
Living Homegrown Podcast – Episode 117
A Garden to Dye For

Show Notes are at: www.LivingHomegrown.com/117

Theresa: This is the Living Homegrown Podcast, Episode 117.

Announcer: Welcome to the Living Homegrown Podcast, where it's all about how to live farm fresh without the farm, to help guide the way to a more flavorful and sustainable lifestyle is your host, national PBS TV producer and canning expert Theresa Loe.

Theresa: Welcome everybody to the Living Homegrown Podcast. I'm your host, Theresa Lowe, and this podcast is where we talk about living farm fresh without the farm, and that can mean preserving or small space food growing, or just taking simple steps towards a more sustainable lifestyle. All the different ways that you can live closer to your food, even if you have little or no garden space at all. If you want to learn about more on any of these topics, or my online courses, or my membership, just visit my website, livinghomegrown.com.

Today's episode is about how a lot of the plants in our backyard can be used as dye plants, meaning that we can take those plants and create a dye bath and color some of the things that we might want to color, like maybe fabric, or we want to dye yarn or fiber. And I thought it would be an interesting topic to cover because I love using my garden for more than just food. I like to use some of my plants for crafts or for fragrance, and using your backyard plants for dyeing can be a lot of fun.

So, I brought on a friend of mine, Chris McLaughlin, who has been on the podcast before, and this time we're talking about a book that she wrote called A Garden to Dye For, and Chris is super knowledgeable. She has a lot of animals on her property, on her farm. She has a fiber farm where they actually do shear their animals and sell the fiber, and she's a spinner, and she uses her plants and her garden to make dyes and color the things that she spins.

So, I thought it would be really interesting to have her on here to tell us how we can do some of this, too. Now, there was one problem with this podcast episode, and that was that we had a little bit of, some connection issues, and I think we've got most of it worked out, but you'll noticed in a couple little spots that her voice was a little off. We just had a few connection problems. We actually tried to record this several times on different days because we were having trouble, but we were finally able to get it together and I'm really excited about it because I think this is something that a lot of people might be

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interested in doing, and you can dye anything from a silk scarf to Easter eggs. So, that's what we're gonna talk about today, and let me tell you a little bit about Chris.

Chris McLaughlin is a northern California writer and author who's been gardening for over 35 years in every garden situation that she could think of. She's the author of six books, including A Garden to Dye For and Vertical Vegetable Gardening. Her current book on heirloom flowers will be released in May 2018 and I definitely am gonna have her back when that one comes out. Chris's work can be found in Hobby Farm Home Magazine, Urban Farm Magazine, The Heirloom Gardener, Mother Earth Living, Fine Gardening, and online she writes for a variety of gardening sites, including VegetableGardener.com, About.com, Fix.com, and From Scratch Magazine.

Chris and her family live on a flower and fiber farm in the northern California foothills where they grow flowers, fruit, and vegetables alongside their Angora goats. You can hunt her down at her personal website, Laughing Crow and Company. Now, to learn more about Chris, and her books, and anything else that we talk about on today's episode, just go to the show notes, and that's at LivingHomegrown.com/117. And I will have links to her website as well as her book and all the information that Chris talks about in this episode.

So, I just think it'll be interesting for you to learn how we can take the plants that we're growing and use them in new and different ways. So, with that, let me introduce you to Chris and our conversation all about A Garden to Dye For.

Hey, Chris. Thanks so much for coming on the show today.

Chris: Hi, Theresa. Thanks for having me.

Theresa: This is gonna be a fun topic because we've never talked about this before, but I had a couple requests from some listeners who wanted to know a little bit about using their garden for making dyes. And I knew the perfect person, you, for that, and I thought it would be a fun topic to cover.

Chris: Yeah.

Theresa: Yeah. So, I guess we should start a little bit by having you tell everybody a little bit about what it is you do, 'cause you write about more than just dyeing plants. You write several different books. So, what is it that you do?

Chris: Well, basically, I consider myself the gateway drug to gardening, I really do. I try in every way possible to get people to find interest in gardening that goes beyond what you may have heard before or just done before where it's just, "Oh, we'll plant some flowers or whatever."

