

Knit Picks Podcast 344 - Forage for Natural Dyes with Anna Canning

Stacey: Hi, and welcome to the Knit Picks Podcast. I'm Stacey, I'm the Outreach Director. And today we have a special interview. But first, I'm here with Lee.

Lee: Hi, I'm Lee, the Graphic Designer who designs all the books and patterns for Knit Picks.

Stacey: So what have you been up to lately Lee? I feel like we haven't talked for a while.

Lee: It's been a little while. I finished a sock, which was exciting because it was a sock that I got halfway through, I [00:00:30] turned the heel and I was decreasing the gusset and then I set it down. I think I made a mistake, and I did that thing where I was like, I've got to go back and fix that mistake. And then I stuck it in a project bag and forgot about it for like a year and a half or something. The last time I was working on it, I remember was in the office, it was pre-pandemic, so at least a year and a half ago. So I found it recently and I dug it up and I was like, oh, I like this sock. It's made with two strands of Hawthorne, held together, Hayden colorway, which is like a really [00:01:00] dark red and dark purple multi.

Stacey: I love that color.

Lee: It's gorgeous. So I found it, and I loved it. I was like, I want to finish it. So I brought it to our work Knit in Public Day, which was like a week before actual Knit in Public Day, we did a little photo shoot video thing.

Stacey: It was so fun.

Lee: Which you might have seen in our email on Knit in Public Day, had pictures of that, it was really fun and I got the gusset done, I got to the foot and then I took it with me to actual [00:01:30] Knit in Public Day. I went to this community park Black Lives Matter event, a pre Juneteenth kind of thing with like speakers and performers and kids and vendors. And it was super fun. I just got to like sit in the nice weather. It was kind of humid. It was one of those days where if you're walking, you feel gross, but if you're sitting, it's like perfect. If you're not moving, you're like, this is a perfect day to just sit outside and knit and not move. And then I feel really nice. So I finished my sock at the Knit in Public event and I grafted the toe and everything. [00:02:00] And I felt like, yes, I pulled it out of hibernating and I finished it. And then I cast on the second one.

Because this was a very early sock that I started before I learned that two at a time is the way to go. So it's one at a time. So now the second one is on the needles now. And I will never again knit one sock at a time because I love two at a time now.

Stacey: Once you do two at a time, it's really hard to go back to knitting single socks. [00:02:30] Because I remember I knit a while back when we were testing out some new sock yarns, I knit a sock in, just a single sock because we were testing out the yarn and we wanted to see what it looked like. So I'm like, I can knit this up in like a few days. So I knit one sock, and then it hung in my cubicle at work for, I want to say a long time, because I never

ended up going back to finish it. I really liked it too. It was a really cool yarn and really cool colors and stuff. But did you see any other knitters [00:03:00] at your Knit in Public Day?

Lee: I don't think so. I got some. When you're knitting in public in a place that's not craft related, some people will be like, "Oh, look at you." I got some people who thought what I was doing was like super fun and interesting. So that was fun.

Stacey: I mean, I kind of had a similar thing. I went to the coast a few weeks ago with my mom, our yearly trip, we obviously didn't go last year, we usually go in May. But when I was there, when I was packing [00:03:30] up, I'm like, well, I have my sweater that I've been talking about for, I feel like, months on this podcast, but I'm still not finished with it. It's what I slowly work on. But I wanted to bring a smaller project.

So I brought along a pair of Hawthorne socks, which is, as usual, they were in the really cool sock labs color work or excuse me, in the one of the sock labs and I can't remember the name of it, but it was so pretty. And so I've been slowly working on that too. And almost done with that. I think I'm at like [00:04:00] the gusset decreases. Because I do top down. And so sometimes it's a little bit more difficult to work on when we are like in the dark watching movies or whatever on the coast, but I'll probably go back and finish that because it's getting to be warmer out and I'm going to be out and about out of the house. So I want to carry around a pair of socks when I'm out about, which I do. It's just like I fell out of the habit after last summer.

Lee: [00:04:30] We weren't going out and about for a long time. So I get back in the habit of sticking a project bag.

Stacey: Because I was thinking about that when I was out. We decided to go out to get like a drink, just down the street like an outdoor place and I totally forgot to bring my knitting and I'm just sitting there. I'm like, I actually have something else in my hands to do. I don't have my knitting with me.

Lee: It's missing. You're missing a limb.

Stacey: No, I totally felt like it. I [00:05:00] got used to carrying around my smaller bag where I don't have room for my knitting bag. So it was just like a really weird experience. So I'm about to start doing that again.

