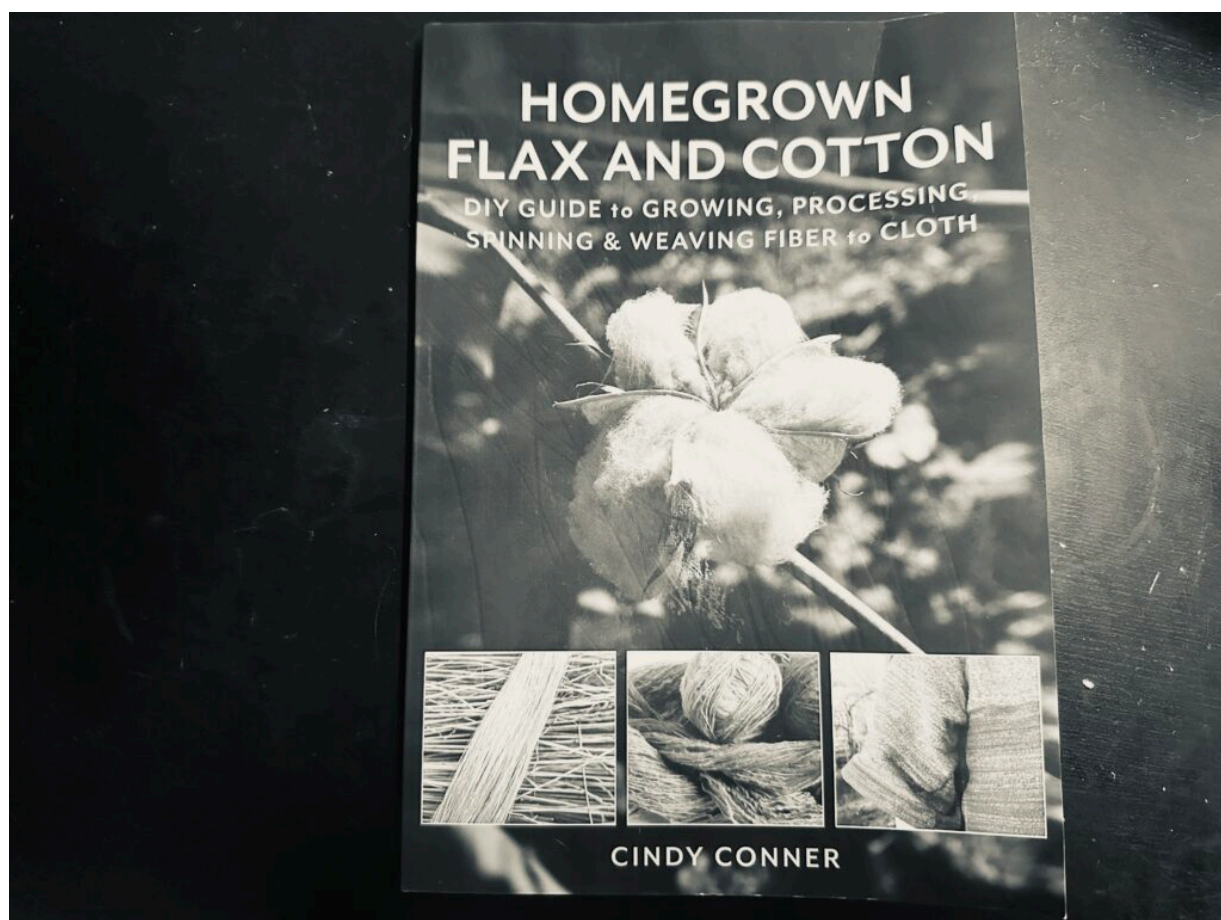


# Book Review: Homegrown Flax and Cotton



Every once in a while, I get to marry multiple interests. For example, I have long loved crochet and believe in the slow yarn movement. Every now and then, I can combine that with gardening. I shared a bit of that with you when I did a book review of [A Garden to Dye For](#). Today, I'll share more with a book review of Homegrown Flax and Cotton by Cindy Conner.

## What Is Slow Yarn?

[Slow yarn](#), like the slow food movement, refers to engaging in yarn crafting mindfully and sustainably. It's part of an overall sustainable lifestyle. And it celebrates doing things by hand. Crochet and knitting are already slow crafts. After all, it takes a lot longer to create a handmade sweater than

it does to just go buy one. However, you can extend that into a longer, more involved slow yarn process.

