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How Does Your Garden Grow?

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How does your garden grow?

One researcher uses natural dyes to change the way we view common plants.



Sherry Haar's garden is more than a hobby — it's blurring the line between science and art. The Kansas State University researcher is studying natural dyes for their sustainable use around the world in textile design.

Haar, professor of apparel, textiles and interior design, hopes that eventually this natural method of extracting color for use on clothing and other textiles could improve lives. For six years, Haar has been growing plants in her own garden for research and has spent her summers dyeing fabric in her driveway.

"At our jobs, we're at computers all the time," said Haar. "With my research, I get outside, dig in the ground and create color and pattern from nature. This provides a healthy balance."

Natural dyes are derived from natural sources such as plants, animals, insects and minerals, known as dyestuffs. Haar said she extracts dyes from the dyestuffs through a combination of water and heat, often using thermal or solar methods. The fabric she uses is often pre-treated with aluminum minerals, called mordants.

Haar also grows plants for their pounding potential to transfer their imprint to fabric. This is useful in producing patterns and can be done simply by setting a leaf and wet fabric under a heavy object, or by hammering the leaf onto dry fabric.

“It should be a natural alternative. The aim is not to return to using only natural dyes, but to consider best practices for each region around the world.”



“Pounding on dry fabric creates a very distinct pattern, while imprinting on wet fabric creates hazier patterns,” said Haar. “People often think the images are painted onto the fabric — it’s that detailed.”

Haar primarily grows plants that readily grow in the region. She also collects materials from around the community, such as fallen Osage orange branches, walnuts, and goldenrod.

Her goal is to apply the idea of local resource use to help others. Part of Haar’s research involves working with colleagues in her department to change the lives of women around the world. In August 2013, Haar and a colleague are traveling to southern India with an alumnus who has been supporting an orphanage for the last several years and is investing in the establishment of a women’s training center.

The training center will be located near tea and spice plantations, which may be a good match for natural dyes. Haar said the group doesn’t yet know what their role will be, but are looking forward to exploring opportunities.

“One of the goals is to find out how we can translate our knowledge of natural dye and design to appropriate use of regional resources,” said Haar. “It’s a skillset that is adaptable to many locations around the world. We also hope to facilitate service learning opportunities for our students.”

Haar added that the interest and use of natural dyes is growing as they provide an alternative to the synthetic dyes widely used today.

“It should be a natural alternative,” said Haar. “The aim is not to return to using only natural dyes, but to consider best practices for each region around the world.”

By Megan Saunders, Communications and Marketing

