

Natural Fabric Dyeing: Colorfast vs. Fugitive Dyes From Plants



Last month I mentioned that I'm working with the book [*A Garden to Dye For*](#) to learn more about growing plants that you can use to natural dye fabrics. One of the first important concepts is learning about how well or how long a plant's color is likely to adhere to the fabric that you're dyeing. After all, you don't want to grow a plant for dyes that will immediately fade, right? So, I'm learning about colorfast and fugitive dyes.

Colorfast vs. Fugitive Plant Dyes

You can technically dye fabric with almost any plant. However, some plants simply work better than others. Basically, colorfast plants create a natural dye that will easily stick

to your fabric and won't fade very much. In contrast, fugitive plant dyes won't stick or stay on fabric for very long at all. You can still use fugitive plant dyes, but you'll usually use them for other crafting projects, such as coloring homemade play dough, rather than for dyeing fabric.

Colorfast, Lightfast, Washfast

In the aforementioned book, author Chris McLaughlin notes that we should consider not just how colorfast a plant's dyes will be but also whether they are lightfast and washfast. Colorfast means the color will stick and not fade. Lightfast refers to color that doesn't fade much even after frequent exposure to light. Washfast, as you might guess, refers to colors that don't fade much even after many times of washing the fabric.

McLaughlin emphasizes, "a color might be one and not the other" of these three things. [Solstice Studio](#) notes that sometimes when a plant is one but not the other, we call it "semi-fugitive."

Common Fugitive Plant Dyes

Berries are so beautiful as plants that it's tempting to try to dye fabric with them. However, they are often fugitive dyes. The color rarely sticks.

Other common examples of plants that are less than ideal for dyeing, according to Solstice Studio, include:

- Basil
- Beets
- Black beans
- Black rice
- Citrus
- Pomegranate kernels
- Red cabbage

- Roses
- Spinach
- Turmeric
- Wine

Good Colorfast Plants for Dyeing

In contrast, though, there are many great plants for fabric dyeing. Obviously, McLaughlin's entire book is about this, so I can't cover it all in a paragraph. However, some of the most popular options include:

- Marigolds, dahlias, yarrow, and goldenrod for yellow and orange colors
- Hollyhock, lichen, Japanese maple and madder for reds and purples
- Walnuts and pomegranate skin for shades of brown; eucalyptus and oak for more orange or reddish brown
- Avocado for pink
- Indigo for blue
- Mint for green

Factors Affecting Colorfastness of Plants

You want to start by choosing plants with good colorfastness and/or lightfastness and/or wash fastness. However, do note that other factors come into play. How much of the plant you use to dye, the temperature of the dye bath, whether or not you add mordant or modifiers, the fabric you use, and how long you leave the fabric in the plant dye bath are just a few examples for those additional factors.

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- [Garden Photo Walks for Mindfulness](#)
 - [5 Fun Ways to Use Yarn in the Garden](#)
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A Garden to Dye For



Several years ago my sister sent me a wonderful gift. She's one of those people who is so great at picking out the perfect gifts for people. The gift was a book called "A Garden to Dye For." She also sent me a set of Japanese Indigo seeds grown locally to her area. Somehow, all of this time has passed, and I haven't used this, yet. However, I'm determined to finally enjoy it this spring.

Garden to Dye For

“A Garden to Dye For” by Chris McLaughlin has a book subtitle that tells you exactly what this book is all about:

“How to Use Plants from the Garden to Create Natural Colors for Fabrics and Fibers”

In the introduction, the author explains that “the plan for this book is to bridge the gap between mainstream gardeners and the world of hand crafters.” The author explains that there are plenty of other great books that tell you about how to use plant dyes in fiber arts. However, most of them don’t address the home gardener. This book does.

Plants for Fabric Dyes = Slow Crafting

I am a huge fan of the [slow crafting movement](#). Crafting itself, of course, contributes to a slower way of life. When you sit down and make your own clothes, blankets, or home decor, you slow down. You stop contributing to the world of fast fashion.

As time goes on, you get more and more interested in ways to further slow down the craft. In other words, you want to get your hands dirty every step of the way. So, for example, I crochet. I started off buying various synthetic yarns from the store. From there, I moved on to buying organic, natural, sustainable yarn from local farms and independent dyers. From there, you can slow things down further by learning to spin and dye your own yarn. You might move on to get a small farm for raising your own fiber. And / or you might plant a garden to create your own natural dyes for your yarn.

The more you get involved in each process, the more you embrace and enjoy the benefits of the slow craft movement.

It's one thing, and an amazing thing, of course, to knit or crochet your own sweater. It's another level entirely to grow the plants and dye the yarn before you even get to knitting.

7 Chapters In A Garden to Dye For

There are seven chapters in the book. These further indicate all that there is to learn about this unique niche of gardening for the fiber arts:

1. An Excuse To Plant More Plants

This is a more in-depth introduction to the concept of planting a garden specifically to use for fabric yarn dyeing.

2. All About Color

This chapter explores the different ways that you can dye fiber. In doing so, it also provides great information for how well different plants are going to work for different methods.

3. 12 Flowering Plants for Fiber Dyeing

In this chapter, we get a more in-depth look at working with twelve different flowering plants. Learn how to grow marigolds, hollyhocks, zinnia and more for this purpose.

4. Edible Plants for Fiber Dyeing

Do you prefer to grow fruits and vegetables? Wonderful. Many of these are great for dyeing as well. This chapter covers 15 options.



5. And Herbs Can Dye As Well

Herbs are another option for a beautiful garden that also produces amazing fiber dye options. There are 16 different herbs discussed in this section. One of those is Japanese Indigo. As I mentioned, when my sister gifted me this book,

she also gifted me a set of these seeds!

6. Your Landscape Already Grows Dyes

This chapter is all about looking at the native plants around you to find dyes in nature. Eucalyptus, lichen, juniper and willow offer a few examples.

7. Planning & Planting a Dye Garden

Before I read through this book, I would have assumed that this chapter was the longest. However, it's actually the shortest. It expands upon what the rest of the book already discussed. There are some general tips. Moreover, there are specific suggested layouts for different gardens. This chapter may come at the end but it's really just the beginning!

Read More:

- [5 Fun Ways to Use Yarn in the Garden](#)
- [DIY Squash Trellis Under \\$10](#)
- [Frugal Container Gardening](#)