GROW A dye garden

Unleash your creativity with plants that produce unique fabric dyes



Fresh beetroot

Natural practice

Using plants to dye fabric is a centuries-old practice. Now it's back in fashion, as an exciting, sustainable way to colour textiles, wool and thread. The bonus of keeping a few dye plants in your back yard is that it gives you the freedom to experiment, whenever the time and fancy allows. Although making plant dye is straightforward (look online for tutorials), there are many variables involved, ensuring endlessly fascinating results.



Rubia tinctorum 'Madder'

Anthemis tinctoria 'Dyer's chamomile'



Alder *Alnus glutinosa*

Colour chart

These reliable dye plants can be added to any decorative border. Remember, flowers can be picked and dried for later use.

* *Anthemis tinctoria* 'Dyer's chamomile' – a bushy perennial with yellow, daisy-like flowers that produce a warm yellow dye.
* *Coreopsis tinctoria* 'Golden coreopsis' – a cheery annual with yellow blooms that create orange and russet tones.
* *Isatis tinctoria* 'Woad' – a biennial with small yellow flowers in its second year. Its spinach-like leaves are harvested in the first year for blue dye.
* *Rubia tinctorum* 'Madder' – an evergreen perennial that can sometimes be invasive. The fleshy roots of three-to-four-year-old plants produce a scarlet red.



Asteraceae 'Calendula'

POTTED DYES

If you have a balcony or paved garden, try cultivating dye plants in pots. Most are hardy and low-maintenance, and prefer a sunny position with good drainage. Small plants, like calendula, coreopsis and French marigold, thrive in pots of 25-30cm diameter, but allow more space for deep-rooted madder (at least 45cm diameter). Water plants when the top 2.5cm of the compost feels dry, and feed in the growing season.

Wonderful weeds

Other plants, often considered weeds, produce a range of subtle, earthy tones. Use dock leaves for buff, green and grey, nettles for a range of greens, and cow parsley for yellow. In winter, when the garden is empty of blooms, forage for tree cones. Those of alder produce hues of caramel and chocolate, while spruce gives pink, plum and warm grey.



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Elderberry *Sambuca*

VEGETABLE PALETTE

Take pickings from the veg patch or forage for more wonderful colours (when foraging, take only what you need and seek permission if land is private). Often, dyes can be extracted from vegetable waste, including onion skins. Colours can also be manipulated by adding substances that change the dye pH, such as vinegar, lemon juice and bicarbonate of soda. Here are some of the colours you can get from fruit and veg:

* **Red and pink** Beetroot, red onion, avocado skins
* **Blue and purple** Red cabbage, elderberry, blackberry
* **Brown** Fresh green walnut hulls
* **Pink** Elderberry, blackberry
* **Yellow** Rhubarb leaves



Cow parsley
Anthriscus sylvestris

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