

# USING NATURE'S PALETTE

Founders of Nature's Rainbow in Hitchin, a couple are recreating and teaching the ancient art of growing and dyeing with plants

WORDS: Sebastian Oake

Susan Dye on her allotment 'dye garden'. She uses a wheelbarrow to transport the produce back home



**H**ave you ever wondered where your bright new jumper got its colour? You may be surprised to learn it is probably from a synthetic dye made using chemicals derived from oil. In the late 19th century dyes were often made using coal tar as the raw material but before around 1860, yarn and cloth were generally coloured using natural plant-based dyes. Many common plants contain sources of vibrant colours and our ancestors knew how to work with them. Some people still do.

Among them is Susan Dye. The clue, of course, might be in her family name, but Susan says she has no idea whether it was given to her forebears because of their occupation, such as Baker or Butcher.

'I have solid working-class peasantry on both sides of the family,' she says with a laugh. 'They could have been dyers. And we did come from Norwich, which was an important textile centre up until around 1870, so there may be something in it.'

Susan and her partner, Ashley Walker, have what can only be called a dye garden. Their two allotments are crammed with plants ready to reveal their

colourful secrets to those who know how to unlock them. Some sources of colour are obvious. The bright yellow flowers of dyer's greenweed are a big clue to the hue you can extract from them but would you guess that woad, with its grey-green leaves and yellow flowers, could offer up a powerful blue? Julius Caesar famously recorded that Britons smeared it on their skin to make them 'the more terrible to behold in battle'. Or that common madder, again unremarkable in the garden, could be the source of bright red?

It's all down to the extraction process and the part of the plant used. Indigo is released from woad using basic science involving an alkali and a reducing agent, while the red of madder comes from its roots.

Susan and Ashley are a common sight around Hitchin as they wheel a barrow between home and allotment. They have turned their passion into an industrious cottage business. They sell dye plant seeds, give advice on setting up a dye garden and run workshops on using the colours. Clients have come from as far afield as Gateshead.

The couple find the subject really ignites people's enthusiasm



*'The production of raw colour is both magical and motivating'*



Photos: Sharon Cooper



Photo: aimphotography.com

**ABOVE:**  
Ashley in the dye garden

**FAR LEFT:**  
Produce from the garden

**LEFT:**  
Dried dye plants

and connects to a yearning for simpler, natural things. 'The production of raw colour is both magical and motivating,' says Susan. 'We love sharing our knowledge with others. Empowering people to get colour is so satisfying. It's part of the rejection of mass-produced colour using oil and all the ecological damage inflicted by the modern fashion industry.'

Just as a child with a pot of bright paint looks for something to spread it on, producing colour in a natural way is only part of the story. Susan says her interest is 'from seed to stitch'. She and Ashley belong to the London Guild of Weavers, Spinners

and Dyers and have experience across the whole breadth of home textiles.

After extracting the colour, the next step is to dye yarn or thread. Susan and Ashley like to produce their own yarn and are interested in both animal and plant fibres, from wool and silk to cotton and flax. Ashley uses a spinning wheel while Susan uses an even more old-fashioned technique.

'As an invention, the spinning wheel is actually not that old,' she says. 'Its use in Europe goes back only around 500 years. I use a drop spindle, which is a very simple hand tool.'

It turns out to be something ▶

## FIVE MORE HERTS ECO-BUSINESSES

### Refill champions

Cutting out plastic and reducing waste, refill grocery stores are popping up across the county. Visit Refill Pantry in St Albans (also at Carpenter's Farm Shop at Sandridge), Clean Earth Pantry at Berkhamsted, Replenish & Reuse at Buntingford and Replenish Refill Store in Hertford.

### Green growth hub

Providing flexible work space in Hemel Hempstead, Harpenden and Watford, Hertfordshire IQ (Innovation Quarter) aims to nurture a sustainable business revolution locally.

[herts-iq.co.uk](http://herts-iq.co.uk)

### Online lifestyle shop

Offering free delivery in the Royston area, the online Eco Living and Sustainable Home store can help you make good, green purchasing choices.

[ecoliving](http://ecoliving)

[sustainablehome.co.uk](http://sustainablehome.co.uk)

### Answering a call

Based in Waltham Abbey, Bamboo Distribution is an international concern specialising in the recovery and refurbishment or recycling of old mobile phones.

[bamboodistribution.com](http://bamboodistribution.com)

### Repair & reuse

Petefire is an artist-cum-blacksmith with a forge just outside St Albans where he crafts everything from knives and decorative swords to fire surrounds and pokers, railings and sculptures. He can also do metal repairs and runs workshops.

[petefire.co.uk](http://petefire.co.uk)



Photos: Sharon Cooper



Photo: Nature's Rainbow

**TOP LEFT:**  
Pin loom squares,  
ready for quilting  
or patchwork

**TOP RIGHT:**  
Ashley with  
his pin loom  
weaving frame

**ABOVE:**  
Plant-dyed  
woollen yarn

reminiscent of a child's spinning top. 'This method dates back to around 5,000 BC, which is pretty extraordinary.'

Everything the couple do involves skills now retained in this country only at craft level. And the sophistication of their equipment is, like the drop spindle, reassuringly simple. The dyeing process, for example, uses not much more than a series of buckets, pans and something to stir things with.

Having spun yarn and coloured it, Ashley uses his homemade pin loom to turn it into squares of cloth. It's a basic wooden frame edged with tack nails, between which the yarn is repeatedly crossed. The resulting pieces of fabric

can then be stitched together through simple patchwork to make a blanket or throw.

Susan studied for a City and Guilds in patchwork and quilting but leans towards the latter process, where layers of fabric are sewn together in various ways.

'Fabrics produced through quilting needn't have a purpose – they can just be for art or expression,' Susan explains. One piece she is particularly proud of is a four by three foot contemporary quilt wall-hanging to honour the exquisite work, in poor conditions, of the dyers and weavers of Norwich before the advent of synthetic dyes.

While their creativity drives them, the couple are perhaps happiest outdoors, rolling up

their sleeves and tending their dye garden. After all, everything natural starts with the soil, whether it is growing dye plants, rearing sheep or growing flax. Susan and Ashley do, however, admit that nature is not without its flaws in terms of her colour palette. For all their obvious greenery, plants struggle to come up with a true green that you can easily dye with. Dyers usually have to carefully juggle blue and yellow to get there. But this remarkable couple insist that's all part of the beauty of the process. ♦

*For details of Susan Dye and Ashley Walker's plant dyeing and workshops, visit [naturesrainbow.co.uk](http://naturesrainbow.co.uk)*