Lee: In the interview, we're going to be talking about dyeing yarn, like with natural dyes, specifically, but for dying, we at Knit Picks and lots of you also out there like to use our Knit Picks bare yarns as a base to dye yarns. So what bare yarns [00:05:30] are, are the same yarns that come in colors, but without any dye applied to them. And also some yarns that don't come in other colors too. There's some bare yarns that we have that only exists as bare yarns, which I didn't actually know that was true until I started working for Knit Picks and discovered like, whoa, some of these like really nice, beautiful

yarns you don't know about unless you like click over to the bare tab. So I know some of those are your favorites, right? What's your favorite?

Stacey: Woodland Tweed. I love Woodland Tweed. I've been [00:06:00] begging for colors. And we've talked about maybe, because that's one thing we do with the bare yarns, is sometimes we'll kind of just want to test out like how people respond to a different blend. For instance, also we have another one that I really like is the woolen cotton, which is a wool and cotton blend in DK weight. So we'll bring it in as a bare yarn. And then people can try it out, test it out, see how they like [00:06:30] it.

They can knit just a... Like my Woodland Tweed, I have a sweater in Woodland Tweed, that's just a cream colored sweater with tweed. Or you can dye the yarn or you can dye the actual finished project, which I haven't actually done, but I'm kind of lazy. I do love dyeing though with it. And the only time, I mean, we did, right before. I always think of it as the last fun thing we did before the shutdown but we did like the whole indigo dye day. [00:07:00] And that was really fun at work. We use all different kinds of bare yarns. I remember I used twill and I think I use the wool and cotton for my yarns.

Lee: I use Twill and Woodland Tweed as my two yarns.

Stacey: I still had. I need to knit with them. I just keep, I actually found them not much longer when I was trying to find something else. I'm like, oh yeah, I need to really knit with this because they're really fun.

Lee: Me too. We should say the Woodland Tweed, it's 80% [00:07:30] merino wool, 15% baby alpaca, 5% viscose, which viscose is like a bamboo base like nylon. I'm not a fiber expert. It's like one of those plants/manmade fiber blend things. So I think it adds some strength to it. Like that 5% viscose, I think what it does, makes it a little stretchier and stronger than it would be without it because baby alpaca doesn't really have stretch to it. So it balances out the alpaca. [00:08:00] It's such a great blend up merino baby alpaca makes it the softest thing ever.

Stacey: I love I love [crosstalk 00:08:08].

Lee: I love how it looks. I've died some with Kool-Aid and my Kool-Aid blog posts it will link to in the show notes. And I have died some with Indigo on our Indigo Dye Day. And I love how it took both of those dyes, but I also love how it looks just bare because it has the Tweed speckles to it. So it's not boring. There's a couple of different sweaters that I've designed in the books and [00:08:30] our pattern books and they are always look so good.

Stacey: I keep putting it in. You'd always tell what I pick out yarns and colors for a certain books. I always want to throw in Woodland Tweed if it's like a cable ebook, or because I just love it so much. And I really want, so if you like it, you should buy it and write in and say

Knit Picks Podcast 344 - Forage for Natural Dyes with Anna Canning

how much you want to see it in colors. There we go. I'm going to do it. We're going to get colors.

Lee: And [00:09:00] then there's a couple, I think you mentioned the woolen cotton. It's what it's called, that's another one that's like only in bare that's not in colors. And that's, I don't remember the percentage, but it's part-

Stacey: I think it's 50-50.

Lee: So that's interesting, it makes it more summery than a straight wool, like you could make a t-shirt with it, but it's like warmer than a straight cotton.

Stacey: Yep, it's 50 merino, 50 pima cotton, so it's so soft. It's so nice. [00:09:30] And it's a nice transitional yarn. I think of it for spring knits or for fall knits. When it's a little bit crisp out in the air and cooler, so it keeps you a little bit warm. But the Pima-

Lee: Just like cardigans.

Stacey: I mean, my favorite cardigans are always in cotton. And this just gives a little bit more warmth than, say something like knitting Comfy or Shine or whatever. Having that little bit of warmth is just perfect, especially for Arnica, [00:10:00] the woods, I think. But I really love that yarn. So I'm all about that yarn. But I love all of our bare yarns. And some of our old favorites, or at least, my old favorites are only in bare now.

Because sometimes if we do discontinue a line, like for sales or whatever, we'll usually keep the bare version. And still Combo is one. Because it's a wonderful yarn, and I really loved it, but it didn't really catch on sales wise. [00:10:30] So we kept it in the bare line, but discontinued the color, so you can still get it in the bare. And still use it for some really great sweaters.

