

Making Dye from Plants (published 2026-08-01)
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Natural plant dyeing offers a creative way to use local weeds, flowers, and tree materials to produce a wide range of colors for fabrics and yarn.

Early settlers and Native Americans relied on native plants to create dyes for cloth, basketry, and body decoration. According to the U.S. Forest Service, plants such as sumac and black walnut were widely used because they contain tannins that produce rich, long-lasting colors without complex preparation. Their ease of use and reliable results make them especially suitable for beginners interested in natural dyeing.

In our area, a variety of practical dye plants grow naturally in gardens, fields, roadsides, and woodlands.

Experimenting is the name of the game, and natural dyeing can be an enjoyable activity for both adults and children. Visiting local historic sites with demonstration gardens that feature dye plants used in the past offers valuable hands-on learning opportunities. These sites include Exchange Place, Old Deery Inn, Tipton-Haynes Historic Site, and Rocky Mount.

In addition, native plant organizations and Master Gardeners throughout the region encourage the use of native plants, many of which serve a dual purpose as both dye plants and valuable food sources for pollinators. This connection makes natural dyeing an excellent way to explore local history while supporting biodiversity in the landscape.

Many dye plants are already growing around us and are often overlooked as weeds or common landscape plants. Black walnut trees, sumac, goldenrod, and pokeweed can all be found in parts of East Tennessee and have been used historically to create natural dyes. Black walnut husks produce rich brown shades, while goldenrod is known for bright yellows. The color produced by a plant can vary depending on the time of harvest, the fabric being dyed, and the dyeing process itself. Part of the appeal of natural dyeing is the element of discovery. Even when using the same plant, no two dye baths are exactly alike. This makes each project unique and encourages experimentation with materials that are readily available in our local environment.

Here are some suggestions for common dye plants to try, keeping in mind that different plants produce different colors. For the best results, use fresh leaves, flowers, fruits, bark, or even kitchen scraps, depending on the plant. Goldenrod (*Solidago* spp.) is often considered a beginner's favorite because it reliably produces vibrant yellow dyes and is widely available throughout the region.

Yellows: marigolds, yarrow, goldenrod, onion skins
Reds: hollyhocks, beets, or chopped red cabbage
Blues and Purples: blueberries, indigo, black beans
Greens: spinach, carrot tops
Tans: walnut husks

1. Prep Your Fabric

Plant dyes only adhere well to natural fibers such as cotton, linen, silk, or wool. To help prevent the color from washing out, pre-treat (mordant) your fabric.

For berries and vegetables: Soak your fabric in a mixture of 1-part salt to 4-parts water.

For flowers and leaves: Soak your fabric in a mixture of 1-part white vinegar to 4-parts water.

Directions: Submerge your fabric in the solution, bring it to a simmer, and let it soak for about an hour. Rinse in cold water.

2. Create a Dye Bath

Chop or crush your natural ingredients and place them in a pot with roughly twice the amount of water. Bring to a boil, then simmer on low for 30 to 60 minutes, until the water becomes rich in color. Strain out the solid ingredients.

3. Dye and Set

Place your pre-soaked fabric into the warm dye bath. Let it soak until it reaches a slightly darker color than you desire, as natural dyes tend to fade somewhat when dry. Remove the cloth, rinse thoroughly in cold water until the water runs clear, and hang it to dry.

Natural dyeing can also be a sustainable hobby. Many dye materials come from garden trimmings, kitchen scraps, or plants that are already abundant in the landscape. Onion skins, beet tops, and fallen walnut husks can all be repurposed rather than discarded. By using readily available plant materials, natural dyeing encourages creativity while helping people develop a deeper appreciation for the plants growing in their communities.

Now that you know the basics of dyeing with plants, expand your knowledge and be creative. For us in today's world of synthetic dyes, natural dyeing means celebrating the traditions of our ancestors while also keeping alive practices from long-ago cultures.

Resources

“Native Plant Dyes,” <https://www.fs.usda.gov/wildflowers/ethnobotany/dyes.shtml>

“Landscaping with Native Plants – East Tennessee,” <https://tnvalley.wildones.org/wp-content/images/sites/173/2018/09/Landscaping-with-Native-Plants.pdf>

“Making Natural Dyes from Plants,” http://www.4-hwesternheritageproject.org/uploads/1/4/0/5/14050480/making_natural_dyes_from_plants.pdf

How do I ask a question?

If you have questions for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.