Black Walnut Hulls for Dye and Natural Medicine

Black Walnut trees have stood next to our home for over 35 years. Other than dents in the roof, twisting my ankle on an unseen ball, and a source of enjoyment for my kids, I never saw much use for them. Now I am kicking myself for all the wasted black walnut harvests we could have been enjoying. I recently decided to collect some black walnuts in order to make a natural dye for our line of yarn.

While researching how to make the dye, I came upon many other interesting articles and ideas. Did you know black walnut was one source for early quill and fountain pen ink? Black walnuts have been harvested for clothing and fiber dye for centuries but did you know that the hulls also have medicinal use? And then we could open up the many creative ways you can use the black walnut hulls and walnut shells for crafts and decorations. All this before you even get to the delicious walnut meat inside.
Ink from Black Walnut Hulls

Black Walnut hulls make a lovely shade of dark brown ink that holds up well against light and air. If you enjoy calligraphy, pen and ink drawing or just want to experiment, this is an easy ink to make.

When you husk the green outer covering off the black walnuts, break up the hulls into slightly smaller pieces. Add the hulls to a non reactive stock pot (stainless steel), cover with water and simmer. Some people describe that they soak the hulls for a few days before heating and others heat right away, and let the mixture cool and sit for a few days. After reading a few different accounts of how to make black walnut ink, I have concluded that it doesn’t really matter at this point. Basically the steps are as follows:

1. Add husks to the stock pot and cover with water
2. Simmer for a couple hours (although some writers mentioned they only simmered for 30 minutes)
3. Cool the liquid
4. Strain through a muslin bag or cloth
5. Test the strength of the ink. If not dark enough, simmer longer to evaporate more water. Be careful not to scorch the ink by simmering too long
6. Test again.
7. When happy with the strength, filter again and pour into a glass jar or bottle. Leave room for the addition of alcohol for preservative. Recommended amount per volume is 1 part alcohol to 4 parts ink. 100 proof vodka or rubbing alcohol can be used.
8. When disposing of the hulls, keep in mind that the juglanes contain compounds that can inhibit plant growth. Do not dispose of the sludge in your garden, or near other trees.

*store ink and dyes out of reach of children and pets.

**Making Dye From the Walnut Hulls**

After collecting a large bucket of green hulled black walnuts from the yard, I spent an afternoon with a hammer and a brick. The green hulls went into the stock pot for dye. The inner nutshell went on a framed screen for drying. After drying, the inner meat of the nut can be extracted.
For making dye to use with yarn, roving or cloth, you will need to add more water to the pot than when you made ink. I added two gallons to my stock pot. You will want to use a pot that will eventually accommodate the amount of material you wish to dye, along with suitable amount of liquid to cover. This part is not an exact science.

Simmer the hulls in the water for a couple of hours. Black walnut dye does not need a mordant because of the high level of tannins in the hulls. The tannins will act as a mordant, making the color stick to the cloth or yarn.

After the dye has simmered, strain out the hulls. I used a fine mesh strainer. If you want to be very certain that no plant material stays in the dye, you can use a muslin cloth to strain the dye. Return the dye to the stock pot. If the water level isn’t high enough add more water. The dye should be a very dark brown
Should you soak and pre-mordant?

Before adding the yarn or fabric to the dye bath, soak the yarn in water, bringing slowly to a simmer for at least an hour. This opens up the fibers to accept the dye. When using other dyes a mordant, such as alum, would be added to the water to increase yarn's ability to accept the dye. When using black walnut dye, you can use a mordant, but it isn’t crucial. I used a pre-mordanted yarn for one batch of black walnut dye and did not mordant on another skein. The color was different, although both are a lovely shade of cocoa brown.

Dyeing the Material

Add the wet yarn or fabric to the dye bath after gently squeezing out some of the water. Do not wring! Felting can occur easily with wool yarn, water and heat. Slowly increase the heat in the dye bath to a low simmer. Or use the dye bath cold, allowing the yarn and dye to stand over night or for a couple of days.
Remove the yarn or cloth from the dye bath. I usually move it to a dish pan in the sink, or use the outside garden hose away from any plants. Rinse the yarn, being careful not to wring or agitate wool fiber. When the water runs clear, the yarn is ready for a shampoo. A drop or two of a textile detergent will finish off the yarn. Rinse the soap out, and hang the skein to dry. Dry completely before storing the yarn.

Make notes as you go along and snip off a sample of the yarn for your notes. I always think I will remember what I did but reality is that I don’t remember! Add information such as, mordant used, time of year, type of fabric or yarn, how long it sat in the dye bath.
Bottom row, L to R
Turmeric, Pokeberry, Goldenrod, middle Pokeberry and Black walnut, Top, Black walnut

Natural Worming Tincture from Black Walnut Hulls

Having only recently learned of the medicinal use of black walnut hulls for making a tincture, I can’t give you any first hand accounts. I have done some research and talked to a couple of herbalist friends about how they use black walnut tincture. The resulting tincture from extracting the compounds out of the hulls, is an anthelmintic. Anthelmintics help the body expel worms. Eww factor! But if I had a case of worms, I would rather use a natural cure than taking a chemical product.
There is information regarding the use of black walnut tincture in livestock and in chickens. I have a half gallon mason jar brewing in my kitchen now. I should be able to strain and bottle it next week. Research and information can be found on using it to worm goats, sheep and dogs, but as I said, I have no first hand knowledge of the dosage or strength. I am looking into it and meanwhile making the tincture so I have plenty available to dose our herds and flocks if I find it a safe measure.

It was my friend Chris from Joybilee Farm that mentioned using the black walnut hulls for medicinal purposes. I also found this information from WellnessMama which spells out a lot of the benefits of black walnut tincture. Black walnut is a natural astringent, lowers blood pressure, and aids digestive system problems. It can have an effect on flatulence, parasites. and heartburn. Please look into this for yourself as I don’t feel qualified to give out herbal medicinal advice. Preparedness Mamma has a great post on making Black Walnut Salve

Maybe you think all of this information is great but what you really want to know is how to eat the meat from the nuts or delicious recipes made using black walnuts. Here’s a couple of ideas for you to review.

Black Walnut Pie

How to Harvest and Crack Black Walnuts
Are you looking for all natural yarns from free ranging, lovable sheep and fiber goats? Our flock creates beautiful yarns and roving every year. Please visit our shop here or our Etsy shop here.
Free Range Yarn
Homegrown Wool from Our Sheep and Goats

natural dyed yarns – listings coming soon