Dyeing Wool with Natural Plant Dyes

Learning to Use Nature for Dyeing Wool

After years of producing yarn from our home grown wool, I reviewed *A Garden to Dye For*, by Chris McLaughlin and I was thrilled to dive into the world of naturally dyeing wool. (Click on this link if you want to read my review on Amazon.)

We raise our own fiber animals on the farm and send the raw fleeces to a local mill to be processed and spun into yarn. A goal of mine has been to start dyeing wool and yarns to add to our shop. I dream of offering all naturally dyed yarn and fiber to complement our natural color, home grown wools.
It did take me quite awhile to gather plants and flowers and actually begin dyeing wool. But, once I got going, I was hooked! I started looking at all the plants around me in a new way. Could I harvest that color from that flower? Would that
green leaf produce green or some other color?
In the book, A Garden to Dye For, Chris McLaughlin takes you step by step through the process, all the while keeping in mind that this is a creative process. From the planting of a dyers garden, gathering the correct equipment, the pre-dyeing and dyeing process is all there at your fingertips. The book is not a science manual but, rather speaks to your creative side.

While I was creating color, I noticed that one small step to either side can change the color both subtly and significantly. Adding a modifier such as washing soda, or vinegar, can change the PH and the color. Also, the color you see in the plant or vegetable, may not even remotely be the color of the dye you end up with.

Another important point to remember is that the color you receive one day from a particular plant, may vary greatly from the color you develop next time. Dyeing wool in enough quantity for one particular project ensures that you have enough of the dye lot.
Above photo is two separate dye baths using marigold flowers.

So, with the book by my side, I began to experiment. Here are the results of a few different skeins of yarn made colorful with natural garden dyes.

Keep in mind that I was dyeing sample skeins of yarn, approximately 20 yards in length. Adjust the measurements accordingly.

**Red Onion Skin**

**Result – Amber/Brown**
Remove the skin from a red onion. Simmer the skins in 6 cups of water for approximately 30 minutes. Onions are a natural mordant, with the tannins, so the yarn does not need to be pre-mordanted.

Soak the yarn so that it is soaked through. Add the wet yarn to the dye bath and continue to simmer the yarn until the color is developed enough. Rinse the yarn in lukewarm water, do not rinse in cold water as shocking the fiber can result in felting.
Dry completely.

Marigolds
result: Pale yellow to orange range

1/2 cup of marigold blossoms.
6 cups of water
begin to warm the mixture in a pan.
Mordant for the yarn - 1/2 teaspoon alum and 1/2 teaspoon cream of tarter in 8 cups of warm water. Add the yarn to the water bath and slowly bring to a boil. Simmer for one hour making sure the pan does not run out of water. If the water starts to get low, add some additional warm water. Using a long handled wooden spoon, lift the yarn from the bath and let it drain back into the pan.

Immediately add the yarn to the dye bath. Warm the water and keep the dye bath warm for as long as needed for developing the color.

**Madder Root**

**Result:** Deep reds
Madder does not naturally grow in my area. I think you can find some seeds to plant and maybe have it in your garden but I was a bit impatient and ordered some dry madder dye from Dharma Trading.

Use yarn that has been mordanted. If the fiber has dried, re wet before placing in the dye bath. I loved the deep red color that madder produces. After dyeing, rinse in warm water until water is clear.

Just for fun, I also tried some other things we had available. The roses in the side yard are deep pink. They look like there would be plenty of color available, so I gathered two cups of rose petals. I boiled them, and after straining off the dye liquid, I placed a sample skein into the dye. I was a bit surprised to find that the color that developed was more of a brown. I tried to vary the color by adding some washing soda but it just became more of a brown. that’s the fun of experimenting with gardens and dying. You never really know what you might get!

Another note: try to take good notes while you work. I thought I had but I now have this beautiful shade of amber/orange and no idea how I got it. I do remember using a modifier on a brown result but that is as far as my memory goes with it. So
here it is.

I am working on creating a pallet of sample colors, all the while, keeping in mind that the color will vary based on many factors. This is truly a creative process that should be enjoyed. Gather some samples from your garden, your woods, or ask a friend for some materials from their yard. Before long, I am sure you will be hooked on natural dyeing wool, too. Pick up your copy of *A Garden to Dye For* here.

Other helpful resources:
A Weaver’s Garden by Rita Buchanan
Harvesting Color, How to Find Plants and Make Natural Dyes by Rebecca Burgess

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