

Kitchen Cupboard Dyeing

by Debbie Tomkies



Although you may not be aware of it, dyeing materials are all around us. The humble teabag makes a lovely cuppa but how about stewing it with your yarns to produce lovely browns and tans? Make weeding more bearable by using dandelions to produce lovely yellow shades. Keep your privet clippings for great olive-green and ochre colours. Berries, leaves, roots and barks are all good candidates for the dyepot, as are many vegetable leaves and some herbs and spices.

With natural dyeing, there are few hard and fast rules to follow and experimentation is the best way to learn. As many dyestuffs can be collected free (my local gardener would pay me to take away his privet clippings!), getting started isn't expensive and you can have lots of fun experimenting with different plants and vegetables.

Natural dyeing can be broken down into the following simple steps:

1. Making yarn ready for dyeing

Before dyeing can begin, yarn must be skeined and soaked and, in most cases, a fixer (mordant) applied to make the colour permanent. For wools, alum is commonly used. Some dyestuffs, however, contain natural mordant so only need soaking in water.

2. Preparing the dyestuff

Next the colour needs to be extracted from the dyestuff. This is usually done by soaking and cooking the materials then either straining out the solids to leave the dye liquor, or the yarn is simply added to the dyebath with the dyestuff still in the pot. Soft fruit can usually be soaked overnight then used the following day. Clippings, leaves and roots should be washed then soaked for several days in water until soft. They are then simmered until the colour comes out. This can take several hours so be prepared to be patient! Powdered spices and herbs (e.g. turmeric, henna), usually only need to be dissolved before use.

3. Cooking the yarn to set the colour

To dye the yarn it is usually simmered until the colour is how you want it, then left to cool, sometimes overnight. Once cooled it can be rinsed and dried.

The following simple recipe uses everyday teabags. The high tannin content in the tea acts as a natural fixer, so no additional mordant is needed:

Step 1

Get together your equipment. Read the health and safety guidelines carefully.

Step 2

Round up your teabags (do I really drink this much tea?) then soak 100g dry weight of skeined natural animal fibre yarn (e.g. wool) in warm water for about 45mins. The amount of water isn't important but the yarn should be able to move around freely.

Step 3

In a separate, large pot, stew around 25 teabags (fresh or used!), in boiling water for an hour or so, until the liquor is nice and dark (this is too strong even for me to drink!). Allow to cool.

Step 4

Lift out the teabags, keeping as much liquid as possible in the dish. Squeeze the wet yarn thoroughly then add to the dyebath. Make sure the yarn can swish round freely in the pot. Simmer the dyebath and yarn for around 30 minutes then allow to cool in the dyebath. Rinse your cooled yarn in warm water. Add a little woolwash to the first rinse. Allow to dry.

Step 5

You should have a lovely rosy brown skein of yarn.

Other dyestuffs which can be used in this way include tomato vines, pomegranate (rind and pulp), rhubarb leaves, walnut (husks, leaves), bilberries, eucalyptus leaves.

Some dyestuffs will not be permanent unless a mordant is applied to the fibres. For animal fibres, alum is commonly used as a mordant. Alum is a naturally occurring mineral that is considered safe in use and has little environmental impact. Alum can be purchased as crystals from good natural dye suppliers or some chemists.

Alum mordanting is generally done before dyeing and the dyeing process is then the same as above. In Fig. 6, the bright yellow yarn (top right) was mordanted with alum then dyed with a tablespoon of turmeric. The turmeric was simply dissolved in water then strained through a coffee filter to remove the gritty particles. The pinky-beige in the centre was dyed using alum mordant and an old jar of pickled red cabbage. Other than the extra step of mordanting (below), the process is the same as for tea. (Note: the turmeric is great but be aware that the colour may fade over time, even after mordanting).

Alum mordanting.

Dissolve 20-25g alum in a little boiling water, then add to a large pan with enough

water to allow the yarn to swish around freely. Add 100g dry weight of natural animal fibre yarn (e.g. wool). Bring up to a simmer over about 45 minutes, then cook at a simmer for a further hour, stirring regularly. Allow to cool. Dye the yarn using the process described above.

TOP TIPS

Try charity shops for cheap pots. Choose stainless steel or enamel, but avoid aluminium, iron or copper ones as these can taint the dye colours.

Check out eBay and car boot sales for cheap wool yarn to practice with. Avoid synthetic fibres as they rarely take dye permanently.

Clippings, etc. can be dried and stored for future use.

When mordanting, make up a larger batch of yarn than you need then dry and store your mordanted yarn for later. Just wet thoroughly when you are ready to use it.

Collect with care. Don't pick wildflowers, fungi or lichens, as these may be rare.

Grow your own dyestuffs. Madder, broom, woad and other dyestuffs can be grown quite easily.

For purples and reds, many berries will initially give these colours but may fade quickly.

Don't have time to stew up clippings etc.? Natural dye extracts are very concentrated powders, easy to use and fully inter-mixable. They can be used for all types of dyeing including rainbow dyeing, yarn painting and other techniques. They are handy when you are short on time and can produce a more predictable, wider range of colours.

Make notes: repeating results exactly is nigh impossible, but notes will help you remember how you got that fabulous shade!

SAFETY

Dyeing pots and equipment should only be used for dyeing and not used afterwards for cooking. Label all dyestuffs etc. Handle carefully and store out of reach of children and animals.

Wear gloves and an apron. Cover surfaces and clean up thoroughly.

Use oven gloves when handling hot pots.

Work in a well-ventilated area and don't inhale fumes or powders. Use a suitable mask, particularly if you are prone to allergies.

Don't eat, drink, prepare food, or smoke when dyeing.

Avoid dyeing if you are, or may be, pregnant.

Seek medical advice if any substances come into contact with your eyes or are ingested. Remember, plants can be poisonous.

Please read any warnings on individual product packaging carefully before use.

Please consider the environment when disposing of dyes and fixer solutions. The quantities you will be using should have minimum impact. However, if you plan to dye in significant quantities or if you have a septic tank/reed filtration system etc., contact your local waste disposal authority for further guidance.

MATERIALS AND EQUIPMENT LIST

- Yarn/fabric/fleece/tops or other fibres (avoid anything man-made or synthetic

as results can be at best unreliable and in many cases, the dyes will simply not work at all. Rayon and viscose are exceptions to this rule of thumb, taking dye well)

- Water
- Bucket for soaking and rinsing yarn
- A large, flat-bottomed stainless steel or enamel pan, dish or similar container, large enough to comfortably hold the yarn
- Plastic or newspapers to cover work surfaces
- Dust mask
- Measuring jug
- Stirring stick or spoon
- Containers to hold the dye solutions
- Access to a stove or portable gas/electric hob
- Adhesive labels or permanent marker pen for marking up dye solution bottles and equipment
- Tags for labelling yarns
- Notebook for recording your methods and results for use in future projects

This printable version has been designed to minimise ink and space. For more images, including step-by-step process pictures, visit the original at www.theinsideloop.com.

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