothes that you don't mind staining. Always wear gloves (kitchen gloves are perfect) when handling rusty items. It's safer, cleaner, and protects your hands from both discoloration and scrapes or scratches.

If you want specific imprints from your rusty items: Lay your fabric flat in a plastic box or tray. Lightly spray your fabric with the vinegar/water mixture. Place your rusty items on the fabric in any pattern you like. Place another piece of fabric on top.

Keep your fabric slightly moist for the next few days; this will help the rust designs to develop. (Tip: Weight down the fabric with small items such as rocks or bottles if you want to make your imprint clearer.)

You can lay a plastic bag or sheet lightly over the fabric, but you also want to make sure air can reach the fabric as well. Oxygen is necessary for the rust to develop.

My favorite way to rust-dye is to leave the items outside, uncovered, for a few rainy or humid days!

Here are some more dyeing options: Roll or wrap your fabric around rusty items; if you have a rusty pot or kettle, you can wad the fabric up and stuff it inside the pot or kettle.

If you're using steel wool, unroll it and wrap or fold it into your fabric, or cut it into strips, pieces or bits, and place or sprinkle them onto your fabric.

I have even bundled rusty chain, wire, nails and other small items willy-nilly into fabric, and put it all in a plastic bucket or bag with fantastic results.

The important thing is to make sure that the rusty items are in contact with the fabric—that's how the dyeing occurs. This process can be as planned or as random as you like. And you cannot fail – if you don't like your results, you can simply dye your fabric again with more rusty items.

Length of the Dyeing Process

Check your fabric once a day or so; make sure it's damp, and see how the color is developing.

For light colors, you may only want to leave your dyeing project for one day.



For very dark intense color, you might leave it for 4 or 5 days.

If left too long, the rust can eventually damage the fabric, especially if it is thin or delicate (I've left silk too long and it developed holes). However, if you check your fabric every day or so, you should not have any problems.

I find that the rust-dye develops more quickly in warmer environments; I especially love rust-dyeing outdoors in the summer, as it goes very quickly.

Rust dyeing does damage the integrity of fabrics slightly; however, I have found my rust-dyed fabrics perfectly suitable for crafting, wearing, quilting and sewing. Items with very strong or dark rust-dye will be more difficult to sew, simply because your needle will dull quickly.

Finishing Your Dyeing Process

When you are satisfied with the color and patterning of your fabric, remove the rusty items and keep them for use in your next project.

Next, immerse the fabric in a light saline solution; this completely stops the rusting process and neutralizes the fabric. For the solution, I use about one tablespoon of salt in a gallon of water.

Then wash the fabric as normal – if it's silk or wool, hand wash with dishwashing liquid and rinse thoroughly. If it's a cotton or synthetic, you may machine wash and dry as normal.

The only time I enjoy ironing is after I have just rust-dyed some fabric or a garment. After it's washed, ironing it is so rewarding! When it's ironed, you can really see the fantastic patterns and fully enjoy the beauty of your dye project.

About the Author: Maggie Howe grows herbs and flowers—and makes beautiful fabrics and more—at Prairieland Herbs, the farm she co-owns in central Iowa.