

Dye with Garden Nettles

A step-by-step guide to getting soft yellow-green and pistachio from nettles

What you need

Quantities: I used 138g of fresh nettle leaves for 40g of wool (roughly 3:1 plant to fibre). This ratio is approximate: plant colour varies with soil and season.

- Fresh nettle leaves
 - Pre-mordanted wool (alum mordant: see the mordanting video in the Natural Dye Plants playlist)
 - A dedicated dye pan
 - Washing soda (optional but recommended)
 - pH indicator paper
 - White vinegar
 - Ferrous sulphate (iron): only if you want to modify the colour to pistachio green
 - Gloves for picking; different gloves for iron work
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Step 1: Prepare the nettles

Pick your nettles and leave them on a flat surface for a few minutes so any creatures can escape. Add them to the dye pan, sprinkle over about half a teaspoon of washing soda, and pour over enough hot water to cover.

Note: The washing soda keeps the bath from becoming too acidic as the leaves simmer. Without it you may need more vinegar later.

Step 2: Simmer

Bring to a simmer, turn down to the lowest heat, lid on, and leave for 20–30 minutes. You're looking for a bright, fluorescent green in the water.

Note: Don't boil for longer than this. Extended heat darkens and dulls the colour.

Step 3: Strain and check pH

Strain out the nettles and compost them. Check the dye liquor with pH paper. You're aiming for neutral (7). If it reads alkaline (8 or above), add a small splash of white vinegar, stir, and test again. Repeat in small amounts until you reach 7.

Note: Wool going into an alkaline solution will harden and felt more easily. Neutral is important.

Step 4: Cool the bath

Let the dye bath cool until it is hand-hot before adding your wool. Don't rush this.

Step 5: Add the wool

Take your pre-soaked mordanted wool (it should be thoroughly wet). Squeeze it firmly, submerge it under the dye, and let it absorb. Leave for 1–2 hours in the hand-hot bath. No need to heat further.

Note: Squeezing first pulls out water and lets the dye in quickly. You'll see colour taking almost immediately.

Step 6: Rinse or modify

For plain yellow-green: lift the wool out, squeeze gently, and rinse in plain water until clear.

For pistachio green (iron modifier): dissolve $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon of ferrous sulphate in cold water in a separate container. Use different gloves. Squeeze the wool from the dye bath and submerge in the iron bath. Watch the colour shift towards green. Remove after 1–2 minutes: you're working with wet colour, which always lightens on drying. Rinse thoroughly in several changes of water until the water runs clear.

Note: Use iron sparingly. Too much dulls the colour and weakens the fibre over time. A small amount gives a beautiful result.

The colours you'll get

Plain nettles on alum-mordanted wool: a soft pale yellow with a green tinge.

Nettles with iron modifier: pale pistachio, almost mint. The two colours together are very good: the kind of quiet neutral that makes other colours in a project work harder.

These are useful colours. Not vivid, not dramatic. But that's the point.