

*From Blueberries to Yellow  
Onion Skins: Decorating Easter  
Eggs with Natural Dyes*



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# Activity, Time and Materials

## ACTIVITY:

As a group, discuss memories of family traditions relating to Easter. This would be a great discussion to have with guest family members who may be present. Following this discussion, dye Easter eggs using natural dyes. Coordinate this activity with kitchen staff, so that the eggs can be refrigerated and then eaten with Easter breakfast.

## TIME:

One or two sessions, depending on the stamina and interest of the participants (for discussion, thirty minutes; for egg-dyeing, forty-five minutes).

## MATERIALS:

- Pictures of decorated Easter eggs or Easter decorations (in the activity room for participants to look at and to jog memories)
- Plastic eggs (for participants to hold during the discussion stage of the activity)
- White vinegar
- Water
- Large kitchen pots
- Nylon panty hose
- Scissors
- Twist ties
- Refrigerator
- Cheesecloth
- Pencils
- White wax crayons
- Slotted spoon
- Paper towels
- Fresh eggs (at least one to dye per person)
- Cloth rags
- Butter
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

Natural dye materials, such as:

- Blueberries (cold or boiling method)

- Red cabbage (cold method)
- Cranberries (cold or boiling method)
- Coffee (boiling method)
- Chili powder (boiling method)
- Paprika (boiling method)
- Red grape juice (boiling method)
- Yellow onion skins (boiling method)
- Turmeric (boiling method)
- Beets (cold or boiling method)

Note 1: Have friends or facility kitchen staff save yellow onion skins for several weeks to get a good supply. Start with about 6 packed cups.

Note 2: Farm-fresh eggs should be used to maximize the coloring. The shells of store-bought eggs are polished, and the dyes likely will not adhere. If store-bought eggs are used, it is very important to remove the wax or shine from the shells thoroughly with a cloth doused with vinegar. Rub the eggs until they look dull or matte before coloring them. The person directing the plan may want to test an egg in natural dye before conducting the activity to make sure the eggs are adequately prepared to allow the color to adhere. If it appears that a film has developed on the egg that is preventing the dye from adhering to it, remove the egg from the dye, wipe it off with a paper towel, and return it to the dye bath.

(Recommended optional publication: *From the Wellspring: Faith, Soil, Tradition—Folk Arts from Ukrainian Culture in North*

*Dakota* by Troyd A. Geist. Bismarck, ND: North Dakota Council on the Arts, 1997. This publication includes a section on the ornately decorated Ukrainian Easter egg tradition of *pysanky*. This publication includes photographs of the Ukrainian Easter egg process, images of completed eggs, a list of natural sources of dye and the color obtained from each source, an explanation of the symbolism of the colors used, as well as an extensive illustration of various Easter egg designs and their meanings.)

## **“THREE PLAGUES” (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):**

This activity begins with the recollection of past experiences and a time for conversational sharing of those memories with the other participants. The opportunity to interact with others will go a long way to combat loneliness. Because older adults have accumulated a lifetime of experiences, memories, and knowledge, reminiscing reinforces their identity and gives them a sense of pride and self-esteem. Adding to the exchange of ideas helps to displace feelings of helplessness. If the participants have stories to tell, and additionally listen to the stories of others, boredom will be eliminated for the duration of the activity.

Note: While reminiscing works well for people in the early stages of dementia who are trying to hang onto memories, it may be frustrating for those in the middle to late stages of the disease. Stimulating the use of other senses, such as sight and touch, may help to better invoke their memories. For this reason, try to utilize other senses in this activity plan. Have the participants look at pictures of decorated Easter eggs (sight) and have plastic eggs for the participants to hold (touch) during the discussion.

## **ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDY:**

This activity will require some extra helpers and offers older adults, families, and caregivers an interactive experience that combines opportunities for individual decision-making, learning, and social interaction. The value of this kind of active interaction is documented by Jennifer M. Kinney and Clarissa A. Rentz. Kinney and Rentz studied a “Memories in the Making” program in Cincinnati and found that participants in the arts programs offering social interaction with an emphasis on individuals’ skills and strengths exhibited greater pleasure, higher self-esteem, more interest, and sustained attention than participants in traditional adult day activities.

*--Kinney, