



# Medieval Textiles

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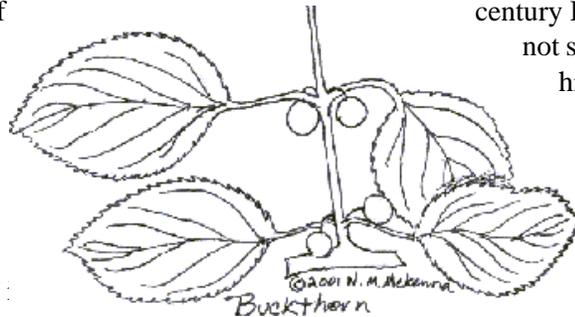
## Dyeing with Buckthorn

(*Rhamnus cathartica*)

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Known as common or European buckthorn, it was known as a healing herb hundreds of years ago in Anglo-Saxon England, where it was called waythorn, highwaythorn, hartshorn, or ramsthorn. It is also sometimes called purging buckthorn because of its laxative properties. The berries of European buckthorn can be used in healing. The ripe berries of this species are black and the size of a pea. *R. cathartica* is a shrubby tree that grows to a height of about 18 ft (6 m). Its twigs are often tipped with small spines, accounting for the "thorn" in its name. It has dull green, ovate-elliptic leaves which are smooth on both surfaces and have minute teeth on the margins. Common buckthorn is found throughout Great Britain, continental Europe, and North Africa, where it grows wild in partial sun along the edges of roads and woodlands. It was introduced into North America as an ornamental landscaping plant, but it has naturalized and become a nuisance plant in much of Canada and the northern United States. It can be controlled thru burning underbrush annually or bi-annually. Cutting will cause it to sprout anew from the roots.

This plant is not found among period manuscripts outlining medieval dyes as readily as weld, however, it was available and may have been used by the home dyer. Since only the berries are used, this would have been a more difficult commercial dye as compared to weld, and would have been available for a limited time of the year.



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## Dyeing with Black Walnut

(*Juglans nigra*)

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Using Walnuts to dye cloth a brown or black is featured in the Innisbruck Manuscript (c. 1330 AD) and others and is thus well known and documented. It was also used to dye yarns for the Bayeux Tapestry, and the pair of men's pants from Hedeby (10th century Denmark). I include it here not so much to point out its historical significance which can easily be found, but to allow those who do not have confidence in using natural dyes to try the simplest natural dye there is, in my opinion.

Very simply, beat the squirrels to your local walnut tree and gather as many nuts as you can from the ground. If the tree is a prize specimen producing large nuts keep some for eating. If it is the wild variety that only the squirrels want, put all in a bag and crush the nuts. Touching the crushed nuts hulls with your hands will cause your hands to turn black and stay that way for quite awhile. If you do not want to use a bag, then use gloves when crushing the nuts.

Place crushed hulls into a pot, and fill with water. After about a half hour, the water will be brown/black. You can strain the liquid from the hulls or just add the wool/yarn. Simmer for about a half hour or until the shade of brown you wish is reached. Adding iron or premordanting with iron will create black hues.

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**Mordant:**

Per pound of wool:

3 oz. Alum (potassium Alum Sulfate)

1 oz Cream of Tartar (potassium bitartrate)

5 gallons of soft water Simmer for 20 minutes, drain  
& rinse yarn.

**Dye:**

Take green berries and smash them. I used half as  
much berries as yarn by weight. Add sufficient water  
to cover the yarn and bring to a simmer. Keep at this  
heat for about 10 minutes. When the water hit about  
170 degrees Farenheit, the dyebath exhausted.

Results were a bright yellow yarn.

**Sources:**

Davison, Tish. Buckthorn The Gale Encyclopedia of  
Alternative Medicine. Gale Group (c) 2001