I mean, even young men find this fascinating. In fact, I know several people off the top of my head that are hand-spinners, so they spin fiber in to yarn, and they are avid dyers. So, they love the natural dyes and everything. So, with the plants, I really like to try to encourage people, no matter who they are, no matter what they do for a living or anything, there's different reasons to use plants, because we're really dependent on them, and most people are familiar with using plants medicinally, herbs and things like that, but we can also use them for our crafting. So, that's where natural dyes comes in.

Theresa: That's fantastic, and that's exactly why I wanted to have you on because we all grow a lot of different plants I our backyards, some of us are growing them for food, some of us are growing herbs, but there's other things that we can do with them, and I love the idea of covering some of these other topics. So, this'll be great. So, why don't you tell everybody a little bit about how did you get into the natural dyes in the first place? 'Cause I know you started as a gardener, but how did you get to this place where you're actually doing dyes with your garden plants?

Chris: Well, originally, I'm a crafter anyway, so I kind of had been doing, but in this world, doing things. And when I had seen natural dyes, but I had only really seen them in the case of say like Easter eggs. I had read that like, I mean, oh my goodness, probably 30 years ago in a magazine. I thought, "That is really cool," and I had ripped it out and saved it. So, I knew it could be done. But when I started hand-spinning fibers from animals and making yarns, of course I wanted to dye them. What I figured out was is that even though, oh my goodness, artisans has been using natural dyes since the beginning of time, but the gardeners that I know around me and my garden colleagues, my garden writer friends and all that, none of them were doing it. And I thought, "Well, then, that's so interesting."

They do all these other things with their plants, and I don't know if they realize that they could also be using them for crafting such as dyeing. So, that's why I wanted to write the book was actually, I was trying to bridge that gap between the gardeners who are growing the plants and their artwork. You know, like I said, the other people that are actually into this and have been into this, artisans, aren't necessarily growing it, but they are buying the dried plants from people or buying extracts and things like that. And I thought, it's so funny 'cause we have them right in our yards and we could be doing it. And so, I just, I wanted to share that with my fellow gardeners.

So, there are a lot of wonderful dye books out there, but what I found was that nobody was talking to the gardeners. So, that was kind of my reason for writing the book.

Theresa: Well, I love that and I think that you are bridging the gap and maybe we should have you talk a little bit about how you do, you have a lot of animals and you

actually do the spinning, you spin your own thread, so this was a natural thing for you to look to your garden to color some of the fiber work that you do.

Chris: Right, exactly. What I, I have this thing I do every year. Instead of doing, you know, on New Year's everybody has this sort of resolution thing. I don't really do a resolution. What I do is I plan out what I'm gonna learn new that year that I have never done before that I want to know how to do. And one year, it was about knitting, and I thought, "Well, gosh, knitting seems like such a great thing."

I'm an avid sewer, so I thought knitting would be terrific to learn. And before I could actually get there, I fell in love with the yarn itself, and I became fascinated with how does the yarn get to be yarn? So, having a farm and stuff and having animals and things like that of course I had been raising and growing rabbits for a while. I knew you could spin it, but never thought about doing it myself. I was showing those rabbits.

So, I started doing that, and then we ended up getting Angora goats and spinning their fiber and selling their fiber to other spinners, and I never did get to learn to knit. I still cannot knit to this day, 'cause I'm so obsessed with the actual fiber. So, now we are a fiber and flower farm and we raise Angora goats for that reason and stuff. And of course, it's so perfect with the flowers. It just all so works together.

So, it's a lot of fun. You can step right outside and you can, you know, you shear your animals. And yes, these animals are shorn. These animals are not killed for their fiber. They stay with us for ever and ever and ever, and my goats are shorn every six months and give us beautiful fiber.

Theresa: But I love that New Year's resolution thing of doing a new thing, what are you gonna learn this year, I really love that. I'm gonna steal that from you, 'cause I think that's a fun thing to do.

Chris: Yeah. Honestly, instead of, it's you know, with the resolutions, I always feel like in a way, it almost, I don't know if this makes sense. I don't want to be like negative, but when I say resolution and I think to myself, it's always about losing weight or ... Not that that isn't good, that can be great, and healthy for you, but that's not a positive way to say it. It's just not a positive way to, a resolution, when you're saying, "I'm gonna lose 20 pounds this year," or something, it feels sort of negative, like you're not doing something right or something. So, that's why I like to just something I haven't learned. So, maybe instead of, if I wanted to lose weight or get healthier, I would say something like, "I want to learn about that new style of eating. I want to learn about how that works."

