

Watercolors from the Garden

Overview: The earliest paints were crafted from natural materials such as roots, stems, leaves, flowers, fruit, and seeds that could be ground down into a medium used for expression. Inspire young gardeners' creativity by making your own watercolor paints from plant parts harvested from the garden.

Materials:

Various plant materials, cut into small pieces

Large enamel or glass pot

Hotplate or stovetop

Distilled water (chlorine-free)

Large wooden spoon or spatula

Cheesecloth or nylon stockings

Optional: alum or cream of tartar (available in spices section

of grocery store) Note: Alum and cream of tartar are used as mordants that act as fixatives to chemically attach or "set" the dye to the material being colored.

Natural (kaolin or white cosmetic) clay

Watercolor paper

Paint brushes



Approximate Time to Complete: 2+ hours

Location: Indoor for preparation; indoor or outdoor for painting

Ages: 3+

Season: spring through fall

Instructions:

1. Gather a collection of plant parts that can be used to create natural dyes. Below are some suggestions:

Red

Madder (roots)

Anatto (seeds)

Orange

Dyer's Coreopsis (flowers)

Carrot (roots)

Onion skins

Yellow:

Chamomile (flowers)

Daisies (flowers)

Aster (flowers)

Marguerite (flowers)

Marigold (flowers)

Calendula (flowers)

Zinnia (flowers)

Dahlia (flowers)

Sulfur cosmos (flowers)

Sunflower (flowers)

St. John's Wort (flowers)

Mint (leaves/stems)

Parsley (leaves/stems)

Wild mustard (leaves/stems)

Yellow dock (leaves/stems)

Bindweed (leaves/stems)

Celery (leaves/stems)

Turmeric (roots)

Green

Black-eyed Susan (flowers)

Spinach (leaves)

Coneflower (leaves)

Chamomile (leaves)

Grass (leaves)

Nettle (leaves)

Plantain (roots)

Blue

Tomato (leaves/stems)

Red cabbage (leaves/stems)

Elderberries (fruit)

Purple

Blueberries (fruit)

Wild grapes (fruit)

Blackberries (fruit)

Mulberries (fruit)

Dandelion (roots)

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Beets (roots)

2. Cut larger parts into small pieces and place in a pot (enamel or glass preferable).
3. Cover the plant materials with distilled water and then simmer them for about an hour until the water is colored and the plant tissues look bleached.
4. Strain the dye bath through cheesecloth or an old stocking to get rid of plant material. Optional: Add mordant*. If you're just getting started, you may choose not to use a mordant to "fix" the dye to fabric. Some plants will yield colorfast dyes without a mordant (e.g. turmeric), while others will lose their color with washing and sunlight (e.g. purple cabbage).
*Mordants, such as alum and cream of tartar, act as fixatives to chemically attach or "set" the dye to the material being colored.
5. Measure the liquid and pour it into a bowl. Add natural (kaolin or white cosmetic) clay in a ratio of 1:2 of clay to dye liquid. For example, add 1/2 cup of clay for every cup of dye liquid. Mix thoroughly.
6. Use your mixture to create colorful watercolor paintings! Watercolor paper works best, although any type of absorbent paper can work (like construction paper). If you have multiple colors, an old muffin tin can make a fun artist palette.
7. Set up your own art show to show off your new skills and creations.

For additional ideas for using natural dyes, check out the [Art Garden Activity Pack](#) developed in collaboration with Smart Pot.

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