

# Natural Dyes

# INTRODUCTION

Of all our vanishing early American skills, none is easier to renew and master than that of coloring wool with natural dyes. Considering the simplicity of the art, the rewards one receives from learning it are remarkably rich. Perhaps the joy comes from the knowledge that the colors are truly colors of nature, more real and vibrant and lasting than any colors caught on film or tucked in the recesses of our minds. But before you become so exuberant that you consider naturally dyeing all of your garments, remember that there were many good reasons why our ancestors rejected the natural dyes for the synthetic colors we use today. Natural dyes, although unequalled for their subtlety and earthiness, are unfortunately vulnerable to our modern harsh detergents and bright sunlight. Always hand wash or dry-clean your natural dyes and keep them in the shade.

## MATERIALS

### 1. Your "Victim."

Choose a plant which you would like to experiment with—perhaps a plant in your garden or a roadside weed. Decide which part of the plant you would like to test—leaves, stems, flowers, roots or all of them. Most plants will give some kind of dye. You can not always predict the color—orange flowers may not give orange dye, while plain old "wood" from some plants may yield brilliant golds and yellows! The guesswork involved is all part of the fun.

### 2. Wool.

The state of the wool—whether raw, spun or woven—is up to you. If you spin your own wool, you will probably

want to dye raw wool right off the sheep. Wash the raw wool well in a mild soap to shed dirt and lanolin from the fibers. Most of you will probably wish to dye already spun wool. If you can not find a source of undyed wool yarn, then simply buy cream-white yarn. Make sure that you do have 100% wool yarn. Synthetic fibers will not accept the color. Trying to dye wool already woven into garments is not ideal since the wool will probably accept the color unevenly. Similarly, wool yarn should be dyed in very loose skeins to insure even color tones.



### **3. Mordant.**

To help the wool accept the color and to help fix it to the wool fibers, you need a mordant. Do not be scared by the word "mordant." Mordants are plentiful and many can be purchased at any shopping center. A favorite mordant is alum which can be found at grocery stores and drug stores. Cream of tartar is often used in conjunction with alum following the belief that the two together work better than either alone. Copperas is also a popular mordant. It can occasionally be purchased at drug stores in the home remedy section. When copperas is added to a dye bath it almost always causes an instant color change, darkening the dye bath to shades of greens or grays. Both copperas and alum are known chemically as "salts." There are many other mordants such as human urine, potassium chromate and blue vitriol. If you wish, you can soak your wool overnight in a mordant solution prior to dyeing. The wool, even when dried, will retain the mordant. This allows you to add the wool to the dye bath without adding mordant. The results are the same either way. Almost any salt of tin, aluminum, copper or iron will work as a mordant. Sometimes salts can be bought at farmers' supply outlets or, of course, chemical supply stores.

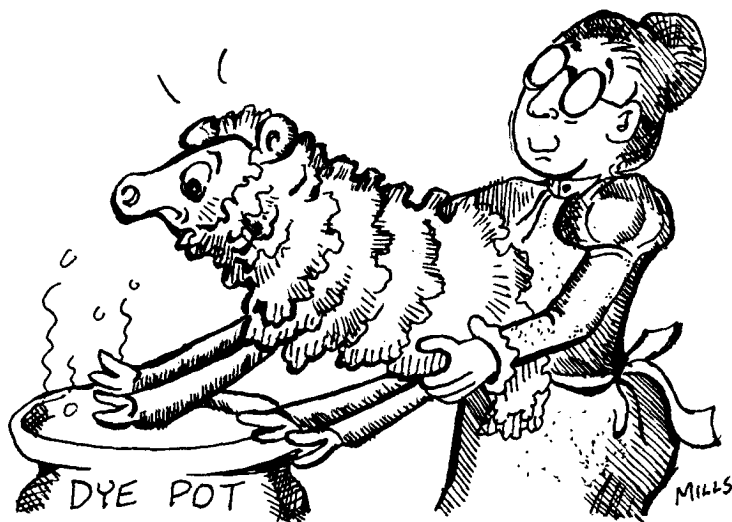
#### **4. Container.**

You will need a container large enough to hold the largest amount of wool you ever want to dye at one time. Abandon all thoughts of ever trying to dye wool a second time to get a preconceived notion of a color. It is virtually impossible. Therefore, if you are dyeing wool in anticipation of using it in a project, make sure you dye enough! Steel and enamel pans are good because they will not affect the intended color. Copper, brass and iron pots will tend to act as mordants and may change the color from what you intended.