So, a positive sort of resolution where you're learning something new, it is actually making you a more well-rounded person. It makes you grow. So, to me,

that feels more positive for the year than to say, "I can't have my cookies," or whatever. Anyway, it's just kind of a different way to look at it, I guess.

Theresa: Yes. I love that. Yes. Absolutely. It definitely puts a positive spin on it, and you're so, so right. We're always looking at like, "What am I taking away," or "What am I gonna put myself through?" When we're looking at our resolutions, but definitely having a better, a more positive spin on it is the way to go. So, no, that's why I'm gonna steal it. I think it's a good one.

Chris: Yeah.

Theresa: Well, okay. So, we have a lot of things growing in our backyards, and I know that in your book you cover all these different plants that we can use to dye things, but before we start talking about the different plants that we can use in our garden, what sort of things can we dye? Like, I know we can dye the fiber like what you're talking about, but for me, I don't have any animals that I'm shearing and I'm not making thread or spinning, so what sort of things could I dye just for fun? What sort of crafts do people do with dyes?

Chris: Right. Okay. So, with natural dyes in particular, when you're using something that's an acid dye or something, that's gonna dye everything. But with natural dyes, obviously it really seems logical, they like to dye natural textiles. So, the things that take well with the natural dyes are protein fibers, which are fibers produced by animals. So, that might be sheep's wool, or mohair which is Angora goat, Angora rabbit, Alpaca, cashmere, which also comes from goats, silk, which comes from worms, and felt, which is usually a wool of one of those things. So, all of those things really take the natural dyes really well. It just sucks it right in and you know, really stays, assuming it's a color that stays well. But those are the ones that take to it.

The other thing is is cellulose fibers, which is fibers that are produced from plants. So, cotton, bamboo, hemp, wood, muslin, linen, those are all plant fibers. So, plants dye plants. Cotton is tough. Cotton, it has to sit longer, often has to be treated differently. So, I like to start, when I'm showing people how to do this, I like to start with silk scarves. Silk scarves, they're great. Everybody can use them. They come out beautiful. They love the dye. So, if you're not dyeing something like yarn, which is a wool, animal thing usually, then maybe a silk scarf is the way to go, or even the play silks that kids play with, things like that.

So, those are the best things. Anything that's synthetic, these dyes will not work on. So, you can't take like a blouse, maybe that you have a rayon blouse, it's not gonna work. So, it has to be a natural source.

Theresa: Got it. Got it. Okay. That's good to know. And I love the idea of doing a silk scarf, 'cause that's a great small project if you're just getting into this and testing the waters, so to speak. So, that's a perfect one. Okay. So, if we want to dye

something like a silk scarf or maybe even a piece of linen that maybe we wanted to do something with, or we have some yarn that we want to knit or we want to dye, we can always buy it if we don't have our own animals. So, I guess then we have to look at what's in our garden that we could turn into dye. What sort of plants do we have out there that would work?

Chris: Right. Well, the things that you might have right now that you didn't plant them on purpose as a dye, marigolds are awesome. They're like my favorite because that color sticks really, really well. It's easy to extract, and everybody has them. Well, you know, maybe not in the dead of winter, perhaps, but usually everybody has them.

Calendula's another one, daylilies dye well. You want the spent blooms on daylilies. So, you want them already sort of shriveled and dead. That's where the color comes out of those the best that way. Dark colored dahlias, so wine colored, really deep colored dahlias. Even oak trees. I know you may have, I know I do here in California, have eucalyptus. Eucalyptus trees are fascinating to dye with. They are one of my absolute favorite things. Depending on the eucalyptus species, you get all these great fun dyes. But also like some black walnuts are being harvested, and the outer hull of the walnut, when they're soaked in a bucket and you use that gives these gorgeous browns. So, that's something that sometimes people have access to.

But there's a lot of plants in the garden that people are just growing cutting gardens. Goldenrod, which grows wild here, but a lot of people have goldenrod in their garden, too. A beautiful plant dye. Cosmos work, as well. So, there's a lot of plants out there that you can find.

Theresa: What about like beets? Are there any vegetables or fruits that we could use not just the plant part?

