An Introduction to Natural Dyes

Description

Irish linen in the process of changing from green to blue

My journey into natural dyeing began from a place of curiosity, evolved into a passion (borderline addiction) and has become my livelihood. While living in California, I was exposed to an incredible creative community & began to explore natural dyeing. As blue was my favourite colour, I started with Indigo (a blue dye extracted from the leaves of particular plants & one of the oldest know dyes to man). I fell completely and blindly in love with the process, the magic & the alchemy of this incredible plant. It blew my mind to see that you could coax such vibrant colours from nature. From there I went on to explore various other plant-based dyes until I became familiar with the process and methods of natural dyeing. I had always been interested in natural fibres and textiles and being able to create the colours I wanted, added a whole new dimension to my relationship with textiles.

DUPONIC

Irish linen dyed with “Cutch”

When people speak of natural dyes they are referring to dyes found in plants, fruits, insects & minerals. You can dye with ingredients found in your kitchen such as tea, turmeric, avocado stones/skins, black beans, carrot tops, onion skins, to name a few. Dyes can be found in your garden, your neighbourhood, in fields and forests. You can dye with herbs, flowers, leaves, roots, bark, stems, twigs, seeds, fungi & lichen. Youâll be surprised what you can dye with and the abundance of materials around you that will produce natural colours.

Thousands of plants can produce a seemingly un-endless palette of beautiful colours when applied to yarns, cloth or finished garments. Various different factors such as soil, water PH, region or time of year will influence the resulting shades achieved. Some dyes can be applied without heat and others require simmering to release the colour. In many ways, the process of natural dyeing is very similar to cooking. Just as there are many different ways to cook they are also many different ways to go about natural dyeing. You donât need much to start on this journey, a lot of the equipment can be found in most kitchens. You will need a pot, some buckets, wooden spoons, bowls and a sieve or strainer. Dyes can be found easily in your environment or specific colours can be sourced in dye supply stores in most countries. They can be combined in the dye pots or layered to further expand the colours possible. Working with natural dyes is a wonderful way to add new life to an old piece, to reinvigorate what you have, to decrease mass consumption and to look at what we have in new ways.

Fabric soaking in the dye pot

Dyes can be applied to all-natural fibres which fall into two categories, plant-based fibres or animal-based fibres. Plant fibres also referred to as cellulose fibres would be any fibre derived from a plant such as cotton, linen or hemp. Animal or protein fibres would be any fibre that comes from an animal such as wool, yarn or silk. Each fibre reacts differently to another when taking up the dye and so the results you get will also be determined by the fibre or fabric you are using. One of my favourite fabrics to work with is Linen as it takes the dye so beautifully and brings out the textural properties of this ancient cloth.

There is a life and a soul to colour brought forth from nature, the colours seem to dance & change, sometimes they can be hard to define with subtle differences at different times of the day. There is a depth to natural shades that synthetic colours do not have, synthetic colours are flat & one dimensional whereas natural dyes come alive and dance before our eyes. Natural dyes work so harmoniously together, effortlessly complementing each other. You must slow down when working with natural dyes, the process takes time and can’t be rushed and by its very nature is grounding, meditative & enriching.

Apart from the rewarding aspects of working with natural dyeing, they have numerous environmental benefits. They eliminate the harmful waste created by modern synthetic dyeing, they are biodegradable & can be disposed of safely. They are non-toxic to the environment & nonallergic to our skin. Many natural dyes also have antimicrobial properties, making them safer for children in particular.

Experimenting & learning about this process can be an incredibly enriching and empowering process. Spending time gathering materials, whether it's utilising food waste from our kitchens or going for a walk to gather plants for your dyeing, reconnects you to nature. Reconnecting with our environment & creating something beautiful with our own hands can soothe the soul & ease the mind. In a world that becomes more dependent on technology and more disconnected from nature, taking time to learn these traditional skills is a worthwhile endeavour that may support us through these modern times.

I'm excited to be contributing a few more articles on natural dyeing over the coming weeks. I would love to hear if anyone has any experience, thoughts or questions on the process, please feel free to let me know in the comments below?

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