Naturally Dyeing Homestead Wool

Tools and Materials

- Stainless steel pots or pans (using Iron, copper and aluminum may affect your color)
- Use separate tongs, spoons, knives, scissors and other utensils for dye work
- Goggles
- Gloves
- Outdoor burner (need plenty of ventilation)
- Scale—digital food scale to weigh dyes, mordants, modifiers and fiber
- Fine strainer
- Clean buckets
- Thermometer
- Ph strips
- Drop cloth
- Hangers

Note book and pen—record what you are doing as you go along. Even if you don’t measure carefully, know that you added more of a certain modifier will help you re-create the outcome

Caution

Common Dye Material

- Pokeberry
- Marigolds
- Tree Bark
- Madder Root
- Turmeric
- Coffee
- Tea
- Green weeds, knot weed, smart weed
- Acorn hulls
- Black Walnut hulls
- Avocado
- Hibiscus
- and so many more!

Older books may reference using copper, tin and chrome metals as mordants. These are very toxic and no longer recommended or used in home dyeing. Safer metal mordants to use are Alum and Iron. Both need to be used with caution but are much less toxic and leave no toxic residue on the dyed fiber

Mordants and Modifiers

- Pre-mordant – Most common is alum. 1 tablespoon per 2 gallons of tap water. It is possible and convenient to pre-mordant a few skeins at a time. This way the wool is ready when you are. Just wet the fiber again but no need to pre-mordant the fiber again.
- You can pre-mordant with vinegar too especially if dyeing with poke berry. Mordants are usually added to the dye pot and help the dye and the fiber interact. The mordant is an agent. Some describe the mordant as being a translator between the two substances.
- Common mordants – Alum, Iron, Sumac, tannins, rhubarb leaves
- Modifiers – Vinegar – brightens colors
- Iron – darkens colors
- Washing soda or wood ash can change color completely. Washing soda is also a cleaning agent.
- Cream of Tartar—Assists mordant uptake

Black Walnut Dye

Select your skein of yarn and pre-mordant in vinegar water or alum and water.
- Alum = potassium aluminum sulfate
- Simmer for at least a half hour in the pre-mordant bath. If you are going to dye the fiber the same day, go ahead and begin getting the dye bath started.

Black walnut dye is one of the easiest to make. Since it is high in tannins no additional mordant is needed. Vinegar and or Alum can be added if you want to experiment.
- Break off the outer shell of the black walnut and add to the dye pot. Use plenty of hulls for a dark brown dye. Add one to two gallons of water depending on the size of your dye pot.
- Begin heating the pan but do not boil. Simmer for 30 minutes.

Wet the yarn if it has been dried after pre-mordant
- Submerge into the black walnut dye.
- Slowly increase the heat to simmer
- The most optimum temperature is right as steam is starting to curl around the top of the pan
- To obtain a variegated yarn color, place some additional black walnut hulls in a mesh or burlap bag. Tie closed securely and push it into the dye bath with the yarn. It will naturally dye the yarn nearest to it a darker brown
- Simmer for 30 to 40 minutes. Turn off heat and let the yarn and dye cool.
- Remove the yarn from the dye bath and drain. While wearing gloves, carefully press out additional liquid being careful to not agitate the fiber by wringing or twisting. Rinse until water runs clear.
Dye Procedure

Gather your tools and materials. Keep in mind that even if a substance is all natural, it can still be an irritant to lungs or eyes. In many cases it is safer to set up a hot plate outside on a sturdy table. Use caution with children and pets that may be in the area.

Select your raw material to be dyed
Preparing the wool. For this discussion we will refer to the material as wool yarn. Tie the skein in at least four places. This prevents the yarn from tangling up in the dye pot Pre-mordant. This prepares the fiber to accept the dye. It makes the fiber more willing to soak in the color by opening up the fibers. Mordanting is a chemical process which helps the dye fix to the fiber

Each natural fiber, cotton, silk, wool, mohair etc will react slightly differently to each dye. The time of year the dye material is gathered, amount of rain, temperature fluctuation, water treatment, are all factors that will affect the color outcome

Consider using a test skein if the dye is new to you. Preparing a test sample of the yarn can save you money if you are not certain how the dye will react with your yarn. This can be a partial skein or just a few ounces. Weigh and make a not of the grams of fiber used. Note that the smaller size of your sample needs to correspond to the amount of dye used. A 50 gram skein will have become a darker color than a 100 gram skein, in the same amount of dye concentration

Water Use and Disposal

Use rain water, sea water, tap water. There is no need to purchase special water for natural dyeing. Most natural dyes can be used to water the garden after the dye is spent. Add additional water to dilute the mixture. Caution with some, such as black walnut, and iron mordant dyes. These might inhibit growth of some plants.

The mordant baths can be stored and reused with added water and more mordant material.

Don’t pour into septic systems because the metals and acids can interfere with the biological system, in the tank.

Pour in an unused area of the garden/yard if you aren’t sure.

No Power Needed

Some plants and foods will dye without a lot of heat. The sun can offer plenty of warmth for small batch dyeing. Poke berries, Black walnuts, Turmeric, Coffee, Teas, and more, can add color to your wool. When dyeing wool without added heat, leave the yarn in the dye bath overnight. Setting the dye bath where it can absorb the warmth of the sun will help.

Final Note

Learning the process of naturally dyeing wool and other fibers is never ending. There are so many variables, which leads to many new discoveries. Each dye material has it's own distinct beauty. Many books are available on the subject of natural plant dyes. Vary the recipes shared and learn from each session. There are no mistakes in nature. Enjoy the journey.

Please visit my website - https://timbercreekfarmer.com
Some of my natural dye recipes can be found here
https://timbercreekfarmer.com/pokeberry-dye-for-wool-and-yarns/