Chris: Yes. Right. Okay. So, here's the Easter egg situation we talked about earlier. I want to explain what a fugitive dye is. So, a fugitive dye is a plant dye that, you come out when you first dye whatever it is you're dying, your silk scarf, and it comes out some wonderful color, but what happens is that won't stay that way. The color comes out. It just doesn't stay. Generally speaking, you would want to use fugitive dyes for things like Easter eggs, which makes all of the sense because you don't expect that to stay there, you're gonna eat the Easter eggs.

Play-Doh, for kids, also dye paints. We do little, we boil down these colors to where they're sort of, so the liquid is rich with the color and we can do a little water paints with them. You wouldn't want to be an artist that has to sell that, of course, because that won't stay forever, but it's super fun for kids to work with. And even adults. I have in my book, my daughter-in-law had painted with them. So, things that you don't need to stay are great for the fugitive dyes, and fugitive dyes are things like red cabbage, which is absolutely gorgeous dye. So, it

just kills every one of us dyers out there when we can't keep it, but we can't.

Blueberries, beets, blackberries. All of those are fugitive in general. Also, black beans are fugitive. They can yield gorgeous colors, but they just don't stay. Now, I have to add a little thing in there, because god bless the experimenters, lots of times, someone will find a way ... Well, I can't say lots of times. Some times. On occasion, someone will find a way to make something stay longer, and I'm not sure how long they're testing it for, but they indeed have been able to keep things a little longer. So, I just say in general, these are fugitive dyes. Most people won't get them to stay. But I want to say that in case there's someone out there listening that says, "Oh, no, I've done whatever and I still have," well, that could be, maybe something interesting happened that we're not aware of.

But typically, we all know these as fugitives. But I think they're still fun to dye with and they're fun for kids to dye with 'cause they're gorgeous.

Theresa: Okay. Good. Good. All right. So, if we'd want to do something with like the red cabbage leaves or blueberries, or beets, that's a fugitive dye, something that we would only use and know that the color's not gonna last forever, but doing it in something like Play-Doh would be great, because it's a natural thing and we've made homemade Play-Doh and we don't have to worry about the kids with that and it can be a fun project. But if we want to make a silk scarf that' going to last a long time, that's when we go to things like the marigolds, or the daylilies, or some of the other plants that you mentioned, 'cause they stick better.

Chris: Right. Exactly. And you know, there is, one thing that is really great, and I literally do this, I embarrass my daughter to death. We'll be at the grocery store and I'm not kidding you, I do this all the time. As she goes to a different part of the store because she thinks I look really crazy, but I got to the produce department and I gather up all of the yellow and red onion skins that have fallen off those onions, and they have to clean them up and throw them away, anyway. So, I gather them all up and when they come ask me what I'm doing, I tell them, but onion skins, that is not fugitive. Okay, those actually are substantive dyes and that will stick. Onion skins, the color is fabulous, it will totally stick. So, that's a really fun one, if you grow onions, then you can use the skins off that. And like I said, another way is just to go to the store and they don't care if you take the skins. They've got to clean it and throw it out anyway. So, that's a great one to use.

And also, I wanted to mention with using the Easter egg dyes and the Play-Doh and the paints for kids, and certainly with the eggs 'cause you're going to be eating them, make sure that the dyes you're using are things like, you know, the beets, the things that you can actually eat. You don't want to do something that you're not aware of if you can ingest it or not. You know what I mean? So that the kids, if they put the Play-Doh in their mouths or whatever, and you're gonna eat the eggs. So, I just want to make that clear. Always dye with something you

now is edible when it comes to stuff like that.

Theresa: Yeah, when you're working with kids, absolutely. And on the onion skins, 'cause I have done the natural dye Eater eggs, which is a fun thing to do, especially when you have kids, that's when I did it, and also when I was younger, my mother and I did that. But when you use the onion skins we should say what color. Isn't it kind of a golden-y color? I can't remember.

Chris: It is. It's usually, you know, lots of times I blend the red with the gold. I don't separate the skins. So, yeah, I usually get like a, it's a goldish red. Sometimes it's more gold. It kind of just depends. And of course, you can always modify colors. If we want to talk about modifiers and mortants a little bit.

Theresa: Yeah.

