

A *dyeing* ART

Using blooms harvested from her garden, Jane Meredith blends dyes to colour the British wool she spins and knits into beautiful textiles

WORDS BY KITTY CORRIGAN ● PHOTOGRAPHS BY NOEL MURPHY



Jed and yellow and pink and green... the rainbow of colours in Jane Meredith's garden live on long after the flowers have faded at summer's end. Through the ancient art of dyeing, they are transformed into the myriad shades on her handmade shawls, throws, blankets, cushions and rugs.

In the wooden studio adjoining her house in the Herefordshire hamlet of Byford, the shelves are piled high with finished items in tactile textures – from finely spun wool to chunky raw fleece – while a work-in-progress sits on her hand loom in the corner. Here she can design and create, away from domestic distractions. The walls are clad in tongue-and-groove, a woodburning stove adds warmth and cheer in the colder months, there are colourful kilim rugs on the floor, and a bookcase is well stocked with craft books for reference and inspiration.

Late summer is harvest time, when Jane gathers armfuls of blooms, leaves, bark and berries to dry in handmade apple baskets under a large canvas canopy attached to the house. Wire vats bought at auction hold Cotswold fleeces drying in the August sunshine. The rambling one-acre plot slopes down to a stretch of the meandering River Wye, a stunning location

where kingfishers flash past, egrets perch and swans drift by. Willow grows along the bank, and meadowsweet, St John's wort and tansy are in abundance. Jane adds all these to her dye recipes but takes care not to pick too much too often.

Plant Dyed Wool is a business that Jane first began as a hobby 32 years ago. Now it takes her to exhibitions around the country, where she demonstrates spinning, weaving and felting, and sells her unique looms, which she makes with her husband Julian, a woodcut artist and printmaker. From April until September she runs workshops at home on all aspects of woolcraft.

In her garden, cottage perennials – penstemons, lupins, delphiniums and hollyhocks – grow alongside traditional dyer's plants – marigolds, foxgloves, goldenrod, coreopsis, woad, weld, madder, gipsywort and camomile. Remnants of raw fleece are laid between rows to suppress weeds. Strolling along the winding paths, Jane explains how every plant earns its keep. Blackcurrant leaves can be used to make a yellow dye after fruiting is finished, while poisonous rhubarb leaves are the source of a natural chemical, oxalic acid, which acts as a mordant – the substance that binds dye to the yarn so that the colour won't fade. "When we

In Jane's garden, cottage perennials grow alongside traditional dyer's plants



Jane gathers flowerheads, bark, berries, fruit casings and leaves from her bountiful garden, which runs along the

River Wye, before placing them in a dye-bath to extract their surprisingly vivid shades

started looking for a house in Herefordshire – to be near a Steiner school for the children – we didn't even ask about the number of bedrooms," she explains. "My only requirement was a large garden." In Victorian times the house they found was a pub called The Boat Inn, and barges would stop to deliver barrels of cider. Later it became a smithy and today is still called The Forge. They rented it for nearly 20 years until Jane inherited money from her parents in 2015, which conveniently coincided with the owner's decision to sell. "It was serendipity," she says.

When they first moved in and were raising their daughters – Skye, Nada and Freya – in the 1980s, theirs was a simple, self-sufficient lifestyle. They grew most of their own food – "I used to spend £5 on a weekly shop at Swaffham market" – and kept a cow, four goats, pigs, chickens, geese, ducks and bees. "I miss the goats, especially at kidding time, but not the twice-daily commitment of milking," she adds. "It was a chaotic household when the children

were small and we had very little income. We ate a lot of wild food."

No one was more surprised than Jane that she took so enthusiastically to living off the land. Before she met Julian in the late Seventies, she had led a peripatetic lifestyle: as a taxi driver in Oxford, a deckhand on a boat to Australia, and a backpacker on the hippy trail through Asia and Africa. "At that time I wasn't into gardening, but suddenly I found myself growing vegetables and keeping animals."

Like everything else in her life, the business evolved naturally. When she acquired a spinning wheel from a friend who showed her how to use it, she became addicted. "I loved the rhythm of it. It was the only time I relaxed," she remembers. "I also took up knitting and made every imaginable item of clothing for the children. Everything I did had to be useful, but I discovered that I had an artistic talent for putting colours and patterns together."

Jane added peg-loom weaving and felting to her repertoire, and with a group of friends started to experiment with making dyes from plants in the garden, cooking them up in pots on a bonfire. The results were fairly hit and miss, but the alchemy fascinated her. Today her technique is more sophisticated, though recipes still come about through trial and error. First,

RURAL BUSINESS



FROM LEFT Jane spins one of her collected British fleeces into wool, which she then uses

to create her distinctive natural-hued weavings on a Brinkley loom

she prepares a dye-bath in a large stainless-steel container, tearing up leaves and sprinkling in petals and roots. Water to cover is added, brought to the boil over an open fire, and left to simmer for an hour or so to extract the colour. She knows what she hopes to achieve, but the result can never be guaranteed. "That's where the magic comes in," she says, "and yet it's very simple. People have been dyeing cloth and wool for thousands of years."

Students attending courses in Jane's tranquil garden can learn every step of the dyeing, spinning and weaving process, from fleece

"I take my van into the hills and commune with the beautiful Herdwick sheep"



to fabric, and leave with several items they have made themselves, sometimes with a loom in tow as well. Jane and Julian are the sole suppliers of the Brinkley loom. "It was invented by a Mr Pink who lived in the village of Brinkley in East Anglia," Jane says. "It was my first loom and I thought I would progress to something bigger and better, but I have never found any that suit me as well. We eventually acquired the business and now make and sell Brinkley looms."

Jane replenishes her store of fleeces, which include Romney, Welsh, Shetland and Cotswold, from fairs around the country. Wool Fest in Cumbria each June is her favourite: "I can take my van off into the hills after a busy day and commune with the beautiful Herdwick sheep."

It is this love of the British countryside and the crafts born from it that sits at the heart of Jane's business. From the flowers and plants in her garden to the techniques she uses to process her fleeces, her knowledge is in-depth and born from passion. It's a passion that she passes on to the students who come to her home, ensuring, far from being a dying art, the craft is very much alive in Herefordshire. 

Plant Dyed Wool, The Forge, Byford, Herefordshire (01981 590370; plantdyedwool.co.uk). Jane will be exhibiting at Sparsholt College in Winchester, Hampshire, from 13-20 August (wsd.org.uk). She is also holding workshops at her home until the end of September. See her website for details.