

# Clothing in the past

## Worksheet: Wool Dyeing with Onion Skins

### Equipment & materials

- Knife
- Kitchen Paper
- Onion Skins
- Electric Hob
- Hot Water
- Liquid Dish Detergent
- Large Pot
- Rubber Gloves
- Vinegar
- Wooden Spoon
- White Wool Strips
- Mordant\* (alum)

### Preparation

Make sure the wool that is being used has been washed and cleaned, this will hold the dye better.

Put your white woollen strips in soapy water/ Liquid Dish Detergent for at least an hour or more so they will soak up the dye easily.

### Activity

**Step 1:** Fill your dye pot with the onion skins; add lots of water to cover generously.

**Step 2:** Heat until very hot but not boiling.

**Step 3:** Add approximately 1 tablespoon of vinegar and stir with a wooden spoon.

**Step 4:** Next add your soapy wool to the pot.

**Step 5:** Layer the wool evenly for the first few minutes to start the dyeing process and then stir into the onion skins. The wool will soak up the dye to create beautiful gold/ yellow shade. When the water clears that is the sign that the wool has soaked up all the dye.

**Step 6:** Rinse off by hand and hang on the line to dry.

\*If using mordant, start by adding prepared wool to water containing mordant and heat gradually, simmer gently for approx 15min, allow to cool and rinse, then proceed with dyeing. You will need 454g of dry wool to 75g Alum. (6 to 1) then go to Step 1.

### Safety

- Use old pots that are not being used for food.
- Be careful when using a knife to take off the onion skins.
- Care is needed with very hot water.

**WARNING!! MANY MORDANTS ARE POISONOUS** and should not be inhaled or eaten. Always dilute mordant baths before disposing of them.

### Background Information

Onion skins, wild plants and berries can make a variety of bright colours that were used long ago for dyeing clothes. These dyes are known as natural dyes.

*There are two types of dyes:*

**Non-Mordant Dyes:** These impart their colour direct to the wool or other material without any preliminary preparation.

**Mordant Dyes:** The fibre has to be prepared before it is dyed so that it can absorb the colour. This is known as mordanting. The 4 main mordants are Alum, Tin, Chrome & Iron.

**Skills:** Investigating and experimenting.

### Follow-Up Activities

Why not try some other traditional materials for dyeing wool, here are some examples:

**Yellow:** heather, dock leaves, nettles **Brown:** Crottle (lichen), seaweed **Blue:** Blackberry

### Remember

If you want the dye to stick permanently you need to use a mordant. (Alum is the most successful mordant for textiles found in powder/packet form in any chemist shop.)

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