Chris: Okay. So, a modifier is, let's say you did your onion skins, you boiled it down, you've got your dye bath. And what you could do is you could add something to actually change that original color. So, you could use like washing soda, you know, and it actually changes the pH. So, it will change the color. So, what I like to do is sometimes I'll use that originally dye bath, I do something where I actually, and everyone's done this with tie-dye. I'll take the scarf and I'll tie it all up with rubber bands. I'll put it in that dye bath, and then after it's been in there for like an hour floating about, then I take it out and then I go ahead and add washing soda or baking soda, or something to it to change that pH, and I change the color, and I wrap more rubber bands around it to kind of hide the original color from this new dye, and I drop it in and then I've got two different colors from the same dye bath.

So, that's a lot of fun. When you modify these colors, you can have just one plant or you could get three or four different colors depending on what you've done with the bath. So, that's always fun, just playing with one color, but modifying it. Mortant actually helps the color attach to whatever you're dyeing. So, you don't have to do that with everything. With walnut shells and onion skins and those guys, their natural mortant, the tannins that are in, that acts as a natural mortant, so you don't really have to do anything with a scarf beforehand, but I like to do it anyway because no matter what I dye with, I know it'll make things a little brighter and stick a little better. So, mortants are usually, like I use alum. You can use any metallic compound. I do like to use iron. Some people use copper.

I haven't really played too much with those things other than iron, because I don't use a lot of heavy metals. So, I'm not super into it, although the iron, I got to tell you, that makes things just crazy beautiful. But I use alum to actually bind, you know, help bind the colors to the fibers. And also in terms of say like irons, sometimes something that is a mortant like iron can also be a modifier. So, what that means is not only will it help things stick, but it's going to also

change the color. And you would want to know that, because alum won't do that. If you just use alum, like you find at the grocery store, to soak your scarf in beforehand, it will not change the color. It might brighten things a little, but it doesn't alter that color in the end the way an iron one would.

So, it's really fun. It's all about experimenting. It's a lot of fun to do, actually.

Theresa: It's kind of like a mad science experiment. So, it sounds like a lot of fun.

Chris: It really is. It really is. It's like science and it's cooking. Really, it's cooking and science and it's all kind of, yeah. It's very fun. It's like a laboratory.

Theresa: Okay. Cool. Well, so, when you're talking about things like alum and iron, so, let's talk about alum. Where would someone find something like alum? At the grocery store?

Chris: Yes. You actually can find alum on the spice aisle at the grocery store.

Theresa: Okay.

Chris: I'm trying to think. Where I usually get, I get bigger amounts of alum for a little bit cheaper, you know, because you're gonna be using it and all that. I order from Dharma Trading Company here in California. They are fabulous. They have all things dye. Everything, I mean the scarves are there. And they're very inexpensive. It's really easy to just go there and find a bunch of stuff and just play with them. They even have natural dyes there, too, that have been extracted or dried from plants that you can get if you don't have them in your yard.

So, basically alum is potassium aluminum sulfate. So, I just order it in bulk, but I've also gone right down to the grocery store and grabbed it off the shelf, because it was just fast at the moment.

Theresa: Okay. So, I'll definitely have a link to the Dharma Trading Company in the show notes so that people can go there, especially since that's a great place to get the silk scarves, that works out really well. And then when you're talking about iron as a mortant, or even as a modifier also, I know in your book, you talk about how people create the iron mortant. So, they take something iron and put it in like a bucket, right?

Chris: Yes, that's exactly right. So, what I do is I get a bell jar, those big giant ones. And now I don't remember, I'm trying to think what was it, what size it was, but they're huge, and what I do is I put, I get an iron object. My case, I often have chains around here. So, I was literally, a rusty chain, and I put that in the jar, and I add one part vinegar to two parts water. And it doesn't matter how much, just as long as you do that. And I just put the lid on and I set it outside. And in a

week or two, the solution turns sort of orange-y or whatever, and it's ready to use. And it can be used, like I said, as a modifier or a mortant, but remember, if you want to use it as a mortant, it will change the color.

You're not going to be able to say, "I want it to stay this color, but I want to use this as a mortant". It's like, well, it's gonna mortant it to its own color. So, you wouldn't want to use it for that, you want to stick with the alum. But this makes, when you use iron mortant, it is really beautiful. It changes colors, it gives you all kinds of greens and things that you weren't getting before. So, it's very fun to try.

