



Making a Japanese Indigo Dye Vat

To dye 4 oz dry weight of fabric or yarn, you will need:

About 8 oz of fresh Japanese Indigo Leaves
Ammonia
Rit® Color Remover
2 2-gallon buckets
1 gallon plastic pitcher or glass jar
1 stainless steel kettle with rack
candy thermometer
1 tbsp and ½ tsp measuring spoons

Note: It's pretty easy to find these items at garage sales or thrift shops. After these tools have been used for dyeing, they should be marked "for dye use only". Do not use them for cooking or food preparation.

When the leaves bruise blue, they are ready to use. Pick them from the base of the stems, using up to half of the plant. The plant will grow new leaves from the joins, and you will be able to harvest from the same plant again in a couple of weeks. Pack them into a 1 gallon glass or plastic pitcher (a one gallon glass pickling jar works great) and cover the leaves with cold tap water. Put the container on a rack, creating a double boiler, in a large stainless steel kettle on the stove top on a low temperature setting. (An inverted metal pie plate with holes punched through works well, if you don't have a rack.) Slowly bring the temperature of the leaf liquid up to 160°. Sometimes this could take an hour, or two. Do not ever allow the temperature to go over 180°. It is ready when a paper towel dipped in the leaf liquid comes out blue or changes to blue within minutes, and there is blue pigment floating on the surface of the liquid.

Remove and discard the leaves and pour the liquid into a plastic bucket. Next, add about 1 tablespoon of ammonia per gallon of liquid to bring the ph up to between 7.5 and 8.2.

Pour the liquid back and forth between two buckets for about 5 minutes, until the froth turns blue and the liquid color is a kind of greenish-brown color.

Put the dye liquid back on a burner and maintain a temperature of between 113° and 130°. For this next step, be sure to read and follow the precautionary instructions on the color remover package. Wear plastic gloves, a respirator that blocks dust and fumes, and protective eye wear. Sprinkle ½ teaspoon color remover into the dye liquid, and stir the liquid slowly, to avoid introducing more oxygen into the dyebath. When the dyebath turns a greenish-yellow color, it is ready to dye. This could take anywhere from 20 minutes to an hour.

Gently place the wetted cloth or yarn into the dyebath, and leave it in for 20 minutes or until you have the depth of color you want.

Remove the article, being careful not to let it drip back into the dyebath. Wring it out, and you will see the color change from green to beautiful indigo blue! Allow it to dry and air out for 20 minutes, then re-dip it for a darker, or more even color, if you like. Let the dyed items dry overnight, then rinse them out, with the final rinse in water mixed with a tbsp of vinegar (to restore the ph level of the dyed item, especially if it is wool).

Additional references:

Buchanan, (1995). A Dyer's Garden. Loveland, CO, USA; Interweave Press
Cannon, John & Margaret, (1994) Dye Plants and dyeing, Portland, OR, USA; Timber Press
Dean, Jenny (1999) Wild Color, New York, USA, Watson-Guption