

# Mother Nature Dyes Lovely Easter Eggs

Coloring Easter eggs with natural dyestuffs is a perfect holiday activity.

"It is a very, very old custom in the Middle East," says Asma Harb of Birmingham, Ala. She and her family came to the U.S. from Ramallah, a town near Jerusalem, more than 30 years ago.

"My grandmother followed this custom, my mother followed it, I'm following it, and my children are following it."

Harb uses yellow onion skins to produce a soft shade of yellow-orange. "With the peel from six or seven big onions, you can dye dozens of eggs," she explains. Each consecutive batch is lighter, though, and the dye eventually peters out.

If you ask your children or grandchildren to help gather plants for the dye, they probably will scamper to the nearest flower garden in bloom. But plain-looking plants usually yield the prettiest pastels for Easter.

Nature provides an artistic advantage not possible with commercial dyes. But it is unpredictable.

Keeping that in mind, try the following ingredients: yellow onion skins for yellow-orange; frozen blueberries for pale gray-blue; pecan or hickory bark for toasty beige; madder root for light red; paprika for pale rusty-brown; alder catkins for yellow; and instant coffee and walnut hulls for deep, rich brown.

Other possibilities are dried sassafras root for medium-to-deep rusty-orange, and dried turmeric for bright yellow. Add 1 teaspoon vinegar per 1 cup dye for these two.

Also try fresh red cabbage for deep sapphire blue to medium blue, adding 1 teaspoon alum per 1 cup dye.

To produce a good batch of dye with the fresh material, chop, shred, or crush about 1 cup of it. About 2 tablespoons are sufficient if the ingredient is dry.

You'll find that fresh produce usually gives better dyeing results than do commercially frozen or canned materials.

For easy cleanup from the onion peel dye, Harb uses a stainless steel pot. Other choices are glass, ceramic, or enamel containers.

Simmer the ingredient with about 4 cups of water for 30 minutes or

more to distill color. Strain to remove dyestuff, and cover the eggs in the remaining liquid.

For pale tints, use precooked eggs; for deeper shades, cook the eggs directly in the dyestuff as you distill the color. Simmer for about 20 minutes or until eggshells reach desired color, turning often to prevent spotting of the dye. Dry eggs on paper towels or a rack, turning them at least once. A change in color may occur during drying.

For that extra gleam, polish the dried eggs with a bit of olive oil.

Coloring "mistakes" can be removed with a solution of 1 tablespoon of white vinegar to 1 cup of water. This solution also can remove the film sometimes applied to commercial eggs to retard spoilage.

To produce a mottled effect, wrap the dyeing ingredient around the egg, then tie the egg in cheesecloth. Use a plastic garbage bag twister to secure the fabric. Boil for 10 to 15 minutes in clear water.

To make a pattern, try the same procedure with a fern or a plant seed head placed between the egg and dyeing material.

With this help from Mother Nature, you and your family are sure to enjoy this "eggs-traordinary" Easter activity. ■



(Above) Onion skin wrapped with cheesecloth achieves this mottled look. (Right) This moss-covered basket with a twig handle perfectly complements the soft colors of these Easter treats.