Theresa: Okay. And it's super easy because you can just find a rusty chain and create it yourself, so we don't have to go try and find iron in the grocery store, which we probably wouldn't. So, that's all, I wanted to make sure everyone knew that they could create it, 'cause I thought that was kind of cool when I saw that in the eBook, I'm like, "Oh, I can make my own." So, very nice. Okay. So, then let's talk a little bit about one of the other terms you used in the book, which people might not be familiar with, and that's colorfast. We've kind of talked about it when you talked about fugitive colors, things that don't hold their color, but what is a colorfast color?

Chris: Right. So, when we talk in terms of colorfast, people will often ask that, they'll dye something and they'll share it with someone and they'll say, "Well, how colorfast is it?" And when they mean that, they mean how long is the color staying on there, not just after you wash it, but once it's exposed to the light for a long time. So, some things are more colorfast than others. They're not necessarily fugitive. They're not necessarily gonna just wash away. But after some time in the sun, they fade from their natural color. It's not always bad, by the way.

It's sort of, I heard somebody say, I don't know who it was. Probably some famous dye person I look up to. But they said something about, and I thought this was really nice, they said something about how the colors in your garden even change, your plants change. You know, you get this little bloom, and it's starting to bloom, and it's looking a certain way. Then it opens up part way and it's like glorious, and then it opens all the way and it's sort of fading but then the birds are eating and stuff, and it's beautiful in its own way. And it's sort of the same way with some of these that start to fade. They fade beautifully. They don't always, while you don't want something that's gonna wash out quickly, that seems sort of not what we want, obviously.

But as something slightly changes, that isn't necessarily bad. Really it's just about light-fast, so how long it retains its color after being exposed to light, and wash-fast. So, and these colors might be really good at one and not at the other. They might not really wash out, but with a lot of sun, they start to fade. So, that's basically what they're talking about, is how long it sticks.

Theresa: Okay. Okay. Important to know. That's really good. So, when we're looking at things in our garden that maybe we want to try to turn into a dye, maybe we want to do a scarf or some Play-Doh, or even some Easter eggs, or something just really simple, what would be the steps? Like, could you walk us through a real simple dye? You don't have to give all the details, but just a basic overview of how this works so that it, 'cause I know every dye's a little bit different, so I was just kind of thinking we should walk through what is involved in making a dye.

Chris: Sure. Okay. So, to create the dye bath, so let's say with marigolds, because it seems like there's, when we plant them, we have an abundance of them, so snapping off their little heads doesn't seem to bother people too much. By the way, when you start gathering these flower heads or, by the way, it's not just flower heads. You could do leaves or stems. But when you gather those flower heads up, you could also pop them in a Ziploc bag in the freezer. You could also let them dry up and use them once they're dried. It's really fun. You just keep gathering up these plants and letting them dry up, pop them in a jar, and use them as you need them.

I tend to use the fresh ones just because that's when I'm always thinking about it. They're fresh and they're blooming, so I'm always grabbing them. But anyway, so you go outside and basically how many, I don't measure a whole lot. What I do is I figure it's sort of a ratio of one and one. So, however much that scarf weighs, which isn't very much, is about the same amount of flower heads I'm gonna use. I just have this giant handful of these marigold heads and I have one little silk scarf. And it's really simple to do a basic dye bath, because basically, and you can separate the flower heads, you know from the green bits, or you can just leave them. I usually leave them. I am lazy. So, I do as little as I have to do.

You want to put them in a non-reactive pot, and what I mean is don't put them in an iron pot. Things like that, obviously iron is gonna cause a reaction and may change your color, so I use a stainless steel pot. You could also use glass. So, I fill it with about three times as much water as I have in plant material. So, you're really, the idea is to let that scarf be able to float around in a bath once it's created. You don't want it to be like pressing towards the bottom. So, I make sure I have plenty of water in there. And then I put the lid on the pot and I bring the bath to a boil, and as soon as it's boiling, I turn it down immediately and I let it simmer.

And it's about an hour. And you know, with marigolds, your house will not smell bad, but I will not promise you that on everything else. It's like, "Wow." Sometimes you're like, "Oh, my goodness". So, I mean, you want to talk about the mad scientist thing, this is so fun. I have these tables outside, these wooded tables, and then I have one of those camping stoves, and I have my dye pots

outside, and it is like so cool. It's like you're cooking outside. So, you get your plants from the garden, you literally can see the plants that you've put in your pot. It really feels mad scientist. It's very fun.

