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Healing Cloths ~ The Art of Imbuing Fabric With Plant Spirit for Healing

Fabrics dyed with plants have been used for healing for as long as people have been dyeing fabrics. In Ayurveda, this art is called “ayuvastra”, meaning healthy clothing and has been part of Indian culture for about 5000 years. Currently, this type of healing cloth is produced in Kerala, India. The idea is to use spices and herbs that heal the body, by wearing these same plants, they will help to balance the body1.

In the Americas, numerous tribes used plants such as Bloodroot, Pokeweed and Sumac to decorate their skin, clothes and baskets, etc. Colors are also designated to “the Directions” and used in Medicine Wheels, which sometimes included plants. I wasn’t able to find a direct credible reference to dyed cloth used medicinally, but given that colors themselves were given meaning, it’s likely that dyed materials would also be considered useful by medicine people. 2

In European history, clothing and even people were dyed colors to represent courage or affiliations with particular groups. The ancient Romans were confronted by ancient Britons who dyed their clothes and bodies blue with woad as part of their preparations for battle. 3

In ancient Israel, a dye from a scale insect, called Shani was made for ceremonial uses; the earliest recorded use of Shani dates back to Iraq in the 14-15 century BC!4

**How To’s of Natural Plant Dyes or It’s a Process**

**Materials: dedicated pots, tongs, containers, fabrics, dye plant material, labels, notebook for swatches**

1. The first step in Dyeing fabric is to pick a fabric. In general, we use protein fibers, such as wool or silk, or plant fibers, such as cotton or linen. Synthetic fibers often won’t pick up colors and their production processes aren’t healing for the planet, but you are free to experiment as you like, for example it might be interesting to recycle used fabrics this way.
2. The second step is to “scour” the fabric, or wash it with detergent to remove oils or starches. This step is most important with new fabric or wools and silks that haven’t been washed before.
3. The next step is to mordant the fabric if you are looking for more color. Common mordants are alum, available at supply stores or in small quantities at grocery stores; iron, which can be obtained by soaking rusty metal in water; or tannin containing plants, such as oak, grape or blackberry leaves.
4. Pick your plant dye material and chop. Bring to a simmer in stainless steel, enamel or glass cookware. Turn off and let steep for an hour or overnight. Add vinegar for protein based materials, like wool or silk; or salt for plant based materials, such as cotton and linen to help with absorption. This is also when you would add metal solutions such as iron. Many of the commercial metal additives for enhancing dye colors are toxic and not recommended. Also, you would need to contact hazardous waste to find disposal options. Strain and place your dampened fabric in the liquid. Bring to a simmer again, turn off and either hang to dry right away or let fabric soak until color has reached saturation point. If the water still looks very colored you might try some more fabric, this is called an exhaust bath.
5. I like to let fabric dry with colors infused for several days without rinsing to let colors settle in. I might even redo the dying process to get deeper colors. It pays to have patience with natural dyes.
6. Resources for dye methods and plants: Wild Color ~ Jenny Dean, Plants are Magic ~ Rebecca Desnos. The libraries have several books on natural dyes. Many of the easily googled sites for dyes online have incorrect information. Experiment.
7. Washing naturally dyed plants so the color lasts longer. Find a mild detergent, such as shampoo or woolite. Commercial clothes detergent is made to remove organic plant materials and stains, like your natural dyes. The heat of the dryer also fades colors faster. . Many plant dyes are fugitive, meaning they fade with time. Embrace the ephemeral.

**Eco-printing**

1. Plants colors are infused into material by steaming. Most often used with plant based fabrics such as cotton or linen.
2. Wrap fabric around a stick or piece of cardboard and secure.
3. Wrap with plastic if there are no additions to basic color or not if adding other plant material such as oak leaves, iron or blackberry leaves. (my preference)
4. Using your dedicated equipment (thrift stores are a good place to find extra kitchen wares and it doesn’t matter if they’re pretty for this work. Avoid non-stick pans as the coating is cancer causing. Keep this equipment separate from items used for cooking food), place bundles in water or steam section of pot and simmer for an hour to several days. (If doing several days, such as in a crockpot, check often for water level as it burns off surprisingly quickly)
5. Turn off and let cool. Unwrap and see what you got!
6. Again I like to let them dry for about a week before rinsing.

**Pounding**

1. This is the fastest way to transfer the plant material to fabric. Usually I use cotton or linen but any light colored material would probably work.
2. Pick out your plant material.
3. Find a flat place you can pound on.
4. Place plant material on fabric…. You may want to use a protective barrier, such as cardboard or a plastic cutting board under your project. Use a rubber mallet or other hard broad object to pound the plants into fabric; hammers tend to disintegrate plants before driving them into fabric.
5. Brush off debris afterwards and enjoy colors. These tend to wash out, so I don’t advise washing them and most likely they will fade with time, but be enjoyable for some time.

1<https://www.monsoonblooms.com/natural-plant-dyes.html>

2<http://lewisandclarktrail.com/section2/colorsanddesigns.htm>

3<http://www.huntbotanical.org/virtues-pleasures-herbs/page.php?Dye-5>

4<https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/article/55/12/1080/407161>