

Notes on Natural Dyes

/ Anita Cazzola

PROCESS

1: Scour

Scouring is a 'deep cleaning' that will remove any oils, finishing, dirt, etc from new and used fibres. I use Soda Ash to scour most fabrics, with the exception of wool - here I use a pH neutral soap called Orvus Paste.

I use 1-2% of the weight of the dry fibre (i.e. WOF) soda ash or orvus paste. Dissolve this in boiling water and add to a pot of warm water. Submerge pre-soaked fibers and increase heat to a light simmer. Hold in here for 45 minutes, then remove fibers and rinse. Proceed to mordanting.

2: Mordant

The word 'mordant' comes from the french for 'to bite'. Mordanting helps fibres 'bite' onto colour, to increase colourfastness and lightfastness, and to produce brighter/deeper shades. There are many plants and minerals that can be used as a mordant. The most popular is Alum (aluminum sulfate) which is a metal salt. Other options include iron, soy milk, symplocos, and tannin-rich plants such as sumac or gallnut. A recipe for mordanting with sumac can be found here: dyeplantsincuriousspaces.com/sumac

3: Make Dyebath

Gently forage plant materials so that you have between 50-200% WOF of plant material. The more plant material you use, the richer the colour will be. Submerge the plants in a pot of water and simmer around 160F for 45 + minutes. This is very loose - you can let things soak overnight after an initial heating, or heat for a few hours if you want to try to coax more colour out of the plants. Strain plant material out of the bath and proceed to dyeing.

4: Dye

Submerge pre-soaked fibres into the dyebath. Gently increase heat to 160F again

and let stand here for 45 + minutes. Stig gently and regularly. Again, you can let things sit longer for deeper colours.

5: Dry/rinse/dry/iron

To preserve water, I let my fabrics dry completely before rinsing them. This also helps the colour set more. Rinse the fabrics in cold water, and let them dry again. Then, iron them to set the colour with heat. Going forward, wash in cold water with pH neutral soap.

ON FORAGING

Please be mindful & practice gratitude when foraging for natural dye plants. Consider:

- how does this plant propagate and regenerate? (seeds, rhizomes, etc)
- is this a native plant? Is it endangered? Is it invasive?
- how does this plant support pollinators and other members of the ecosystem?
- if I remove some of this plant, will it harm these ecosystems?
- does this plant *want* to be harvested?
- consider reading: "The Honorable Harvest" in Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* (or the whole book - it is all amazing!)

RESOURCES / MATERIALS

Maiwa School of Textiles / Maiwa Handprints

maiwa.com (*materials, instructions/techniques*)

Mamie's Schoolhouse

mamiesschoolhouse.com (*sustainable dye blog*)

Fibershed / Upper Canada Fibreshed

fibershed.org / uppercanadafibreshed.ca (*sustainable textile knowledge sharing and local producer directory*)

Botanica Tinctoria

botanica tinctoria.com (*dyed and undyed trims & threads*)

Botanical Colors

botanicalcolors.com (*materials, instructions/techniques*)

Dye Plants in Curious Spaces

dyeplantsincuriousspaces.com (*online local dye archive*)