But that way, I have so much air circulation that it's not gonna get overpowering. The marigolds really don't get overpowering, but other things might. So, outside is way more logical to do this. Anyway. So, we let it simmer for about an hour, and then what I do is I take my strainer and I pour all those marigolds, I pour it from one pot to the other so that I'm straining out the marigold leaves, and then I just have the bath left. And then you would add the scarf to the bath. Your scarf would already be wet, by the way, and I'll explain why that would happen.

So, you just add it to the bath and you let it simmer. I usually let it simmer for about 30 minutes. Some people do it a little longer, you're gonna get a deeper color, but honestly the color comes very quickly. And then I just take it out of there with the tongs and I rinse it under some warm water. I kind of keep things around the same temperature a little bit just so I'm not shocking the fiber or the fabric. And then you're ready to go. And usually, there's no way your bath is done. You've still got dye in there. So, we call that an exhaust bath.

So, oftentimes, we'll take other things, now you're running around your house grabbing whatever you can that's natural and throwing it in the pot so you can dye that, too, and of course you'll get less and less color, but it's just a different color. And most people do that, they exhaust the bath from the color. What I like to do with anything I'm dying beforehand is I always like to mortant. That was I don't have to even think about whether it's gonna stick well or not, I just know it's already ready to go.

So, in my mortant, what I use is I use not only the alum, I also like to use cream of tartar, which is obviously at the store as well. You don't have to, but I like it because it makes things a little bit brighter. So, what I do with the scarf beforehand is I kind of get a, again, I don't really physically put it on a scale and weigh it. But I have before, so I have a general idea. So, the idea is to do about 10% alum per the weight of your fiber. That's not very much. It's like an eighth of a teaspoon or something. And then about 5% of the cream of tartar.

And I fill a non-reactive pot, again, like stainless steel. I fill that with water, and then I put my fibers in there, and then I add the alum and the cream of tartar to it, and I raise that just to a simmer. And I don't know, I let it simmer like 30 minutes to an hour, whatever, I want it to really get inside, in between the fibers if it's something that is woven. I just really want it to get in there, and then it's ready to dye. You could literally take it right from that pot and put it in the dye bath. There's nothing else you have to do. I hold it up with tongs, and of course I let all the water drip off it first.

But that way, it's just ready to go. If you didn't want to mortant it, you don't have to, but you certainly want it completely soaked, so again, you would want to put it in sort of a low simmer on the stove with water or somewhere where it's been sitting and soaking up water for quite a while, because then you're gonna make sure it's gonna be evenly dyed.

Theresa: Okay. Okay. So, the most important thing is to, first of all, whatever it is you're going to be dyeing, the most important thing is to make sure that it's wet, but if you want to, you can make this mortant bath, and that will just make sure that the dye is going to stick to whatever it is that you're dyeing. So, you can make this mortant bath with 10% alum and 5% cream of tartar, and let your object soak before you put it into your dye bath that you've treated and boiled it for 30 minutes.

Chris: Right. Exactly. And you know, like I said, sometimes you don't really have to do that at all. I don't want people to think like they have to go get this and do that. They don't. You could do a marigold dye bath without that. It would be fine. Same with the onion skins and things like that. Lots of things will stick without it. I just like to do it 'cause then I, sort of a guaranteed and I'm not surprised later if something doesn't stay, you know, very well.

Theresa: Got it. So, it's kind of like your insurance policy?

Chris: It is. Absolutely. Yep.

Theresa: Okay. Good. All right. So, we take our silk scarf. We get it wet, or we prep it in the mortant, and we have created our dye bath. We soak it in the dye bath, boil it for 30 minutes, and then do we just take it out and let it dry? Is there any treatment we have to do to it after it's been dyed?

Chris: Well, first I just want to throw out there that you wouldn't actually be boiling it, it would just be lightly simmering.

Theresa: Okay. Sorry.

Chris: Lots of times with, yeah. No, that's okay, and the reason why I want to mention that is because some of the dyes, it actually changes the color to raise the temperature too high. So, that's why I thought I'd mention that is it actually might be kind of shocking, like "What happened?" It's like, "Well, it was boiling and it can't be boiling."

