

FROM WOODS & FIELDS



This month I'd like to offer an answer to one of the more often asked questions that I encounter. Perhaps it is one that you have wondered about, also.

Question: What is the best way to obtain a deep brown from walnuts?

Answer: One of the most common misconceptions about dyeing with walnuts is that the walnut shell is used for dyeing. While the shell can give tans, the most sought after color, a deep, rich brown, is most easily obtained from the green hull that surrounds the shell as it grows on the tree. I have never had English walnut hulls available for testing, however, most dye sources refer to black walnut as the species used for dyeing.

I have dyed with walnut hulls in nearly every possible condition: fresh and green, picked directly from the tree; brown hulls which have been on the ground through rain and snow; green hulls which sat in a plastic bag longer than I intended and thus turned to a brown, wormy, moldy mush; old, dried forgotten hulls which had to be pounded with a hammer into powder before using; and hulls which I have chopped and steeped, covered in water, for as little as a few days to as long as several years until they were needed for dyeing. All forms yield colors ranging from light to deep brown, but what do I recommend for you to use?

The richest, deepest brown is obtained from fresh, green hulls picked directly from the tree and used immediately for dyeing. You will obtain the greatest amount of pigment by cutting the soft hull off the shell into small pieces. (At one time a walnut furniture stain was achieved by rubbing the cut surface of a green hull directly onto the wood. You will experience this staining potential if you do not protect your hands with rubber gloves while handling the hulls.)

Simmer the chopped green hulls along with your fiber in water until the desired color is achieved, perhaps leaving the fiber in the dye overnight. Nut hulls, along with most barks, are some of the few dyestuffs that need to be simmered for longer periods of time than the usual hour or so. If they are being used from a dried state, the hulls should be soaked from a minimum of overnight to as long as several days before being used for dyeing. It is also probably best to simmer them for some time before adding the fiber. One great advantage to dyeing with walnuts is that no mordant is necessary to obtain a fast color. Slight variations of browns can be achieved, however, with the use of different mordants.

How many hulls should be used? I have used as little as the chopped fresh green hull from one walnut to obtain a rich, chocolate brown on one ounce of fleece. They were simmered together for two hours and allowed to cool together overnight before rinsing. If dried hulls are used a much larger quantity will be needed to reach a dark brown. I've usually found that fresh hulls give a richer and more vibrant color and old hulls tend to give a duller brown.

My experience with hulls that have been on the ground for any length of time has been poor. I am assuming that exposure to rain or snow has caused the water soluble pigments that we are seeking for dyeing to be leached out.

In addition to walnut hulls, fresh walnut leaves have often given me as beautiful a brown as the hulls. I've had no luck trying to dry walnut leaves for storage purposes. And, yes, I have used butternuts with the best browns, also, coming from the fresh hulls.

Walnuts are an indispensable source of brown dye for the natural dyer. If you don't have a friend with a walnut tree, you had better start talking to the squirrels!