Lee: Cool. And if you wanted to just try out some of these that we're talking about, and you don't want to commit to even a whole skein, because a lot of the time the bare yarns are 100 gram skeins, instead of... Like the colors will be 50 gram, but the bare will be 100 gram. So if that's like, oh, I don't know if I want an entire 100 grams. We have a lot of the bare [00:11:00] yarns come in minis now, which is like a newer thing.

Stacey: They're so cute.

Lee: We have cute little minis that I think are only like \$1.99 each and you can just like try out, I might be wrong about that.

Stacey: \$1.50.

Lee: \$1.50, it's even less. So you can just get a bunch of them, like tack them on to your order when you're already making order anyway, just like add a bunch of minis to just like

Knit Picks Podcast 344 - Forage for Natural Dyes with Anna Canning

make swatches are used for like the heels and toes of a sock or something, just little things, you try it out and see if you like it. And also to test out dyes to it [00:11:30] to see how it takes to dye before you decide you want to dye an entire skein.

Stacey: There are only 10 grams. So they're really small. I mean, depending on the weight, like how many yarns, but it's just a really nice thing, you can make amigurumis and cute little things like that. Just to try it out. I love doing that. I love giving those tiny little minis and just playing with them. I remember, I've made like when swatching like especially for sock yarns. I'll make little mini socks just to [00:12:00] see how it knits up. And it's just a nice way to see. And it's cute. And then you can hang them up on your wall or whatever. Or your cubicle like I used to do.

Lee: Or like Christmas ornaments or something.

Stacey: So it's a nice weight. So if you're really, really into trying out different yarn fibers, our bare minis are a great way to. I think we have almost all of them in minis.

Lee: So we could ramble on about yarn, fiber content and whatnot and swatching [00:12:30] that forever and ever and ever.

Stacey: Yes we do.

Lee: We should stop because we have this awesome interview coming up with my friend Anna Canning, who I've known for years through my knit night but I roped her into joining me on the podcast and I got to chat with her about natural dyeing. It was really fun.

Stacey: That's fabulous. She does her own natural dyeing?

Lee: She does a ton of natural dyeing. She's just a hobby dyer, it's not her business or anything, but it's like her passion project that she does tons of research and experimentation. And [00:13:00] you'll hear all about it, it's awesome.

Stacey: I can't wait to hear. All right. Well, let's all take a listen to the interview with Lee and Anna.

Lee: So hey, this is Lee again, here to interview Anna Canning. Hi, Anna, you want to introduce yourself?

Anna: Hi, as you said, I'm Anna Canning. I'm based in Portland, Oregon. And by day, I work [00:13:30] on labor and human rights issues in the food system. I'm by no means a professional at dying, but I love to do it. And well, my work is obviously really different. I do feel like the values definitely align. I spent a lot of my time at work, talking about what it would take to transform our food system and economy from something that's super extractive currently, and exploits a lot of people to one that nourishes people and

communities. And I think my approach to dying is really based [00:14:00] on that same vision, like looking for beauty and connection in the world instead of a focus on just like maximum production and consumption and everything.

Lee: That's so awesome to look at it that way. I love it so much. So interesting to think about. How did you first get into dyeing yarns, like how long have you been doing it and what made you get started with it?

Anna: I think I've done little bits of dyeing before over time, like dumping things in red [00:14:30] dye or old tea leaves to mellow things out or whatever. But what really got me started down the whole rabbit hole of natural dyes was probably like seven or eight years ago now. I was out on a walk with my boyfriend at the time and he knew a lot about mushrooms and I think we were actually like both hungover and so we were like going really slow through the park and happen on this big luscious dyer's polypore, and he knew what it was, [00:15:00] and that it made colors. So we just kind of scooped it up and brought it home. And I'd been interested in dying before. So I'd read some about it and do some basics. So between that and the internet that was off and running.

Lee: Can you talk more about what are dyer's polypores for those of us who don't know?

Anna: So polypores are this mushroom that grow on wood. And they're kind of hardened woody. They aren't like, you think of a standard button [00:15:30] mushroom in your supermarket, they don't have that shape at all. It's this sturdy woody mushroom that actually grows out of the ground at the base of Doug fir trees. And it's these big round gorgeous rosettes that then have this yellow fuzz looking stuff off the edges.

Overtime with age, it gets more and more brown as it ages. But this one I found was like at its perfect moment of yellow. And it's like a really good lucky thing that that was the first one I found, because it's a super tolerant [00:16:00] dye stuff, that you cannot let it boil and the color doesn't disappear the way some things do. So it just came out this like absolute vibrant mustardy sunshiny yellow, which is one of my favorite colors. It was great.

Lee: Really is like your color, it makes me think of you. I should say to the audience that Anna and I have known each other for a long time. And that's how we've been knit night friends for many years. And when we wanted to do [00:16:30] a podcast about natural dyeing, I immediately thought of Anna because I've seen you knit with different natural dyed yarns over the years. And there are a lot of those like really good mustard Eagle, the colors that you are able to get, which are so beautiful.