So, just want to throw that out there.

Theresa: Okay.

Chris: But yeah, what I do is I take it, I always take it out with tongs and also, have to

tell you this, don't ask me how I know this, but when you want to see how things are going and you lift the lid, do not stick your face over that immediately when you lift the lid. Because all this steam comes out, okay? So, it's like, if you want to take a peek, you can. But lift the lid, let the steam out, then look, because I learned a lesson. So, what I do is I take it out with tongs and then I rinse it under warm water in the sink. Just warm. I mean, obviously it's not gonna match the temperature, but I just kind of like It to cool down slowly.

And then, yeah, in the case of if it's free floating, you can just rinse it off, if it's free floating in the dye. You know, rinse it off and you just hang it to dry somewhere that isn't in the direct sun, that's in a nice area with a lot of, you know, I don't want to say a breeze, but you know, good air circulation. And it will dry very quickly and you'll have this scarf and then in the case of when I tied them up with rubber bands, which is super fun, 'cause it comes out in its own little crazy way, then I just snip the rubber bands off and then rinse it and hang it up to dry. And the silk dries really quickly, so that's nice.

Theresa: Nice. Okay. So, that's fantastic. So, this really isn't difficult, and there doesn't really seem like there's a right or wrong way to do it. That's what's fun about it is that you can experiment, which is great.

Chris: Absolutely. And you should experiment, because you'll find different things. I have to tell you what happened with my black bean experiment. That was really fun. I had always heard, several years ago, I had heard about dyeing with black beans, that it would give me this beautiful blue. Blue was always the holy grail of everything.

Anyway, I thought, "Here we go. I'm gonna do this black bean dye." So, I did my black beans, I did what they had said, put it in a bowl, let it soak for about 24 hours. I wouldn't go much longer than that 'cause I don't know if you've smelled beans after they've been longer than 24 hours, it's pretty bad. So, anyway, I did everything they told me to do, took the fabric out, and it was lavender. And it was pretty. I mean, I thought, "Well, this is a nice color, but this is nothing like what they said." I couldn't figure it out. At the moment, I had no one really to ask.

so, then I thought maybe it was my bowl or pot, maybe had changed the color. But I was using stainless steel, so that wasn't it. So, then I thought to myself, "Maybe my water is on the acidic side." 'Cause I don't normally go around testing my water, although you can. So, I literally opened the cupboard up and grabbed some baking soda, and I sprinkled that because that is alkaline, and I sprinkled that into the dye bowl and bam. Turned blue. And I stuck another scarf in there, and that was completely blue. And so, it was just fabulous, because I learned on my own what I needed to do to alter that color, where I might've went wrong. And I didn't really go wrong, but the fact is my water happened to be on the acidic side. So, this is what it gave me.

But it was a really fun lesson. And black beans, also, are fugitive, by the way. Once I put those in the wash, they turned gray. So, it doesn't stick. But it is gorgeous.

Theresa: Yeah.

Chris: So, yeah.

Theresa: But they would make a really good Play-Doh, a blue Play-Doh.

Chris: Oh, yeah. Oh, absolutely. It'd be terrific.

Theresa: Yeah. That's so funny. Wow. Well, Chris, I really want to thank you for coming on and explaining all of this to us, because if we are not in that world of natural fiber, we may not realize that we have all these dyes sitting in our backyard. So, I really appreciate you coming on and explaining everything to us and how we can actually do this ourselves, whether it's a scarf, or an Easter egg, or if we do want to get into fiber. So, thank you so much for coming on.

Chris: Thank you, Theresa, for having me here. I love being on your podcast.

Theresa: Well, I hope you enjoyed that interview with Chris McLaughlin from Laughing Crow and Company and all about her book, A Garden to Dye For. Now, I will have links to everything that Chris talked about in the show notes for this episode, and to get to the show notes, just go to LivingHomegrown.com/117. I hope you learned something new today, and until next time, just live a little more local, seasonal, and homegrown. Take care, everybody!

Announcer: That's all for this episode of the Living Homegrown Podcast. Visit livinghomegrown.com to download Theresa's free canning resource guide and find more tips on how to live farm fresh without the farm. Be sure and join Theresa Loe next time on the Living Homegrown Podcast.