

## **Natural Dyeing Basics**

Baroness Eithni ingen Talorgain, OL, OP  
eithni@gmail.com

### **Tips to getting started successfully**

- Do some reading and planning in advance – it will tell you what materials you will need, what safety precautions you need to take and give you an idea of how long your project will take.
- Start with a small, easy and cheap project - Woad is really cool but expensive and tricky. It is less discouraging to have a \$3 project go wonky than to waste \$40.
- Order or obtain quality dyestuffs – It is no fun to waste time and fabric on stale, cheap or old dyestuffs that will not produce the colors you are looking for.
- Get a good deal on equipment – a large amount of what you need for natural dyeing can be obtained cheaply at your local Goodwill store (pots, utensils, scales, etc.). Even some dyestuffs can be obtained on the cheap – gather onion skins at the grocery store and look for weeds and cut wood along the roadside.
- Keep a written record of what you do, so you can learn from mistakes and remember how to replicate successes.
- Keep all chemicals in tightly sealed, clearly labeled containers. Many of the dyestuffs, mordants, and modifiers are irritants or toxic.

### **Basic Equipment:**

- Large enamel or stainless pot(s)
- Long spoon
- Paint straining bags/colander
- Bucket(s)
- Dyestuffs
- Fiber to be dyed
- Small scale
- Cupcake liners
- Gloves, masks, goggles, apron
- Clothesline and pins
- Notebook and pen
- Camera (optional)

### **Preparing your fabric**

- Natural dyes take best on natural fibers – silk in particular dyes well, but also use linen, cotton, and wool
- Always pre-wash the fabric according to the recommended pre-dyeing washing method to improve the color and to prevent fading, crocking, or uneven coloring
  - Wash wool and silk fibers with a mild dish detergent
  - Boil cotton and linen in a solution of washing soda and soap
  - Rinse very, very well.
- Mordants are a pre-treatment that helps the dye stick to the fibers better. Depending on the fiber and dyestuff, mordanting may or may not be necessary. The most common mordants are alum, copper, tannin, and iron. Refer to resources to see which is right for your project. Mordants can also often be used as modifiers after the dyebath to alter the color of the finished fiber.

## **Dyeing**

- Dyeing can be done in either hot or cold water, but hot water often produces more intense colors.
- Most dyes produce a darker color when either more dyestuffs are used or the fibers are exposed to the dyebath for a longer period of time. Some exceptions exist, however, like indigo and woad, where the depth of the color is based on the number of times the fibers are dipped and then exposed to the air.
- In most cases, you should strain out the dyestuffs before adding your fibers to the pot or the dyestuffs can stick to your fiber and create a mottled appearance. I prefer to use paint strainer bags because they are of a finer mesh than most colanders and strainers and are suitable for straining large volumes at a time.
- Fibers should be wet, and usually soaked, when added to the dyebath to improve the uniformity of the color.
- The dye pot should always be large enough to permit the free movement of the fibers in the dyebath. If fibers get bunched up, it increases the chances of uneven dyeing and a mottled appearance.
- Stir the dyebath often to ensure that the fibers get uniformly exposed to the dye.
- Rinse the dyed fibers well and wash before sewing fabric into a final garment.
- I often use Retayne – a color setting additive - on my dyeing projects. I have had good luck with it in commercially dyed fibers and it seems to improve the colorfastness of naturally dyed projects as well.  
<http://www.dharmatrading.com/html/eng/1981-AA.shtml>

## **Written Resources:**

- Wild Color by Jenny Dean and Karen Diadick Casselman ISBN: 0823057275
- The Art and Craft of Natural Dyeing: Traditional Recipes for Modern Use by J. N. Liles ISBN: 0870496700
- Dyes in the Viking age: <http://www.cs.vassar.edu/~capriest/vikdyes.html>
- Elizabethan and earlier dyes: <http://www.elizabethancostume.net/dyes/>
- Natural Dyes International <http://www.naturaldyes.org/>

## **Materials Resources:** (can you see the pattern?)

- Earth guild <http://www.earthguild.com/> 1-800-327-8448
- Earthsong <http://www.earthsongfibers.com>
- Earthhues <http://www.earthhues.com/>
- The Woolery <http://www.woolery.com/Pages/dyes.html>
- Your local pharmacy, grocery, or hardware store – some will carry bulk chemicals like alum
- Your grocery store - most will not complain if you take the loose onion skins out of the bins and you may be able to ask about fruits and flowers that have gone too bad to be sold as food, but may be fine to be used as dyestuffs.
- Your local quilting or knitting shop – they may carry natural dyeing materials or be able to tell you about other local suppliers.