

episode 87 show notes and advice

Plants fill us with joy, nourishment, and pleasure, whether they are in the garden, picked for vases in our homes, or harvested for delicious food on our plates. This week's episode looks at how we can celebrate plants in yet another way - through colour on our clothes.

Today, Sarah chats to garden designer turned plant dyer Tania Compton on her use of plant dyes on silks. Having first met around 25 years ago when, both in their mid-twenties, Sarah was transitioning from medicine to full-time writer and gardener, and Tania then Gardening Commissioning Editor at House & Garden Magazine, commissioned Sarah's first article on gardening. Having reconnected on a wildflower trip in the Peloponnese this spring, Sarah was intrigued to hear more about Tania's obsession with plant dyes.

This passion, and now skill, is another way she can still engage with nature and plants, but from an entirely different perspective.

In this episode, discover:

- The optimum time to take plants from the garden to use in plant dyeing
- The method and process of plant dyeing, including 'mordanting' the material
- How plant dye colours are produced by different varieties, in particular conditions
- Tania's top three recommendations for first-time plant dyers
- Tania's recommended, organic, silkworm grower
- Books and courses on plant dyeing

episode 87 advice sheet

Tania was first inspired to pursue her interest in plant dyes, having seen a pool of iris ink form on the kitchen table. Determined to paint with it, Tania grabbed a paintbrush, admitting it was only later that she realised that the use of plant dyes was already very well-established. Passionate about colour, Tania enrolled herself in workshop run by Flora Arbuthnott – natural dyer, forager, and gardener, during which she learnt about the preparation of silk ahead of the dyeing process – known as ‘mordanting’, and enthusiastically began practising it at home. Particularly captivated by silk due to its sheen, the way it absorbs colour, and how it can transform leftovers from a compost heap into unbelievably beautiful scarves or swathes of fabric, Tania admits it quickly became a huge obsession for her.

Recycling of organic matter

Preferring not to take any flowers the bees haven’t yet finished with, Tania often picks up the remnants of plants. Like art in many ways, her plant dyeing of silks captures the aftermath of a plant. Tania feels the most opportune moment to gather the petals is when they’re still on the plant just before they’ve ended up on the ground. Although, she does admit to spending a lot of time scrabbling around in the ashes of what was plant material. An example of this was catching sight of a row of coreopsis during a visit to The Plant Library at The Orchard - a community project run by Tom and Sue Stuart-Smith. Not wanting to pick any of the flowers as they were still busy with bees, Tania scraped her hands around in the sand, retrieving what she refers to as ‘a very unpromising couple of handfuls of brown petals’. On her return, she boiled them up with some water for an hour to produce the most extraordinary burnt orange - akin to Helenium ‘Waltraut’ – a shade somewhere between gold and ochre and completely on-trend.

Tania’s method – from plants to coloured silks

- Tania tends to collect flowers, to have as cut flowers in vases, and then scoops them up afterwards (can use fresh or dried flowers).
- Petals are then stored in named paper bags, added to her ‘library of varieties’, or if fresh, put into a jam jar, filling it up with water and adding embroidery thread into it, as Tania mainly does embroidery, not just scarves.

- To save time when dyeing embroidery threads, Tania is increasingly leaving the plants in miniature jam jars with the threads inside, which produces extraordinary colours a week later.
- When making a plant dye for a scarf, Tania will either cook up the plant material which helps it to exude its dye or leaves it out in the sun in her open shed.
- If she has enough of one variety, she will do a 'single malt' plant dye and then put a mix together for a mixed-coloured scarf.

The use of heat or sun affects the colour

- Poppy petals make the most beautiful plum colours when left in the sun, so not heated.
- Dahlias 'Black Jack' and 'Dark Spirit' make the most amazing purples if left in the sun or a lovely green when heated.
- Yellow varieties of Buddleia (1 kg) left in a dye bath in the sun turns silk a murky mustard powder colour or a luminous sunshine yellow if heated.
- Bright yellow pompom dahlias make the most incredible coreopsis orange.

Tania's top 3 recommendations for first-time plant dyers

- Dahlias are a good bang for your buck, and Tania's favourite varieties are:
 - Dahlia 'Dark Spirit'
 - Dahlia 'Striped Vulcan' – yellow with red stripes to make an unbelievable coreopsis orange.
- Buddleia – all varieties/shades (from 'Lochinch', to 'Miss Ruby' or 'Black Knight') make a beautiful vibrant yellow

The flowers don't need to be fresh

Recently, Tania made a dye bath with some heritage tulips she'd been sent by Polly Nicholson, at Bayntun. The colour that came out was beautiful and a first-of-its-kind best show lawn apple green colour. That was two years on from receiving the tulips, by which time they were totally desiccated, meaning there might have been more dye if she had used them a bit sooner.

