*Complex Weavers'*

ISSN: 1530-762X

# Medieval Textiles

**Nancy M. McKenna, Chairperson** **507 Singer Ave, Lemont IL 60439**

## Wool Dye from Prickly Pear Cactus Juice

*Opuntia phaeacantha* aka *O. engelmanii*
(c) 2004 Gayle Bingham

The Navajo have used cactus pear juice for dyeing wool for centuries. There are many methods for obtaining the juice for dyeing. This is the method our fiber group uses for this dye.

First of all, pick very ripe pears when they are a deep, rich purple/red, and are slightly soft to the touch. Use either very tough leather gloves or tongs to pick the pears.

Boil the pears in water to soften further, piercing them with a sharp knife. The pears were then removed from the water. We then ground them through a tomato juicer. This type of juicer separates the pulp and seeds from the juice.

We then squeezed the juice through a jelly bag. Be sure to wear **heavy** leather gloves with rubber gloves underneith! The squeezed juice with the addition of a small amount of the water used to boil the pears is poured into bottles. This juice can be saved in the refrigerator or frozen.

The dye procedure is very simple and does not require a mordant. This is a fermentation vat dye. Place clean, damp wool skeins in jars and cover with pear juice. Let the jars stand in a warm, not hot, place for as long as two weeks or as short a time as two days. The temperature is **very** important. The temperature should not exceed 80º F or drop below 50º F. Do **not** put jars in sunlight but place them in a shaded area of a room where there is light but not direct sunlight. A bluish/red may be obtained by adding vinegar to the vat.

Our group has found that the cactus pear juice will produce pleasing color only on wool.

## Dyeing with Avocado Pits and Skins

(c) 2004 Gayle Bingham

My method of dyeing with both avocado pits and skins is a combination of several methods. I saved the avocado pits and skins for nearly a year in the freezer. The pits were cut in fourths and the skins were torn into medium sized pieces before freezing. I filled a one-quart freezer bag for the pits and one quart freezer bag for the skins.

I separated the pits and skins to use each one in two different dye pots. The pits were put in a mesh bag, as were the skins. Both the pits and the skins were soaked for seven to nine days in about a gallon of water. Every two to three days the dyes and water were heated to a simmer. After the period of soaking was complete, the mesh bags containing the dyestuffs were removed and enough water was added to each dye pot to cover the amount of yarn to be dyed.

The dye baths were heated and the wetted fiber was entered. The dye baths were brought to a low simmer and held at that temperature for at least one hour. Then, the heat was turned off, and the fiber was allowed to cool in the dye bath.

After the fiber had cooled, the fiber was soaked in strong salt water for twenty minutes. The salt used was plain salt, not iodized salt. After the twenty minutes had elapsed, the fibers were rinsed and dried.

The skins gave a yellow beige color and the pits gave a rose beige color. The yarns were Egyptian cotton and Tencel/cotton.