Natural Dyeing with Hawthorn

Four colours from one plant: leaves, bark, and iron modification

What you need

- Hawthorn leaves (fresh; end-of-spring leaves work fine)
- Hawthorn twigs, inner bark separated from outer where possible
- Pre-mordanted wool, alum mordant (I am using sock weight)
- Washing soda (sodium carbonate)
- Ferrous sulphate (iron modifier)
- pH strips
- White vinegar
- Two dye pans, one modifier bowl, separate stirring sticks

Quantities: roughly equal weight of plant material to dry fibre. Half a teaspoon of washing soda per pan to start. Half a teaspoon of ferrous sulphate for the modifier bowl.

Steps

Step 1: Prepare the leaves

Strip leaves from their stems and place in your first pan. Cover with just-boiled water, add half a teaspoon of washing soda, and bring to a simmer. Simmer for 20 minutes, then let cool. Reheat, cool again, and steep overnight if you can for the richest colour.

Step 2: Prepare the bark

Keep twigs and leaves entirely separate; any leaves in the bark pan will muddy the colour. On larger pieces, scrape away the outer bark to expose the inner layer. Chop smaller twigs into pieces. Place in your second pan, add a full teaspoon of washing soda, and cover with boiling water.

Leave to steep for at least 24 hours. The bark needs longer than the leaves to release its pigment.

Step 3: Strain and check pH

Strain both baths and discard plant material. Check pH. The bark bath is likely to read around 10 (alkaline). Add white vinegar a little at a time, stirring between additions, until it returns to neutral or just slightly acidic. Do not do this while the liquid is hot.

Step 4: Dye the wool

Soak your wool thoroughly, squeeze out, and lower into the dye bath. Bring to hand-hot temperature (not simmering, not boiling) and hold for about 30 minutes. Leave one skein from each bath undipped in iron. These are your base colours.

The bark bath tends to be more concentrated; you may see a noticeable colour shift in the liquid as the wool takes up the pigment.

Step 5: Modify with iron (saddening)

Dissolve half a teaspoon of ferrous sulphate in a bowl of water. Take one skein from each bath, squeeze well, and lower into the iron solution. The colour shifts quickly, so keep an eye on it. Move to a rinse bowl once you are happy with the result.

Keep the iron solution well away from your unmodified skeins. Iron spots are very hard to remove. Use a dedicated stirring stick for the iron bath only. Do not add more iron than needed; excess iron can degrade the fibre over time.

Results

- Leaf, no modifier: soft golden yellow
- Leaf, iron modifier: green-grey
- Bark, no modifier: caramel orange-brown

- Bark, iron modifier: warm mid-brown

Plant dyes are always subtle. The iron shifts are visible but not dramatic. That is the point.
