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Celebrating natives
plant and natural
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Coloring Springtime Eggs with Native Plant Dyes

Next Generation

By Barbara Bray – Oakland (MI) Chapter

The joy of growing native plants is not only reveling in their blooming beauty, but also anticipating the next year's growth, even while the snow is lying deep around the browns and grays of last year's stems. As the days brighten and the snow melts away into tiny rivulets across my garden, I see signs of spring. A small green leaf growing stronger, grasses poking up from the wet soil, and birds chattering away in my back yard as if to say everything is coming alive again.



For thousands of years, springtime celebrations have been part of people's lives, and perhaps the most treasured symbol of springtime is the egg. The idea of coloring eggs is believed to date back more than 2,000 years. In early times, people probably gathered wild bird eggs to exchange with others to celebrate the return of spring. As chickens became domesticated, people began to color the white eggs with plant-based dyes to resemble the colorful eggs of wild birds



Although many people today use store-bought, artificial dyes to color eggs, beautiful colors can be obtained from natural dyes. When using natural dyes, the eggs are cooked and dyed at the same time. Start with a single layer of eggs in a pan and add enough cold water to cover. Add about two teaspoons of vinegar and then the plant material. The amount of plant material needed depends upon how many eggs you are using. Bring the water to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer for 15 minutes. Check

the eggs. If the color is dark enough, remove the eggs from the dye and rinse in cold water until they are cool to the touch. Store the eggs in the refrigerator. If you want a darker shade, remove eggs from the dye. Cool the liquid and the eggs. Then place eggs back into the dye and let them sit in the refrigerator overnight. Remove the eggs from the liquid and let them dry. Place your eggs on a piece of crumpled aluminum foil to avoid spots.

Unless the eggshells are cracked before or during cooking, neither the color nor the taste of the dyes will affect the peeled egg. Since the plant material used to dye the eggs is edible, any bits of color that seep into the egg will also be edible.

Natural Dyes

- For a blue color, red cabbage leaves can be used. About 1/4 of a head of chopped cabbage will color four eggs. Boil the eggs with the cabbage for about 15 minutes and let them soak for six hours. One cup of either blueberries or blackberries can also be used.
- For brown, use red beet skins. Roast the beets at 350 degrees for about one hour or until soft. Peel the skins off, leaving about 1/8 inch of the beet. Put the skins into the pot and boil for 15 minutes with the eggs. Then let them soak overnight. Also try coffee grounds and onion skins.

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- Make a green dye with nettle or spinach leaves. Shred the leaves and add them to the pot of water with the eggs.
- For a purple color, use elderberries. Wild grapes, marjoram flower buds, and red or pink sorrel will also yield purple.
- For red, boil your eggs in beet juice or cranberry juice. Also try red onion skins.
- For orange, the skins of two yellow onions will color four eggs. Yellow can be made by removing the eggs a few minutes early. Caraway seed, dandelion heads, turmeric, or 1/4 teaspoon of saffron can also be used to yield yellow.

References

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