Tania's embroidered homage to beautiful plants

For every plant harvested, on each day of the year, Tania has created a little square of coloured embroidery using plant-dyed silks. Each one represents a plant memory for Tania,

and together, the embroidered squares give a beautifully subtle but also bright and vibrant range of colours.

Peace Silk

Eco-conscious Tania uses a responsible and organic silk weaver as her supplier of silk. [Peace Silk](#), in Hertfordshire, feeds her silkworms on her organic mulberry trees rather than treating the trees with lots of chemicals and hormone feeding the silkworms. Allowing the silkworms to complete their life cycle, instead of killing them halfway through their life before they've eaten their way out of their cocoon, means the weaver gets half the yield so the price is higher. However, Tania has compared the quality with non-organic silk from other growers and they don't seem to have as much of a sheen or residual beauty as Peace Silk.

Preparation of the silk threads – 'mordanting'

- With any fabric you're wanting to plant dye: silk, cotton, linen, and even the embroidery threads, there is a necessary process called mordanting, which binds the colour into the material through a chemical reaction. Without this, the plant dye colour, no matter how intense, would simply wash out in water, leaving a permanent greyish stain on the cloth.
- Mordanting can be done with anything from rhubarb leaves to oak galls to alum (what Tania uses). A more natural alternative to alum is symplocos, a leaf that stores a lot of aluminium and is used as a face mask in India. Tania started using this but found it was a much longer process.
- In terms of disposing of the used mordanting baths, Tania has a dedicated spot in the garden and has observed that the plants are growing just as well there, as elsewhere in the garden, so the heavy metal doesn't seem to be affecting growth. That said, the quantities Tania uses as a domestic dyer are so tiny. It's also very different and far better than the chemicals used in the dye and fabric-making processes for the fashion industry, which are ultimately causing devastation to water systems – especially rivers.
- Tania is very careful when she's dealing with alum and has one shed entirely dedicated to the mordanting process. She always wears a mask and gloves as aluminium is recognised as being a dementia accelerator.
- It is possible to add extra alum into some pots to brighten and manipulate some plant dye colours, but it doesn't work on all colours. Tania prefers not to experiment, to allow the plant colours to come through naturally.

Dyeing wool

Wool colours tend to be in the more muted, mossy end of the dyeing spectrum, and Tania feels she has found her niche with silk, preferring the bright and the bling.

Links & references:

Order Sarah's book: <https://bit.ly/2TWHJcz>

Order Arthur's book: <https://bit.ly/3xOov7H>

Shop on the Sarah Raven Website: <http://bit.ly/3jvbaeu>

Get in touch: info@sarahraven.com

The Plant Library at The Orchard, Hertfordshire (Tom and Sue Stuart-Smith)

<https://www.tomstuartsmith.co.uk/community>

Bayntun Flowers, Wiltshire (Polly Nicholson)

<https://www.bayntunflowers.co.uk>

Peace Silk

<https://botanicalinks.bigcartel.com/product/satin-silk>

Recommended book:

Wild Colours by Jenny Dean (in paperback, 10th edition)

"An extraordinary, very good and practical guide"

<https://www.jennydean.co.uk/publications/>

Recommended courses:

- Ceres Natural Dye Prints, Brixton for screen printing with dye prints
<https://ceresstudio1.com>
- Jenny Dean at the Ditchling Museum ([link to course](#))
- Further courses at the Ditchling Museum:
<https://www.ditchlingmuseumartcraft.org.uk/events/category/workshops/adults/>

To follow on Instagram

[Natural Dye Works](#)

[Botanical Colors](#)

Tania's heroes of the ecological movement

[Aboubakar Fofana](#)

Based in Mali, running courses at Botanical Colors in Seattle and France

[Porfirio Gutierrez](#)

Running a third-generation family business in Mexico, harvesting cochineal for use in dyeing material. Porfirio looks at the spiritual practice and the cultural significance of their weaving.

Woad pigments in limewash paint

[Bleu de Lectoure](#)

Located near Albi, which interestingly was the Cathar capital and separated from the Pope to keep the wealth from woad growing, which stretched all the way to Nimes - where denim comes from ("de-Nimes").