Anna: And I'm even wearing some right now, which you also can't see.

Lee: So you said that the one you found is more tolerant than others. Can you talk a bit about what that means [00:17:00] if people are new to natural dyeing, what is that?

Knit Picks Podcast 344 - Forage for Natural Dyes with Anna Canning

- Anna: There are some things, there are like mushrooms that can give color more in the blues and lavender spectrum of things. And that's like a really amazing color to get. And also like, if you get it up all too hot, then [00:17:30] it just goes beige on you. And then there are some that it's like a magic science experiment. And the pH of the bath that you're cooking it in is really important to what color you get, and maybe even if you get color. There's like all these kind of variables that are fun.
- Lee: It's very chemistry, sciency.
- Anna: [00:18:00] It is. In the process of learning about dyeing, I feel like there's all these things where I was like, oh, I could have paid a little more attention in high school, had I known.
- Lee: You said pH, I had flashbacks of high school science class.
- Anna: Exactly, exactly. And just like the whole magic of actually how color attaches itself to fiber, there's like all kinds of science in that that [00:18:30] I ended up like having to do some, that are like, oh, this reminds me of a thing that definitely happened in chemistry class. And I definitely then went and figured that one out.
- Lee: So there's so many directions to go in. Talking about dye attaching itself to fibers made me think about like the difference between animal fibers and plant fibers. Do you have experience dyeing on both animal and plant fibers or do you focus mostly on animal?
- Anna: [00:19:00] I have experience with some of both, I mean, plant fibers. Well, let me backup. Animal fibers or protein fibers, it's a lot easier to get dye to stick to them. And that's the part where you can't see, but I'm making these gestures with my fingers that are showing you how color sticks to fiber.
- Lee: Like intertwining the fingers.
- Anna: And so [00:19:30] protein fibers have a lot more stuff to grab on to, and so that's like wool and silk. So I use a lot of wool yarn, I've dyed some on silk fabric. There's like some things you can do with cotton. Like Indigo works really well on cotton. Actually, a really easy thing that you can do at home is if you have a cotton t-shirt or something, soy milk, if you soak it in soy milk and then you can dye it with avocado [00:20:00] skins and pits, or skins and pits. So that's like a super magic easy project that you can do with grocery store things, and it all [crosstalk 00:20:09].
- Lee: I knew that you and some other people I know have done some dyeing with avocado that I had wanted to look into, I haven't tried yet. I didn't know this soy milk trick. Interesting.
- Anna: Soy milk, it's a protein. And so it helps then the color bind on to the plant [00:20:30] fiber.

Knit Picks Podcast 344 - Forage for Natural Dyes with Anna Canning

Lee: Cool. So avocado is, from what I've seen on Instagram, it makes like pinkish colors, usually. Right? And that like varies a bit between like more pink or more brownish? How do you figure out? Do you know ahead of time like what color you want and you know how to get it? Or is it a lot of experimentation, like you get what you get with color, in general with natural dyeing with color?

Anna: In [00:21:00] general, I would say it's a bit of A and a bit of B. I do a lot of research and reading books, going down YouTube threads. So I have a general idea of which plants make which color, or at the very least like that they make color at all. But from there it is a whole lot of experiment. And the dye stuff is one part of that, you can have avocados that will give you more orange or more peach or pink or [00:21:30] whatever.

But then it's also how much of the stuff you have. And whether it's young or old, like I was talking about with the dyer's polypore, you can have everything from like golden, mustardy, yellow to really more like 70s, harvest gold tan. And then it's also what you pretreat the yarn with, what it's made out of, how long you leave it in there. So there's a lot of variables there. But in general, I don't start out by thinking, I want blue, [00:22:00] and then go out and find a plant that will give me that color. It's more kind of a collaboration with everything that's around.

If I'm out on a walk, I'm always just peeping around to see like what might have colors. And every season really has its own colors. So that's I think a thing that I really enjoy about it, is like the kind of observation that dyeing fosters that I'm always looking around and I found like really wonderful dye plants in my yard [00:22:30] and in my neighborhood. And I think so often like in the dominant culture, the city gets described as being the opposite of nature.

But I live like a block off of two of the busiest roads in Portland. And there are so many sources of color and other foregables right here. And it's given me like such a different map of my neighborhood that I'm like, there's that street over there. And that's the place with the big pokeweed plant and like those [00:23:00] people have the hollyhocks that fall over the sidewalk. So a lot of-

Lee: It's so awesome.

