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HOME DYEING WOOL WITH NATURAL FIBERS

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Vegetable dyeing is a craft which has existed since the earliest times. In each locality there are many natural dye materials that by one method or another, will give satisfactory color.

This publication is intended merely as a guide for dyeing wool with vegetable materials native to Virginia.

NATURE MATERIALS

Dye Materials	Color Range
Acorns	Tans
Black walnut hulls	Browns and tans
Burley tobacco	Browns
Coffee	Tans
Concord grapes	Lavenders and purples
Crab apples (ornamental)	Pinks
Dandelion blossoms	Light yellows
Floribunda rose plant	Tans
Goldenrod blossoms	Yellows
Marigold blossoms	Yellows
Poke weed berries	Reds
Queen Anne's Lace	Pale yellow
Turmeric	Yellows
Yellow onion skins	Yellows
Zinnia blossoms	Yellows

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Steps in the Dyeing Process

An important first step in any dyeing project is to read all of the information and assemble all of the equipment and supplies needed.

1. **Selecting Materials:** Berries and fruits should be picked when completely ripe.
Blossoms should be picked when flower reaches full blossom.
Grasses, leaves, stalks, stems, twigs and vines should be collected late in the season.
Nuts, hulls, and shells - Collect when the nuts are mature, usually after they have fallen to the ground.
2. **Storing:** To hold materials before making dyebath store in a dry place or freeze. Prepared vegetable dyebaths will spoil, ferment or mold at room temperature within two or three days. The dyebath should be refrigerated or placed in plastic container and frozen.
3. **Scouring:** Of all the textile fibers, wool can be dyed most easily. The wool yarn or fiber needs to be scoured (washed) before you begin dyeing. To do this, cover the wool yarn with warm water (2-3 gallons) in a large container and add 2 Tsp. of liquid soap. Stir the soap in until suds are formed. Simmer for about 45 minutes. Pour the water off the yarn, cool, and rinse with warm water until all the soap is removed.
4. **Mordanting:** Before you begin dyeing, the yarn must be treated with a mordant, which is any substance which will combine with a dye substance and cause the dye to permanently color the yarn. The easiest mordant to use is alum, which can be found on the spice rack in the grocery store.

To mordant your yarn with alum, use 3 gallons of warm water, add 3 ounces of alum and stir until completely dissolved. Add the wet wool yarn to this solution and simmer for about 1 hour. Then cool and rinse the yarn again. Gently squeeze the water from the yarn. The yarn is now ready to be dyed.
5. **Making the Dyebath:** To make a dyebath to dye one pound of wool fiber or yarn: Collect 4 gallons of the material to be used for the dyebath, except for concord grapes, dandelion blossoms, zinnia blossoms and acorns when only 3 gallons of the material is needed. Follow recipe given for each dye substance. See pp. 3-5.
6. **Dyeing the Wool:** The dyebath should be lukewarm when the wet yarn is added. Simmer for 30 minutes. At this time add a solution to the dyebath of one pint hot water, 4 tablespoons of cream of tartar (tartaric acid) and 1/2 cup uniodized salt. Simmer for about 30 minutes. Cool. Rinse the yarn in warm water until rinse is clear, then squeeze the water from the yarn and hang it in the shade to dry.

Dyebath Recipes

Recipes are intended for one pound of wool mordanted with alum.

Acorns With Alum Mordant

To Make Dyebath: Place the acorns in a five gallon enamel container, cover them with about three and a half gallons of water and soak for twelve to twenty-four hours. After they have been allowed to soak, boil the acorns in the same water for two hours. Cool. Remove the refuse. The liquid is the dyebath.

Black Walnut Hulls With Alum Mordant

To Make Dyebath: Break the hulls from the walnuts, place them in a five gallon enamel container, cover with three gallons of warm water and soak for about twenty-four hours. After the walnuts have been allowed to soak, boil them in the same water for about three hours. Cool. Remove the refuse. The liquid is now the dyebath.

Burley Tobacco With Alum Mordant

To Make Dyebath: Cut the tobacco leaves into 4" to 6" length pieces, place them in a five gallon enamel container, cover with two and a half to three gallons of water and boil for about one hour. Cool. Remove the refuse. The liquid becomes the dyebath.

Coffee With Alum Mordant

The grounds from any of the perculator grinds of coffee will make dye after they have been used for making coffee beverage.

To Make Dyebath: Place the coffee grounds in a lightweight cotton bag. The bag should be large enough to allow the grounds to move around inside it. Tie the top of the bag and place it in a five gallon enamel container. Cover with three gallons of warm water and boil for one hour. Remove the bag of coffee grounds. Add two tablespoons of tannic acid to the liquid. This is the dyebath.

