

Painting with plants

An opportunity to play & create drawings using natural plant pigments



Katherine Owen.
“Plants have always been a source of dyes and colourings, and this interpretive art activity not only explores plants as sources of pigments, but encourages the artist to identify and learn more about the plants they use in their craft”.

Drawing with nature

Drawing with natural pigments encourages you to play with colours, to discover plants and what their names are, so you can use them again in the future. You can select flowers and their leaves; from tree leaves and berries at certain times of year, to mosses and lichens when they are moist, to soils and clays. You have a wide palette around you, you just need to have a go and see what happens. As you will discover, some colours will be vibrant and stay longer, whilst others will change instantly to another colour and will also fade when exposed to light.

“Drawing with natural pigments has changed my walks and brought me closer to the natural world. I constantly want to learn new plants and spring is such an exciting time!”

Katherine Owen



Chameleon Colours

Collect leaves or a flower and use it as if it was your paint brush to draw directly onto paper. Natural plant pigments will over time fade; the colours do not contain a preservative.

Top tip: Try spraying your picture with a pastel fix spray. Take a photograph of your creation and then you will preserve the original natural pigment colour at that moment. You will then discover how different colours fade over time.

Some plants are poisonous so you need to be aware of them. Always wash your hands afterwards.

With some plants, when you draw directly onto the page, the colours will change before your eyes. I call these the chameleon colours; see below for tips on which ones these might be. With Yellow Broome Flowers, as soon as you add the colour to the page, it instantly changes to a brown colour. The yellow of the daisy flower will do the same.

Artful Kids (Based In Manchester) have a great blog explaining how you can experiment further.
artful-kids.com/blog/2010/09/08/natural-paints

Tree leaves

They produce more colour when they are young (Spring time), are fresh, and have more moisture content. They appear to have less moisture as the year goes on and as they mature.

Some trees' leaves, such as alder, produce a lovely rusty colour in spring. This colour changes as the leaf matures, changing to a dark green with brown hints.

You will get a range of different shades of green from willow, large leaved lime, sweet chestnut and ash. Create your own colour palette so you can refer back to them. Those with needles, such as yew, are harder to extract; however, young larch needles produce a lovely light green.

Flowers & leaves

yellow – dandelion, buttercup and gorse flowers.

blue – bluebell, pimpernel and cornflowers.

purple – purple loosestrife, rosebay willow herb, cuckoo flower and red poppy flowers.

green – foxglove leaf, dock leaf, wild garlic and poppy leaves. Nettles if you are careful (the underneath of the leaf has the stinging bit).

Berries

They are very exciting to play with and from the moment they first appear to when they mature, the colours are wide-ranging.

My favourites are blackberry, which produces a red right through to a deep purple, depending on the time of year and the age of the fruit, to the deep purple of the bilberry. When they're on the tree, rowan berries turn to a mush with a watery orange colour. However, if you pick them and then leave them a few days, the colour will be much more vibrant.

Yew berries are sticky and have no colour, but beware of the seed in the middle as this is the poisonous bit.

In autumn, spindle tree seeds have a bright pink outer casing and inside the seed has a wonderful bright orange colour.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

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All photos and artwork: Katherine Owen

Painting with natural pigments hints and tips:

- Take a small sketch or water colour pad on a walk.
- Collect leaves or petals from a flower or tree and use as if they were your paint brushes to see what colours emerge.
- Some colour pigments will change before your eyes when exposed to light and air.
- The natural pigment colours will fade when exposed to light over a long period of time (pastel spray fix helps to keep them).
- Be careful of plants and berries which might be poisonous and always wash your hand afterwards.
- Most importantly, experiment and have fun!