Anna: It's a really fun way to engage in your neighborhood. And so I think a lot of that process is just around documenting what I find, what I try, and then also just like learning more so that I can see even more dyestuffs around me.

Lee: That's so great. I love that. At the end, I think we'll ask about if you have any like specific book or YouTube channel recommendations, because I'm sure people want [00:23:30] to like learn what to look for in their neighborhood because that's so cool. And I'm going to go back, you used the word collaboration, which I love thinking about. We always think about collaboration between people, but collaboration with your environment is such a fun way to think about it, because it really made me think about my... Like, I don't do

natural dyeing. But I do a lot of thrift store shopping for materials to use. And it's a very similar thing with like, you get what you get, like I don't go to a thrift store thinking like I'm hoping to find a denim duvet [00:24:00] covers that I can make jeans out of, but I find what I find.

One time I did find that and it was great, but I wasn't expecting it or looking for it specifically. And it's like I've made a lot of clothes out of thrifted fabrics that I feel like were a collaboration with what I found because it wasn't something that I was specifically looking for.

So that's a cool way to think about crafting in general in a way that's like, you can really get something you never would have envisioned like collaborating [00:24:30] with your environment, with what's around you. That's so cool. Okay, back to dyeing, on that tangent. Can we talk a bit about the dyeing process? I know mordant sort of thing, which is like something that makes the natural material stick to the fiber. Can you talk a bit about that? How that works?

Anna: Definitely. I mean, I think [00:25:00] I love that craft or I love the collaborative process resonates for you in the world of thrifting. Also like part of, I think that that whole finding process is really like the starting point of so much of my dyeing process. And that stage really goes on for a while too, that I have like a whole shelf of jars where I'm just squirreling away like dried flowers or mushrooms or little alder cones, like until I have enough to do something [00:25:30] with.

And I also then have like a whole yarn stash, because I do buy a lot of yarn like estate sales and thrift shops and stuff, whenever I see like good quality wool, so I have all these things that I'm saving until like the right project coalesces in my entire hoard of things.

Lee: That's awesome.

Anna: But the first step is what's called scouring the yarn, which is basically like cooking it gently with a little bit of dish soap, pick it off any grease is what [00:26:00] people are doing it for, if they're working with like really raw yarn, or also like processing stuff that might be on the yarn. And then I mordant it, which is this, mordanting is the process of exactly like you said, applying or soaking it in something that will help the color stick to the yarn and be more light fast, also.

I use almost exclusively alum, which is honestly [00:26:30] like I buy it at the Vietnamese Grocery Store, because it's also a pickling thing, but you can buy it from dyeing supply stores. And use it to keep pickles crispy. So it's food grade. I do all of my dying in my kitchen. So I don't use some of the things that are a little more toxic, because I don't really want that on the stove, in the same room as everything else.

Lee: Totally. [00:27:00] So the dying that I've done in the past is all Kool-Aid dying. I have done a little bit of technically, I've dyed with coffee grounds and turmeric, but mostly

Kool-Aid. And part of the reason I stick to Kool-Aid is the exact same reason, I can use the stove that I use for food, the microwave that I use for food, then not worry about it spilling on things or whatever. I didn't, I thought of one of the things with natural dyeing with mordants, was that it became more toxic. But that's [00:27:30] really good to know that it can be food grade like that. That's cool.

Anna: I don't use the same pans. I do have a separate pan that I use. But the other one I think I mentioned before is soy milk. That's more for like, I use soy milk on silk, is actually like very traditional from Japan to use that as a mordant. And then as far as like the dye bath itself, I weigh out the dye stuff. And [00:28:00] I keep track of the weight of that as well as the dry weight of the yarn. And then, you just simmer, and that's like a really slow process that I feel like over the years I've gotten even slower about it.

I'll let it simmer for an hour and then take it off the heat and just let the color extract overnight. And then maybe I'll come back and repeat it. And that started as a technique just to fit dyeing into everything else in my life. Because I [00:28:30] don't have full days necessarily to do a dye project and have it be done. It's more like I have an hour while I'm cleaning the kitchen or something.

I then realized that I really liked the results that it gets, and I feel like it gets a lot of really good colors. So it keeps on, keep on doing it that way. And then from there, I just take the wet fiber out and leave it overnight to dry and sometimes longer, then I go ahead [00:29:00] and knit with it.

Lee: The one other natural dyeing I have done is Indigo dyeing which Knit Picks had an Indigo Dye Day a couple years ago. We have a blog post about it, link too. But that was something I learned about Indigo was it depends on the fiber and stuff. But sometimes, like no matter how long you leave it in, it washes out to be like a pretty lighter blue than what I want. But I learned that if you take it out and let the air hit it for a while, then put it back. And then that's how you get a darker blue, which [00:29:30] seems to align with your process of like pick it out, see how it goes, put it back in, the next day, just it seems like a good technique to get what you want.