Concord Grapes With Alum Mordant

The purple grape, known as Concord, contains dye substance when it is ripe. It should be used fresh.

To Make Dyebath: Pick three gallons of Concord grapes from their stems, place them in a five gallon enamel container and cover with about three and a half gallons of water. Boil them for about one hour or until color has boiled out of the grapes. Crush the grapes while boiling to help remove color. Cool. Strain. The liquid is the dyebath.

Crab Apples With Alum Mordant

Pick the crab apples when they are red in color and ripe.

To Make Dyebath: Place the crab apples in a five gallon enamel container, cover them with water and boil until the apples are soft. Cool. Strain. The liquid has now become the dyebath.

Dandelion Blossoms With Alum Mordant

To Make Dyebath: Place the dandelion blossoms in a five gallon enamel container, cover them with about three and a half gallons of water and boil for about forty-five minutes. Cool. Remove the refuse and the liquid becomes the dyebath.

Dried Pokeweed Berries With Alum Mordant

Dried pokeweed berries can be used to make a dye. The berries can be dried by the dyer or they can be purchased from suppliers of vegetable dyes.

To Make Dyebath: Place two pounds of dried pokeweed berries in a five gallon enamel container, cover them with about three and a half gallons of water and allow to soak twelve hours. After twelve hours, boil the dried berries in the water in which they have been allowed to soak for one hour. Cool. Strain. The liquid becomes the dyebath.

Floribunda Rose With Alum Mordant

Rose plants can be used to make dyes. (If the roses are trimmed in the fall, before frost, the trimmings will make a dye.)

To Make Dyebath: Cut four gallons of floribunda rose stems and leaves into 3" or 4" lengths, place them in a five gallon enamel container, cover with water and soak for twelve hours. Boil the stems and leaves in the water in which they have been allowed to soak for about two hours. Add extra water as it boils away. Cool. Remove the refuse. The liquid is now the dyebath.

Goldenrod Blossoms With Alum Mordant

To Make Dyebath: Cut the goldenrod blossoms and that part of the stem nearest the blossom into 1" to 3" lengths, place in a five gallon enamel container, cover with water and boil for about two hours. The water may need to be replenished as it boils away. Cool. Remove the refuse. The liquid has now become the dyebath.

Marigold Blossoms With Alum Mordant

The blossoms should be picked when they are in full bloom.

To Make Dyebath: Place the marigold blossoms in a five gallon enamel container, cover with water and boil for about forty-five minutes. Cool. Remove the refuse. The liquid is now the dyebath.

Pokeweed Berries With Alum Mordant

Pokeweed berries should be picked late in the summer after they have turned dark purple. They can be used fresh or stored frozen.

To Make Dyebath: Cut the pokeweed berries and stems into 1" to 3" lengths. Place in a five gallon enamel container, cover with water, and boil for about forty-five minutes. Crushing the berries while they boil will release more dye. Cool. Remove all solid matter and the liquid becomes the dyebath.

Queen Anne's Lace With Alum Mordant

To Make Dyebath: Cut the whole plant, including the blossoms, into 3" or 4" lengths, place them in a five gallon enamel container, cover with water and boil for about two hours. Extra water should be added if it boils away. Remove the refuse. The liquid is now the dyebath.

Turmeric With Alum Mordant

To Make Dyebath: Put the turmeric into a cheesecloth bag, place the bag in an enamel container, cover it with two and a half gallons of warm water and soak for twelve hours. The bag should be large enough to allow the turmeric to expand while it is soaking. After the turmeric has been soaked, boil the bag in the soaking water for about two hours. Press and squeeze the color from the bag several times while it is boiling. Cool. Remove the bag and the liquid becomes the dyebath.

Yellow Onion Skins With Alum Mordant

To Make Dyebath: Place four gallons of dry yellow onion skins in a five gallon enamel container, cover them with water and boil until the skins are clear. Cool. Remove the cooked skins and the liquid becomes the dyebath.

Zinnia Blossoms With Alum Mordant

Zinnia blossoms should be picked when they are in full bloom. The different varieties and colors may be mixed. All varieties and colors tested made shades of yellow when used with alum mordant.

To Make Dyebath: Place the fresh zennia blossoms in a five gallon enamel container, cover them with three gallons of water and boil for about thirty minutes. Cool. Remove the refuse. The liquid now becomes the dyebath.

Source: Vegetable Dyeing by Alma Leach
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