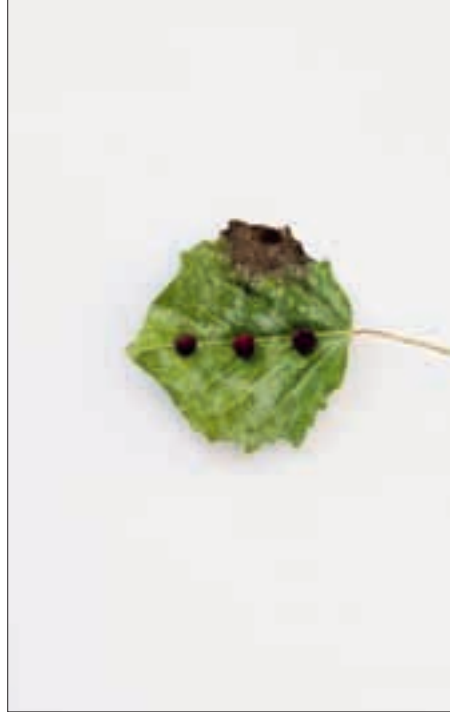




# Dyes from the natural world

TEXT: TINA IGNELL PHOTO: B A IGNELL/J SCHÄRING

*It was like stepping into Linné's laboratory. Botanical literature, dried flowers, rind, leaves and bits of plant matter in glass jars along with small amounts of textile material. Completed work, vibrant and billowing, hung out on display.*



**W**e were at Nääs, outside Gothenburg. Textile artist Jeanette Schäring had produced a show of textile installations as a set, an exposition of her way of thinking and working. Courses on natural dyeing, illustrating her philosophy, were held at the same time.

The three-dimensional sculptural works, creeping along the floor and up the walls, were fashioned from a fine, lightweight silk that she dyes and treats with a special wax. A method she developed herself. The cloth is stitched together with the tiniest of stitches in natural dyed silk thread. The forms evolve steadily out of the stretchy material.

– I like the slow, meditative repetition involved in stitching.

The viewer needs to give this work time, for awakening to the detail and the colouring.

In the interview, she returned on several occasions to our relationship with time and how we accept change.

– Many natural dyeing methods do not produce fast dyes. They fade, change and are alive, which is part of their charm. I find that on-going process and transformation fantastic.

Frequently she opts for the slow methods of cold water and solar dyeing, where the dyebath is left to stand for months and chance is allowed to play an active part.

“The leaf” in the picture above was created with red onion dye and just a smidgen of alum mordant. The silk was wound round with a very fine metallic yarn. The dye only penetrated where the fabric was wet, and the movement of the cloth during the process meant that the dye was unevenly absorbed. A 3-D leaf form, deceptively like a natural form, appeared when she unfurled the cloth.

Her designs led on to new textiles: big suspended screens with industrially printed versions of her poetic images, originally fashioned out of natural dye processes.

– The idea is that the motif is evocative of nature, a peaceful image to which you can constantly return and find detail and familiarity. It creates a less stressful setting for people in office environments.

The dye course, where she demonstrated her way of working, was held in another building alongside the show. Many of the



Left page, Window: Leaves are laid on a cloth, the patterning emerging with the aid of the dyestuff and tannins in the foliage. Plant-dyed and waxed cloth shaped and stitched with the tiniest of stitches.

Top left, Jeanette Schäring showing how stretchy the waxed silk becomes.

Centre, Gall wasps and leaf disease can yield fascinating colour effects.

Top right, Resist dyeing with red onion and alum.

Above centre, Detail of industrially printed versions.

Below, Fermented indigo on vintage silk, treated with eggwhite.





participants had extensive dyeing experience and had plant-dyed before. But not this way.

The course began with everyone picking plants close by and using the simplest methods to get the dyestuff from them on to textiles. Some plants, like St John's Wort, violets and pot marigold, have dyestuff that can be pressed out and painted directly on fabric. Other plants were put in water that was heated up or simply placed in a cold bath with substances that helped the dyestuff on to the material. The latter might be avocado stones, or bits of scrap iron and copper coins that provide the bath with a metal solution, or bits of oak and galls, full of tannin.

– Tannin is worth collecting when doing natural dyeing. It helps the dyestuff dissolve and is a fixative. There is plenty in tea, oakbark, galls and in plants from the Rumex family (dock). Dock can also be used as a natural fixative and, combined with other plants, produces a lot of different colours. Berberis\* is another plant family which is very useful in dyeing, as the pigment acts like a salt.

Other substances that aid the dyeing process are proteins, such as soya milk, milk, yoghurt and egg. They can, for example, help cotton fibre to open up. Vinegar in turn helps wool to absorb the dyestuff better.

There was a bucket there for a vat containing indigo, household soda, wheat bran and madder. (Madder was used in the past to start up a blue woad vat.) Schäring was waiting for the vat to develop.

She showed us a glass with just madder and water, where the madder was clearly fermenting without any other additives. Here, only the dyestuff and water were required. But if you want to add alum to enhance the effect, she advised:

– Don't use as much alum as the recipe says. Often the smallest

amount is fine. And don't throw out dyebath mixtures, as they can be used many times. And ultimately they are good for paper pulp.