Anna: I mean, overall, I feel like it's just a very slow and patient process and it's definitely not like I want to get this specific color and I want to have it by the end of the day, kind of game.

Lee: It's for a specific crafting personality, [00:30:00] I think.

Anna: That is probably true.

Lee: We're just going to take a quick break and we'll talk more with Anna Canning when we get back.

Heather: Heather here. Hey, producer Sarah, have you heard about the Summer Sale?

Knit Picks Podcast 344 - Forage for Natural Dyes with Anna Canning

- Sarah: I love sales, where?
- Heather: The Summer Sale at Knitpicks.com and Crochet.com, save up to 60% off on yarn. And it's fun because each week different yarn weights are on [00:30:30] sale.
- Sarah: Sounds like a good time to stock up on yarn. Oh wait, what about tools?
- Heather: And you can save up to 40% on tools.
- Sarah: Now would be a good time to stock up on supplies for holiday crafting.
- Heather: And each week, there are different deals and freebies with purchase.
- Sarah: I love free stuff.
- Heather: Check knitpicks.com and crochet.com to find out all about the Summer Sale.
- Sarah: Looks like I'm going to knitpicks.com and crochet.com to stock up and save. This sale goes through July 18 [00:31:00] 2021.
- Lee: Hey, we're back with Anna Canning, hobby yarn dyer. We want to talk a bit more about fibers specifically, if you have any specific Knit Picks bare yarns that you like or just like in general, is there a difference between like a merino wool and a coarser wool or like getting down to details like that?
- Anna: I mean, my favorite fiber is always and forever [00:31:30] wool. And I'm particularly partial to the stuff that smells really good and sheepy. And then like I said, I also use a lot of mystery wool, so I find it a state sales and things like that. But my indulgence is definitely like sock basses, and Knit Picks Hawthorne is one that I like, it's really soft and has like a really nice twist to it. And I just did one of my favorite dye projects ever, possibly with it this winter, that I had this huge jar [00:32:00] of dried flowers from the hollyhocks in my garden, that they're those ones that are like the red black, if you see them out, and the end product then ended up being this like deep blue that's like indigo, kind of but also like purple and a little teal in the highlights.
- Lee: Sounds amazing.
- Anna: It was so amazing and the Hawthorn took up the color really well. And the depth of the twist to it, just added to the depth of the [00:32:30] color, like the little bit of shadow, you know that you get in the twist, in the yarn.
- Lee: That sounds so good.
- Anna: It was so good.

Knit Picks Podcast 344 - Forage for Natural Dyes with Anna Canning

Lee: I want to hear more about different natural things like from your yard in your neighborhood, and like what colors they resulted, because I know you've done some, is it walnut, I want to say? What kind of colors do you get from that?

Anna: Well, I have a huge walnut [00:33:00] tree in my yard. So in the fall, this is like totally one of the real collaborative pieces that, a number of years ago, I was like, oh, I'm going to do walnut dyeing because it makes this like really nice dark brown on wool at least, like on cotton, it'll be more of a purple brown, that's a lot lighter. But I started out doing it by harvesting low green walnuts. And during this process [00:33:30] of chipping out the walnut that was in there. So I just had the husk, which is where all the color is.

It was super labor intensive. And then like two months later, there's just all these walnut husks all over my yard. The squirrels, they are just like eating them and throwing the husks around. I'm like oh my gosh, if I just waited two more months, they've done all the work for me. So this is totally an example [00:34:00] of the collaborative process of dyeing. So now like late August, the squirrels and I have an arrangement and they get to eat all the walnuts. They don't eat my tomatoes in my garden. I pick up the husks, I get to dye.

So that's one of the fun colors in my garden. I've been growing Hopi Dye Sunflowers that have this really black [00:34:30] purple color on the shell. And so that's supposed to make like a purplish gray. I'm still collecting enough in my little swell jars. So maybe after this year, I'll have enough to do a project. Another one that comes up a lot is pokeweed, which grows all over the country. And it's just like this incredible [00:35:00] plant, it grows up tall, and then it has these blooms. And then it puts out all of these little like dark purple berries on a pink stem.

And this is actually probably one of the more toxic things that I dye with. I use gloves to handle it because it'll make your skin itch. So be careful. Don't eat it. The seeds are poisonous, all the disclaimers, but it makes a really beautiful red color. [00:35:30] And it's also just like super prolific, that it grows just, there was the greatest one like in the parking lot of the convenience store down the street and they just mowed it down. I was like, no.