### **PROCEDURE**

Relax! There are very few rules defining "proper" procedure and no measuring tools are necessary. Add water to your pot so that the collected plants are barely covered. Set it on a stove and boil until the water turns a color that satisfies you. Usually, the longer you boil, the darker the color will be. Take the pot off the stove and add your wool. The wool should have been previously soaked in water. Adding dry wool to a dye bath often results in uneven dyeing. Mix into the dye bath a little of the mordant—the amount is not really crucial. However, as a rough idea, a teaspoon of alum per gallon of dye bath would be sufficient. As the dye bath cools, the yarn will pick up color. Heating hurries the fixing of the color to the wool, so you may wish to simmer the wool and dye bath mixture. You may soak the wool in the bath just a few minutes or leave it in the pot overnight. Stir the wool once in a while to aid in even coloring. When satisfied, rinse the yarn well in cool water and dry in the shade. Note: Your job will be much easier if you strain the plant material out of the dye bath before adding the wool.

# TRIED AND TRUE NATURAL DYES

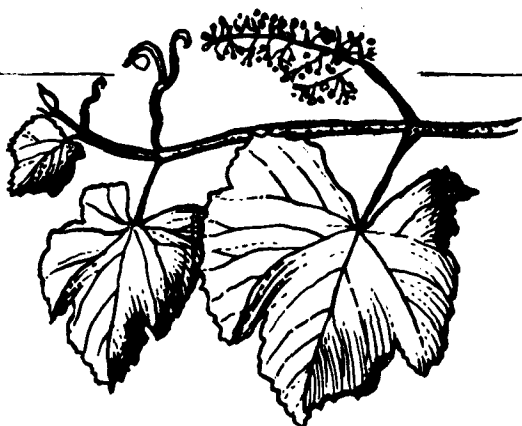


## *Dye Material*

## *Mordant Color*

### DOMESTICS:

Beets, roots and leaves	alum	red, tan
Coffee grounds	alum	brown
Dahlia blossoms	alum	yellow to gray-tan
Day lily blossoms	alum	light green-gray
Day lily leaves	alum	light yellow
Marigold blossoms	alum	yellow
	copperas	green



*Dye Material*

*Mordant Color*

Peach leaves	alum	yellow
Pecan hulls	alum	yellow
Red onion skins	alum	gold to red-tan
Sunflower seeds	alum	yellow-tan
	copperas	blue-gray
Tea	alum	tan
Tomato vines	alum	light tan
Turmeric	no mordant	bright yellow
Yellow onion skins	alum	yellow
<b>WILD PLANTS:</b>		
Acorns	alum	tan
Bedstraw (madder)	alum	yellow
Blackberries	alum	brown-purple
Black walnut hulls	alum	brown and tan
Goldenrod blossoms	alum	bright yellow
Hickory hulls	alum	tan
Ironweed	alum	greenish-tan
Mullein	alum	yellow to tan



<i>Dye Material</i>	<i>Mordant</i>	<i>Color</i>
Oak (black), inner bark	alum	gold
Osage orange, heartwood	alum	yellow-gold
Elderberry leaves	alum	gold
Pokeweed berries	alum	red
Queen Anne's lace	alum	light yellow
Sassafras roots	alum	rich rust
Sassafras leaves, twigs	copperas	gray
Smooth sumac twigs	alum	gold
Wild grapes	alum	lavender
Redbud leaves	alum	yellow

## **ADDITIONAL READING**

**Natural Dyes, Plants and Processes** by Jack Kramer

Publisher · Charles Scribner's Sons

**Dyes From Plants** by Seonaid Robertson

Publisher · Van Nostrand Reinhold Co.

**Vegetable Dyeing** by Alma Lesch

Publisher · Watson · Guptill Publications

**The Weaving, Spinning and Dyeing Book** by Rachel

Brown

Publisher · Alfred A. Knopf