

Natural Dyeing: Dying Linen with Nettles

Natural dyes only work on natural fibres. These include fabrics and threads made from protein (animal) and cellulose (plant) materials. The most common; protein fibres are wool and silk, cellulose fibres are cotton and linen. Here, I've detailed the process for naturally dying linen.

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Nettle Recipe

Your recipe might consist of different measurements, depending on how much fabric you used or how many nettles you collected. Below I've included my recipe notes to demonstrate how you might record your own experiments, in case you ever want to get a similar colour in the future.

Mordant	Alum acetate (5% weight of linen)
Weight of Linen	50 g
Weight of nettle tops	50 g
Rain water	6 litres

Linen in dye pot on a gentle simmer for 1 hour, left in pot overnight.

Nettles collected in Malin Head, August 2023.

Tips

- Wear gloves to collect nettles.
- Collect rain water and use it to make your dye bath instead of tap water.
- Once you've finished with your nettle dye bath you can use the liquid to water your plants.
- When the weather permits I like to take my dye kitchen outside, just make sure there are no pets or little ones running around and always safely secure any electric leads as these can be a trip hazard.

I hope you enjoy experimenting with colours from your own landscape!

Basic Dye Equipment

- Bucket
- Stainless steel pot
- Tongs
- Sieve
- Weighing scales
- Basket (or bag)
- Nettle tops
- Alum acetate
- Soda crystals
- Natural Soap (I use 100% olive oil)

Techniques

Scouring Linen

Scouring is really just a fancy way of saying, wash your fabric vigorously.

1. Machine wash linen at 90°
2. Heat a good sized pot to a rolling boil
3. Add 1 tablespoon of any natural soap
4. Add 1 tablespoon of soda crystals
5. Boil linen for at least an hour
6. Rinse linen and dry

Mordant Linen

This means to prepare the fabric to accept the colour, possibly the most important step in the process.

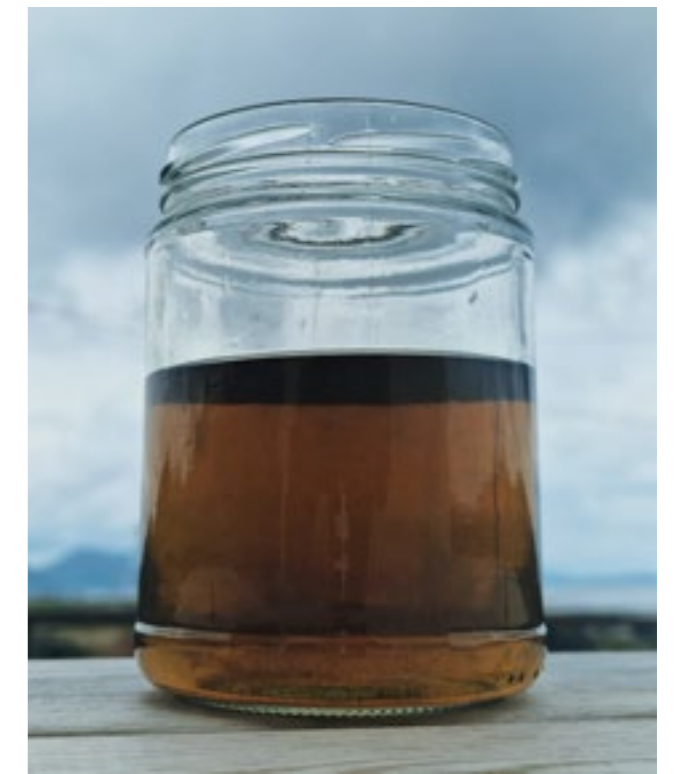
1. Soak linen in a bucket of water for at least 1 hour
2. Heat a large pot of water to a simmer
3. Add alum acetate (5% the weight of the linen) to the pot and stir
4. Add linen and simmer for 1 hour (submerge completely)
5. Remove from hob and let fabric soak in the pot over night
6. Rinse and dry

Create a Nettle Dye Bath

1. Soak linen in bucket of water for at least an hour
2. Measure and add water (1/2 full) to a large pot
3. Weigh nettles and add to pot
4. Put pot on the heat and bring to a gentle simmer for an hour
5. Take pot off the heat and strain liquid into a clean bucket
6. Discard nettles in your compost heap
7. Place liquid in bucket back in pot, add linen (fully submerge) and gently simmer for an hour.
8. Take pot off heat and leave fabric in pot overnight.
9. Take linen out of pot, rinse and dry



Nettles simmering in the dye pot



Colour of dye bath after simmering nettles for 1 hour