So those are a couple of really good things. Marigolds also make a yellow. Last year I planted matter, which you can dig up the roots, and they have a red [00:36:00] dye to them. So it's going to be a couple more years before those are ready to be divided and like dug up without killing the plant, but I'll keep you posted.

Lee: Cool. I love the reds and golds and stuff because when I think of natural dyeing a lot I think of a lot of browns and, I think of less vibrant colors, but it's cool to see those vibrant natural colors.

Anna: [00:36:30] I think, I definitely see a lot of fairly light natural dyes, I think part of it is also, it's really, a lot of the depth of the color comes from how much dye stuff you use with

how much fiber. So I really like concentrated colors. So I tend to just save things in jars or in my freezer, waiting until I have enough to do like an entire skein of sock yarn or something.

Lee: [00:37:00] Cool. It's a good tip. You could also do like dip dye half the skein and make like a very good admiralty, self striping can be... Like wine the skin into a bigger loop and then do half of it to make like an actual self striping yarn, as ways to make the dye go further, or make it more saturated.

Anna: I like that idea. I haven't really experimented much at all with dyeing partial [00:37:30] skeins or anything but that could be fun.

Lee: Brainstorming color ideas. And also I think like a gold mustardy, those shades stripe really well with a bare sheepy white, so I'm imagining that being a pretty nice yarn.

Anna: I know. One of the fun things I think about natural dyes also is, I feel like all the colors that [00:38:00] you get pretty much go together. Even if you don't necessarily think about it, like for me, pink like dusty pink and mustard yellow were two I'd never thought really went together, and then I started dyeing things and I had like yellow from dyer's polypore and then pink from a lobster mushroom. And I really like them. They're not like super high contrast, but they make a really neat stripe.

Lee: [00:38:30] I can picture that being really nice. Cool. Speaking of things like striping here, natural diet, what kind of projects do you like to knit or make? Do you crochet also or only knit, I think you mostly knit.

Anna: I mostly knit. I started out actually crocheting when I was a little kid and I don't do it much. I whipped it out recently to make something for one of my nephews because [00:39:00] crocheting is so rad for how you can just go around and around and make a little garment like directly to fit a bear's body or something. But mostly I knit and I do end up, I think because of like sometimes having limited quantities of stuff. I love to do sock yarn for that. So I end up making definitely a lot of socks as well as other things. Love knitting sweaters.

And [00:39:30] I think the color combos is also really a fun part of socks because you can do it all, it's fun for experimenting too, that I feel like no matter what the socks, you can wear weird colors on your feet. And it's fun. I just recently did a pair of socks with that amazing hollyhock blue that I was talking about. And then the mustardy yellow and those also. They're not like secret socks [00:40:00] that nobody notices, but they're amazing colors together.

Lee: I think we've gotten into it pretty good. Now what about other people getting into it? Do you have resources that you recommend? Anything from books to YouTube channels, blogs, anything that's good to get started and get really learn the science of things like you're talking about and stuff like that?

Knit Picks Podcast 344 - Forage for Natural Dyes with Anna Canning

Anna: Totally. For mushroom dying, [00:40:30] look up the work of Alyssa Allen. She has like a whole Mica pigments thing. And she has a Facebook group that she runs, that's a really great resource. That's like a lot of people from all over the world posting what they're doing and their experiments. So I've learned a lot from that. There's a book called *The Rainbow Beneath my Feet*, which is a little bit dated, but it's definitely a classic. If you know a lot of mushroom stuff, you'll see that since that book was written [00:41:00] in maybe the 70s or 80s, the actual Latin name, some things have changed.

But there's a lot of information that's still super useful in there. For plants, as far as books, Jenny Dean has a couple books, *Wild Color* is one, I can't think of others. But it's based on UK plants, but it's super relevant here. Rebecca Burgess has a book called *Harvesting Color* that is a really nice starting point, [00:41:30] it's like super clear instructions and super good ratios of like, this is about how much stuff you want to have compared to how much yarn you have.

And it's based on California plants. But we have a bunch of them here in the Pacific Northwest as well. And then I really recommend YouTube as a source that there's so many cultures have a really long and rich history of natural dyeing. And a lot of it isn't captured in books, especially books in English, but [00:42:00] there's like Zapotec weavers and dyers in Oaxaca that are just like doing amazing things. And I think that some of that is actually like where I realized just how vibrant you can get with color from natural sources that it's not just like some of the more washed out stuff that sometimes you see.

There's like Mayan weavers in Guatemala. Indigo dyeing has huge cultural traditions all over the world, which are super different too. Like from Japan to Guatemala and Central [00:42:30] America to then like Mali, and Yoruba people in Southern Nigeria. Anyhow, there are amazing videos to watch.

