Making natural dyes from plants

Tips on making natural dyes from plants. Its easy and fun.

Making dyes from common plants is not a new thing. It is, in fact, how we first got color. Our ancestors knew they could extract certain colors from certain plants, such as yellow from goldenrod or purple from berries. Although commercial dyes are simpler, many long to return to doing things the natural way. Here we will take a look at a few plants and the colors they give along with how to prepare a dyebath and dye material.

Below is a sample list of a few plants and the colors they will give. Their simmering times are listed and the amount given will make 4 gallons of dye. Gather the dye materials when they are in full bloom or mature.

For yellow try:

coreopsis - simmer 2 bushels of flower heads for 1 hour.

goldenrod - simmer 2 pds. of flower heads and stems for 1/2 hour.

onion skins - simmer 2 pounds of dry skins for 20 minutes.

For greens try:

Lily of the Valley - simmer 2 pds. of fresh leaves for 1 hour.

Queen Anne's Lace - simmer 1 bushel of heads and stems for 1 hour.

rhododendrun - gather 3 pds. green leaves, let them soak overnight and then boil 1 hour.

For purples or lavenders try:

blackberries - simmer 2 pds. of fully ripe berries for 1/2 hour.

For brown try:

acorns - soak 7 pds. of ground nuts overnight, then boil them 2 1/2 hrs.

marigold - simmer 2 bushels of flower heads for 1 hour.

To make a dyebath, wrap the materials in cheesecloth, cover in water and simmer for times listed. Remove the cheesecloth and dye materials, then add enough hot water to make 4 gallons of dyebath.

When dying material, you should add a mordant to the dye, which will make it colorfast. The best mordant to use is alum (aluminum potassium sulfate). Using a stainless steel pot, dissolve 5 1/2 oz. of alum in 4 gallons of lukewarm water. Wet whatever you wish to dye and then immerse it in this mixture with a wooden spoon. Bring it slowly to a boil for 20 minutes. Remove from the mordant bath, wring it out and place it immediately in the dyebath.

Even though there is much more work to this process than there is with bying a container of dye at the store, as you experiment with making natural dyes you will see that nature makes colors that a science lab simply cannot duplicate.

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