



# Madder Dye Plant

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## Growing & harvesting Madder (*Rubia tinctoria*)

Madder dye plants make one of the most light-fast of natural dyes that has been in use for thousands of years.

The fleshy swollen madder roots produce madder red dye which is sensitive to temperature and to the mineral content of the water. Alizarin is the main chemical compound in this important natural dye and produces the red colour.



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### Biology of madder dye plants



madder dye plant shoots

Madder is a long lived perennial of the family Rubiaceae, the same family as coffee.

The madder plants sprout in early April and grow to 60 to 100 cm high. The star-shaped leaves are prickly and may cause a skin rash.

Small pale-yellow flowers appear by the end of June and green berries by mid July.



madder plants in flower



madder berries

By the end of September the berries have swollen to a small blackcurrant or bilberry size, and turned to dark grey or black.

In late autumn, the plants begin to die down, the berries to dry and the seeds look like black peppercorns. Throughout winter the madder bed looks dead, as if covered with straw.

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### History of madder as a dye

Madder roots have been used as a dye for over 5,000 years. Archaeologists have found traces of madder in linen in Tutankhamen's tomb (1350 BC), and in wool discovered in Norse burial grounds.

Very recently (August 2009), [Marco Leona](#) of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, showed that the 4,000-year-old dye found on leather from an ancient Egyptian quiver was madder red dye (madder lake). Leona used a refined version of a technique called Raman spectroscopy and dated the madder-dyed leather to the Middle Kingdom era.

Druids are said to have used garments dyed with madder red dye in girls' coming of age ceremonies.

Madder root was fed to white horses to colour hooves and teeth, and to hawks to colour beak and

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talons. There is even a mention of feeding madder plants to sheep to dye their wool (see [madder dye links](#)).

In Ireland, women piled a paste of simmered madder roots on their fingernails to stain them. The result was a red rosy glow that looked very natural.

It is likely that early American flags were made from wool and then dyeing with madder or dyeing with cochineal or with a combination of the two. And more recently, the leather casing of cricket balls was dyed red with madder.

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#### Cultivation of madder dye plants

Plant each seed in a small pot filled with compost. Fresh seeds are much more likely to germinate, but be sure to protect them from slugs, which love eating young madder. Madder plants take easily from cuttings too.

Once established, it spreads and creeps, clinging to upright structures and can become invasive. Adding lime to the soil during the winter helps the plant to produce better reds.

#### Harvest - Digging the madder roots



freshly dug madder roots

The minimum age for harvesting madder is three years, but the best age is five years, when the roots are pencil thick. Fifteen-year old plants produce roots that are one inch in diameter. It is best to have three or more madder beds, and dig them in rotation.

Some people say that the best time to dig the roots is in the winter, when the prickly foliage is dry, and most of the nutrients are in the roots. Others say the August is the best month to dig them, the roots being easier to clean after a week or two of good weather. I prefer to use fresh madder roots in my dye vat, and I dig them up when I need them, using thick gloves. I usually dig a patch 1m by 1m in my three year old madder bed, and fill a bucket with roots.

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#### Washing the madder roots

It helps to let the soil around the roots dry for a couple of days beforehand. You can then

shake most of the loose soil out of the roots before washing them.

Fill a five-litre bucket with water and agitate the roots inside the bucket to loosen the soil. Then move the roots to another bucket rather than tipping the water from the bucket. This way the soil stays in the bottom of the first bucket, and does not get mixed with the roots again. Wash the first bucket and then alternate between the two buckets several times.

#### Cutting the madder roots



Madder root is hard to cut when dry, and I usually cut mine in small pieces using a pair of secateurs soon after I have washed them.

The centre of a thick root is yellow immediately after I cut it, but it quickly turns red with exposure to the air.

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#### Yield of madder dye

I weigh the cut madder roots to have an idea of how much fabric I can dye. I usually aim for about 850 grams of fabric I can dye. I usually aim for about 850 grams of freshly-dug roots, which is about a five-litre bucket full of uncut roots. This will fill a ten-litre saucepan when liquidised. 100 grams of fresh madder makes 14 grams of dried madder and 850 grams produces about 110-120 grams of dried madder.

>> [Dyeing with Madder is on the next page](#) >>

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