Lee: Wow. Sounds great.

Anna: And here in the Pacific Northwest, there's- the Multnomah and Chinook people's had used like all kinds of natural things both for textiles and then basketry which is like a whole other thing to get that into. [00:43:00] That's it. I think some of the things that I experiment with. I totally recommend, as you're learning more about the various traditional uses for various plants and trying to decide where you start to be really aware of your relationship with the land you live on and the plants that are there.

Like personally, I go for things that are really abundant, and look for plants that are invasive or maybe damaging. So dyer's polypore [00:43:30] actually has a parasitic relationship with Doug fir trees. Pokeweed is a weed, it's everywhere really. Or things that are leftover from other stuff like avocado pits and seeds, like we talked about or the walnut husks that the squirrels leave all over the place. And then if you really get into it, then you could start planting things to dye with or reach out to people you know,

Knit Picks Podcast 344 - Forage for Natural Dyes with Anna Canning

because most people don't care about [00:44:00] what happens to the flowers once they fall off their plants, but you can use those too.

Lee: I feel like this kind of ties back to your other work and your relationship between your natural dyeing and your work. And you actually are on your own podcast for your work, which is a way that people can learn more about that side of what you do, if you want to talk about that a little bit.

Anna: Definitely. The podcast that I do for work is called For A Better World. [00:44:30] And that puts a lot of this backstory of ingredients, I think, that I've been talking about, I realized the way that I talk about dye stuff is the way that I'm talking about stuff on there, too. It's been a deep dive into chocolate and cocoa and then the sugar and the palm oil and all the things that go into that. So look it up, it's everywhere. Podcast is called For A Better World. And that's a good way to keep hearing my voice talking excitedly [00:45:00] about things.

Lee: I'm sure everyone would love to.

Anna: That was a little egotistical.

Lee: Do you want to tell people your Instagram too, because I know you post some natural dyeing stuff on Instagram, people can follow.

Anna: I mean, I'm not much of a public figure with my crafting, but I am on Twitter and Instagram. If you search Anna Canning, I'm Anna Canning on Instagram. [00:45:30] And if you're prepared to get a dose of politics and other opinions along with your crafting, you can totally come and hang out there.

Lee: Cool. I'm excited too. I've been, as a friend, following your natural dying for so many years, but I've never really dove into it. But I'm definitely going to try avocado pits. I've been eating a lot of avocados lately. So I'll start saving those pits and the peels, right?

Anna: Yeah. Pits and peels and you just like, you want to scrape out all that green stuff and wash [00:46:00] them off a little bit. And then I just dry them on the window sill. And then store them in the freezer until I'm ready.

Lee: Cool. Well, I'm going to get started with that. And then that'll probably put me on a path to trying other things too, which I'm very excited about. Feels like a real summery thing too, because I keep hanging outside to dry and stuff. So now that it's June, it's time, the time has come.

Anna: Going to do it.

Knit Picks Podcast 344 - Forage for Natural Dyes with Anna Canning

- Lee: Thank you so much for talking to me and inspiring me. And I think you've probably inspired a lot of people out there [00:46:30] to try it out. And at least like watching YouTube videos and stuff. I'm excited to learn more and go down some rabbit holes.
- Anna: Thanks for having me. It's been super fun talking with you, too.
- Lee: Bye-bye.
- Anna: Awesome, thank you.
- Stacey: This podcast was originally created by Kelley Petkun
- Lee: It is produced and hosted by us, Lee Meredith and Stacey Winglepleck.
- Stacey: With additional content from [00:47:00]Anna Canning.
- Lee: It is produced by Sarah Nairalez and produced by Heather Mann.
- Stacey: Production assistance by Remi Ostermiller.
- Lee: We recorded this episode from our homes in Portland Oregon where we like to drink iced teas outside.
- Stacey: A big thank you to our friends over at the Connecting Threads Podcast and the WeCrotchet Podcast, where we are all keeping the craft in the crafting.
- Lee: From everyone here at Knit Picks, thank you for joining us.
- Stacey: Everything mentioned in this episode along with all the tools, [00:47:30] yarn, and inspiration a knitter can need can be found on our website at knitpicks.com.
- Lee: If you'd like to be on our podcast, leave us a voicemail, we'll be checking it regularly and using your calls in later episodes. To leave a voicemail, call (360) 334-4847 and record your message. You can also record a voice memo on your phone and email the audio file to us at podcast@knitpicks.com.
- Stacey: [00:48:00] Like and follow us on your favorite social media platforms. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube @knitpicks.
- Lee: Rate and review us wherever you listen to this podcast.
- Stacey: Until next time, happy crafting.
- Stacey: Wait, should I say that? It's weird. (laughing)