Schäring made a point of emphasizing that not all plant dyes are harmless. It is important to check that you are not using any that produce toxins. Health and safety have to come before the desire to experiment.

– Rhubarb leaves, for example, are extremely poisonous, but can be used as a fixative for dyestuff. They have to be kept well out of reach of children, and you must not breathe in the fumes if the bath is heated up.

The course participants were very engrossed in and excited by all the results. On the window sills, the jars of dyestuff, cold water and fabric were solar-dyeing in the sun. The same dyestuffs simmering in the pots produced different results. Each plant has different properties and potential.

Some of the fabrics were wrapped and tied for resist dyeing. This can also be done by applying rice flour or clay.

Once the fabric is unfolded, a fixative can be applied, by for example dipping the fabric in sea water or just dropping some lemon juice on it to gradually remove rust or mute a colour.

SCHÄRING'S INTEREST IN TEXTILES BEGAN EARLY IN LIFE. She did a lot of sewing as a girl and had textile materials to hand. Growing up in the countryside, outside Borås, she had the benefit of nature close by, of course.

As a young adult who had decided on an artistic path, she was initially sceptical about working with textiles, as that did not feel really new or interesting. Yet she still applied for the textile course at the School of Design and Crafts (HDK) in Gothenburg, and studied textiles for six years.

– It felt the right thing. Staying with soft materials.

\* Berberis. This family has 15 genera and nearly 700 species. In Sweden there are three genera: Berberis, Mahonia and Epimedium all originally introduced and then naturalized. The fruit is a capsule or a red or blue/black berry. Berberis was formerly used as a medicinal plant, as a substitute for lemon and a dyeplant and is now grown for hedging.



The course at Nääs involves collecting plants and experimenting yourself. From the left, jars standing in the window with crushed avocado stones to oxidize at different rates before being added to water.

Below, a test strip with different dyestuffs, the glowing red had a bit of lemon juice applied after dyeing.

The type of pot used is important: copper, iron or aluminium.

Above, Madder dyebath with various wrapped objects for sampling.

Even at the start of the course, she researched into the processes involved in natural dyeing. She sought out literature, asked questions, tested and experimented. And she dug deep, finding century old recipes, leads and answers in cultures all over the world. Her desire was for the natural and simple, but also the mysterious: earth dyeing, allowing dyestuff in solution to be absorbed by lengthy processes, allowing different substances to react. Sometimes the results were a surprise to her. As her knowledge grew, so did her ability to understand and control the conditions, to some degree. Curiosity and feeling for experimentation are always pushing in.

SEVERAL AWARDS have made it possible for her to travel - to Laos, Thailand, Finland and New Zealand. These trips have given her new avenues to follow up and research.

– Sweden does have a long plant-dyeing tradition, but much of it has fallen into oblivion. I had to travel far away to find some Swedish sources. She is hoping to develop this further.

Schäring now lives outside Wellington, in New Zealand, where she teaches natural dyeing at the Textile Design Massey University.

She grows her own dyeplants in her garden: woad, *Isatis tinctoria*, and weld, *Reseda luteola*, as well as other historical dyeplants.

– My aim is to introduce the students to my approach. The idea that everything does not have to be fast. Which can moreover be part of the designer's identity. You create a textile in one colour, allow it to change and then maybe overdye it.

In summer 2010, Schäring is making a return visit to Sweden and will be setting up a natural dyeing lab at Nääs, giving lectures and courses, see the column alongside. ■

## JEANETTE SCHÄRING

### EDUCATION

2000-2006 Textile Art, School of Design and Crafts, Gothenburg University  
 1998-2000 KV Art School, Gothenburg  
 Independent projects, Gothenburg University  
 2005 SID, MFS, field study in Laos, ecological silk and natural dyeing  
 2003 Art project studies, research in Finland  
 2002 2001, Art project studies/research in Thailand/Laos

### SOLO SHOWS

2009 Natural dye pigment, Alchemy & textiles, Nääs Arts & Crafts  
 2009 Allotropy, Toe Poneke, New Zealand  
 2004 Textile as expression, Rydals Museum

### GROUP SHOWS, SELECTED

2010 RE-FIBRA: Contemporary Textile Art - A Dialogue between New Zealand and Sweden, blue Oyster Gallery, New Zealand  
 2009 "Fibra Spirare", Rydals Museum  
 2009 "Changing Threads National Fibre Art Award", The Refinery Gallery, Nelson, New Zealand

### SELECTED GRANTS AND AWARDS

The Swedish Embassy, Canberra, Australia 2010, 2009  
 Creative NZ Arts, Council of New Zealand, Toi Aotearoa 2009  
 District Council Award, New Zealand, 1st prize 2009  
 Eric Ericsons Foundation, one year working scholarship 2006  
 Gothenburg Crafts Association 2006  
 Estrid Ericson Foundation 2008, 2005, 2003, 2003, 2002

### WORKSHOPS:

May 28-30 and June 16-18, Nääs Konsthantverk

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