

HOW TO... PAINT WITH PLANTS

MAKING WILD INKLINGS, A QUICK GUIDE BY MAKER'S DOZEN



MATERIALS

- berries, nuts, leaves, bark...
- a pot (that you only use for this)
- water
- a spoon or sturdy stick (for stirring/crushing)
- glass containers (e.g. mason or old sauce/jam jars)
- watercolour or other thick paper
- cheesecloth or coffee filters
- funnel
- *optional*: binder; cloves

BASIC PROCESS

1 GATHER. Identify plant matter to experiment with — berries, leaves, stems, bark. Harvest enough to be useful for an experiment (as little as a few tablespoons) but not so much you overwhelm yourself or your cooking pot. (See “How to Be a Good Forager”, over) Remember that a little finished colour often goes a long way. Start small, experiment often.

2 ADD WATER.

If you're working with something wet, like berries... Crush them in the pot to release their juices. Add enough water that you'll be able to warm it up without the berries scorching. For a juicy fruit like grapes, you may only need a splash or two of water.

If you're working with something dry, like bark or leaves... Add about 2 parts water for every 1 part material. Trust your instincts. If it looks like too little water, add a little more.

3 ADD WARMTH. Warm the pot over a medium-low heat. Keep it below boiling for best results. Watch for the liquid to change colour. This might take as little as a few minutes, or an hour or longer. This process is an art as much as a science. No heat? No problem. Try steeping your plant material in water on a sunny counter in a mason jar for a few days.

4 TEST. Test as you go — Cut test strips of watercolour paper and dip them in the pot to check the colour. When you see a colour you like, you're done!

5 FILTER. Remove the pot from the heat and filter your ink into your glass container. Cheesecloth, coffee filters, fine mesh strainers, can all work as filters, depending on how “clear” you'd like your final ink. Filter until you're happy with the result.

IT'S NOT BINDING BUT...

At this point you can add a few drops of binder, if you like. A binder is any substance that helps the colour stay evenly distributed, or changes its texture - usually making it more viscous. Gum arabic (acacia tree sap) is an effective binder. Local options you might try instead include honey, glues, and egg whites. Many berry inks work fine with no binder added.

6 KEEP IT FRESH. Add a clove to the liquid as a preservative and pop it in the fridge if possible. Fresh inks will spoil faster left at room temperature.



TIPS + TRICKS

- pH can greatly affect colour, temporarily or permanently. Try painting a vinegar (acidic) or baking soda solution (alkaline) over your fresh ink and see what happens...
- Different waters can also affect the final colour. Experiment with distilled water, rain water, lake water, etc.
- Inks may spoil, even kept in the fridge. Since you're not consuming them (and seriously, don't do that), if surface mold develops over time, one option is simply to refilter the ink and keep using it.

THE FAST & THE FUGITIVE

A colour is “fast” if it stays true over time, instead of fading or changing. The opposite of fast is “fugitive”, which means that the colour shifts or degrades over time, with exposure to sunlight, etc. Some natural inks are more fugitive than others. In our experience, colourful inks that tend to have good staying power include sumac (pinks) and wild grape or buckthorn berries (blue-purple). Browns tend to be reliable and stay brown.

HOW TO BE A GOOD FORAGER

TREAD LIGHTLY. Remember that the more plant matter you take, the less is left behind for the next critter, who might need that plant for food or shelter. Flowers, bark and nuts are all life-sustaining materials for some animal, insect, or other. Take only from what's abundant, and only as much as you need. If you can't leave lots behind, don't take any.

USE INVASIVES. Whenever possible, choose to harvest invasive species. Harvesting invasives is a loophole where you can take and give back at the same time!

BE MINDFUL of where you forage. Roadsides are often sprayed with pesticides, and Ontario is home to toxic berries and mushrooms. Use guides and talk to experts. Know what you're picking. If you're not certain, skip it.

ASK FOR PERMISSION, NOT FORGIVENESS.

Asking for permission to forage is a chance to make a new friend, which is so much better than an enemy. Be respectful of both shared and private spaces and give foragers a good name.

UPCYCLE + GROW YOUR OWN.

Not all colour comes from “fresh” or wild sources. Acorn caps make wonderful ink. Let the chipmunks do the work and then gather up what's left! Lots of kitchen scraps produce colour too. Anything that stains your cutting board is worth a second look. Look twice at those onion scraps, beets, and bits of red cabbage. If you have space, consider growing a garden to produce your art-making supplies. You can produce new habitat for birds and bees, while also creating a personal foraging spot. Win-win!

RECOMMENDED READING

The following books started us on our plant painting journey. These are invaluable guides to the world of homemade art supplies:

- *Make Ink* by Jason Logan
- *The Organic Artist* by Nick Neddo

