

THE BASICS OF NATURAL DYEING

Natural dyeing is an incredibly rewarding & satisfying process that allows you to connect to your environment & create stunning natural tones. With it, you can colour the clothes, fabrics & textiles of your life in a way that is in harmony with your environment & the earth. It is gentle, meditative, grounding, soothing & inspiring. If you've been looking for a new creative hobby or the skills to extract colour from nature & dye whatever you'd like, look no further!

Natural dyeing is a process that involves:

1. Cleaning your fibre (known as scouring).
2. Soaking your fibre in a fixative known as a mordant
3. Creating dye baths
4. Dyeing your fibre

There are a few important things to note

Natural fibres:

In natural dyeing, there are two types of natural fibres; plant fibre which has a cellulose structure & animal fibre which has a protein structure. These fibres are treated differently during each step of the natural dyeing process. When speaking about natural dyeing, we are always referring to natural fibres, not synthetic ones.

Scouring:

The term for preparing fibres is known as "scouring". This is a process of removing any oils, waxes or residue from the fibres to ensure the mordant & dye penetrate the fibre fully. It is necessary for even coverage & consistent results. Plant fibres can be scoured using soda ash in the washing machine or traditionally on the stove. Animal fibres can be scoured in a basin using pH-neutral soap or dish soap & tap water.



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Mordants:

A mordant is an ingredient that is added to the process to help the dye bind to the fibre, increase colour & lightfastness & ensure long-lasting strong colours. Mordants can come from plant-based ingredients or metallic mineral salts. Mordanting is the process of soaking your fibre in this solution before dyeing to ensure successful results. By mordanting your fabric you are ensuring that the dye will fix to the fibre & not run out in the wash! Scouring & mordanting are the foundations of successful natural dyeing.

What you need to get started with natural dyeing:

You don't need much & many tools can be found in your kitchen. Just be sure to keep your natural dye tools clearly labelled & separate from your cookware.

- Dye pot
- Measuring spoon
- Wooden spoon
- Whisk
- Bucket or basin of water to modify your fibre
- Dye source
- Soda ash or dish soap (depending on what you're dyeing, see scouring)
- Mordant
- Something to dye
- Somewhere to dry your dyed goods

Let's look at these in more detail:

- Dye pot

The size of your pot is dependent on what you are dyeing, I recommend you start small. Begin by dyeing small pieces of fabric or small items. Start with what you have & don't spend money on any equipment until you're sure this is something you want to incorporate into your life. Find an old pot and make this your dye pot!



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- Dye source

Natural dyes come in two forms, straight from plants or in a concentrated powder form. Gathering plants from your environment is a fantastic way to learn about your environment & the sources of natural colour all around you. You can learn all about [different sources of natural colour](#) on my blog.

- Soda ash to clean plant fibres like linen, cotton or hemp.

Soda ash is sodium carbonate, which is sold as soda ash or soda/washing crystals (in Ireland, I'm not sure what it is called in other countries).

- Dish soap or pH-neutral soap to clean animal fibres like wool, alpaca or silk.

- Mordant

You have a few options when it comes to mordanting, traditionally European dyers mordanted their fabric with metallic mineral salts (these include iron, copper, chrome, tin or alum). In other parts of the world, dyers mordanted fibres with plant-based mordants. You can choose to mordant with whatever suits you. The general rule I follow is I use alum for animal fibres like wool or silk and a tannin mordant for plant fibres like linen or cotton.

- Something to dye

I recommend you start with something small or swatches of fabric before committing to larger pieces or items of clothing. Take a look around your home, if you have an old pillow case or sheets that are becoming thread bare, these can be cut into various sizes. Do you have any old t-shirts or a once-beloved piece that you'd like to revive with a new colour? These are great starting points.



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I hope this has helped give you an overview of the process and what's needed to get started. Once you have an overview of the process you can move through each stage slowly & build your skills with practice.

Be sure to read through the [articles on my blog](#), especially if you are looking for natural dye sources or colour inspiration. Some of my reader's favourite posts have included:

- [Natural dyeing with Eucalyptus](#)
- [Making inks from plants](#)
- [Natural dyeing with avocado stones](#)
- [Natural dyeing with marigold](#)

If you would like to learn more about the process or how to bring this beautiful practice into your creative life be sure to take a look at my ongoing workshops. If you would like to become a skilled & confident natural dyer, consider taking my [6-module foundational course](#). With lifetime access to the course, I guide you through the process through classes, ongoing support and a fully built-out curriculum containing videos, lessons, downloads and more.

x Kathryn