For example, in the book [Unraveling](#), author Peggy Orenstein shares her slow yarn story. She first learns how to shear a sheep, which is no easy task. After learning, she shears enough to collect wool to make a sweater. She cleans the wool. Then she learns how to spin it. After that, she learns how to dye it. Finally, she is ready to knit it into a sweater. That's an example of slow yarn.

## **Slow Yarn in the Garden**

Wool isn't the only fiber that you can use to knit or crochet. In fact, there are many other great natural fibers that offer various benefits when crafting. Cotton is a favorite choice when making lightweight summer clothes as well as kitchen towels. Therefore, you can incorporate gardening into a slow yarn movement of your own. Cindy Conner's book "Homegrown Flax and Cotton" is all about this.

## **Homegrown Flax and Cotton by Cindy Conner**

This book is subtitled: "DIY Guide to Growing, Processing, Spinning and Weaving Fiber to Cloth." Or, as a description of the book puts it, you learn how to go "from seed to shirt." That pretty much sums up what this book is about. It teaches us how to grow either flax or cotton in our own gardens. Then, we learn how to actually take that material from plant form into yarn form. Finally, there are tips for weaving it to create a cloth. However, once you have the spun cotton or flax yarn, you could also knit or crochet with it. As a crocheter, that would be my personal plan.

# Flax vs. Cotton for Growing Your Own Fiber

The book explains that both flax and cotton are easier than you might expect to grow in your own garden. The author explains that if you live in a colder climate, then you will probably want to try growing flax. In contrast, cotton is best grown in a warmer environment. Of course, if you live in a more temperate climate, then you could choose either one (or both).

Some of the other key differences, besides temperature requirements, of flax vs. cotton include:

- Flax has a shorter growing season, smaller flowers, and is usually a physically shorter plant than the cotton plant. Cotton plants actually have really pretty flowers that turn into the cotton.
- Generally speaking, cotton requires more garden space to grow. That said, flax tends to have a lower yield than cotton. As a result, you will need to plant more in order to get the same amount of yarn.
- Flax prefers well-draining, fertile soil with a slightly acidic to neutral pH range (around 6-7). It requires regular watering, particularly during its early growth stages. Cotton, on the other hand, prefers well-drained, loamy soil with good moisture retention. It has a higher water demand than flax and requires consistent watering throughout its growing season.
- Both flax and cotton can be susceptible to certain pests. However, the pests are different for each. Flax may attract insects like aphids, thrips, and flea beetles. Cotton can be affected by pests such as bollworms, aphids, and spider mites.
- Flax is a self-pollinating plant. Cotton, on the other hand, typically requires cross-pollination by bees or other [pollinators](#) to produce a good yield of cotton

bolts.

- The harvesting and processing methods are different for each, which the book explains in greater detail.

## **8 Gardening Things to Learn From Homegrown Flax and Cotton**

You'll have to read the book to get all of the details. In brief, though, here are eight things you'll learn about related to the gardening of cotton and flax:

1. If farm-to-table gardening and eating makes sense to you, then garden-to-garment will make sense as well. The textile industry does a lot of harm to the planet. You can help by growing your own fiber and making your own clothes.
2. In case you weren't already familiar with it, growing flax means that you'll be making clothes out of linen. Notably, you will not also be able to eat flax seeds from this plant. That's because there are two different flax plants – one that's edible and another that's for fiber.
3. For both plants, you want soil that is rich and ready to go in spring. You can use autumn leaves to cover the beds through the winter, preparing the soil for spring planting. However, if you live in an especially cold area, then you might instead plant "winter-kill" crops like forage radish, winter rye and oats.
4. You can plant flax in rows or by scattering the seeds. However, rows might make more sense as a beginner because it's tough to tell what's flax and what's weeds at first. That said you want a really dense planting so that the stalks are crowded together and don't get too wide.
5. You can get seeds for white, green, or brown cotton. The author thinks it's more fun to spin with the color, but you can choose what works for you. Make sure that you

get cotton seeds that are NOT genetically modified.

6. If you know how to plant tomatoes, then you should find it relatively easy to learn to plant cotton!
7. If you've never seen a cotton plant grow before, then you might find the whole process surprisingly exciting. It goes through interesting stages of flowering.
8. Did you know that in some states there are restrictions on planting cotton even in your own backyard garden?! If you live in a cotton-growing state, you should look into the rules before proceeding.

## Read More:

- [Colorfast vs. Fugitive Dyes From Plants](#)
  - [Garden Photo Walks for Mindfulness](#)
  - [5 Fun Ways to Use Yarn in the Garden](#)
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# 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 of those additional factors.

### Read More:

- [Quotes About the Benefits of Gardening](#)
- [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](#)