

# PRETTY IN PRINT

Be inspired  
and print  
from nature!



**C**reate one-of-a-kind napkins with supplies you can find in your pantry and garden! You simply roll foliage in fabric and bundle it with twine, then boil it in a pot of homemade dye to print their natural pigments. It's super easy, eco-friendly and fun, and the results make great gifts, too.



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Eco-printing is a method of bundling leaves and other plants in fabric or paper, and steaming the bundles to print their natural pigments onto the fabric or card. You can buy kits and special chemicals to do this, but you can also try it out with household materials. It can be a little unpredictable, and each time may be different, but boy is it ever fun!

You'll get better results with wool and silk, but we are going to print and dye simple cotton napkins. You use soy milk as your pre-soak, tea for the dye pot and homemade iron mordant as your modifier. The entire process takes several days due to pre-soaking and dyeing time, and the iron mordant needs to be prepared weeks in advance, so factor that in.

## EASY STEPS TO ECO-PRINT FABRIC NAPKINS

### Gather your supplies

- Fabric (here, cotton table napkins)
  - Soy milk
  - Iron mordant (see box on page 3)
  - Deep plastic tray
- Freshly collected foliage
- Saucepan and strainer
- Tea bags or loose-leaf tea
  - Barbecue
- Bicarbonate of soda

### You'll also need

Plastic container; wire drying rack; rubber gloves; drop sheet; spray bottle of water; dowel; natural twine; tongs; scissors

### For you to note

- Depending on the type of leaves you use, they may give off odd smells/vapours when they are steamed/boiled. For that reason, it's a good idea to do the dyeing outside on the barbecue.
- Use an old saucepan and don't use it for cooking again.
- **MORDANT and MODIFIERS:** A mordant is a substance which helps the natural dye adhere to fabric or yarn, making it more colourfast or washfast. A modifier is a substance which is used to alter the final colour, often done after dyeing.
- The milk coats the fibres with a thin layer of protein to make the fibres more like protein fibres, so they bond



STEP 1



STEP 2

to the dyes better. The milk acts as a binding agent and helps dye darker colours. You need a few days to allow the milk to settle into, and bond with, the fibres. It is important to dilute it so it doesn't go onto the fabric too thick, as this can result in the milk literally peeling off at a later point. We are aiming for a nice light coat of milk that will soak into the fibres.

### PREPARING THE FABRIC

- Each type of fibre needs to be readied to take colour from the leaves. To start with the cleanest possible fibres, 'scour' fabric to get rid of any starches, coatings or build-up of oils. Scouring is a strong cleaning process to get rid of these impurities and can be done with washing soda (sodium carbonate) or a laundry powder without chemicals, fragrances or additives such as softeners.
- Cotton is inexpensive so is a great fabric to start with, but it is more difficult to print on cotton and other cellulose fibres than on protein fibres such as silk, so a 'pre-mordant' is necessary. The pre-mordant that can be used with cotton is soy milk. Multiple 'soak and dry' cycles help the fibre allow printing.



STEP 3

### Here's how

**STEP 1** Wash your napkins well and then soak them in a solution of 1 part soy milk to 2 parts water for 48 hours. Remove, wring out excess and then hang out to dry.

**STEP 2** Pour previously prepared iron mordant (see box on page 3) into a deep tray and soak the foliage for 30 minutes. **TIP** Maple leaves, Japanese maple, rose, sumac, eucalyptus and smoke bush all have a high tannin content and work well for eco-printing.

**STEP 3** Lay napkins on a clean drop sheet and dampen slightly by lightly spraying with water

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or simply holding under a tap and squeezing out excess.

Dampening the fabric helps it take on the dye more evenly.

**STEP 4** Place leaves and other plant material on one half of each napkin, then fold the other half over. Place a dowel or stick at one end of folded fabric and roll it up tightly to keep the leaves well flattened to the fabric.

Secure firmly with twine, going back and forward over the roll.

**STEP 5** For the dye bath, in a large pan of simmering water, add 10 black tea bags or 6 tablespoons loose-leaf tea (this can be adjusted to make darker or lighter dyes). Allow the tea to steep in the hot water for a while to darken the colour. You can leave it standing for a few hours or overnight if you like and come back to a really strong dye later.

**STEP 6** When you're happy with the intensity of your dye, remove the tea bags or strain the loose-leaf tea through a strainer or fine mesh sieve.

**STEP 7** Boil the twine-wrapped bundles on the barbecue for 1½-2 hours and then leave to cool in the pan overnight if possible. Remove rolls from dye bath with tongs. (You can boil for longer and achieve different results, and also leave wrapped up after dyeing for longer for differing results. Black tea contains the most tannins and dyes the quickest.)

**STEP 8** Wearing gloves, cut off twine and unroll fabric bundles.

**STEP 9** After unwrapping, give the napkins a rinse in a weak bicarbonate of soda bath to neutralise the iron. Then wash them with a 'sensitive' or fragrance-free washing powder. There may be a bit of extra tannin washing out, but most of the strong blacks stay put quite well. Lie the napkins flat on the wire rack and leave to dry.



### MAKE IRON MORDANT

A mordant or fixative is a substance - often metallic - that helps the natural dye adhere to your material. You can make your own iron mordant with this easy recipe. Just remember that it does need to sit for 2 weeks. Place a handful of rusty nails, 2 cups water and 1 cup white vinegar in a jar and loosely screw on the top. Let it sit for about 2 weeks. As you use the iron liquid, simply replace the water/vinegar in the jar in the same 2:1 ratio. ■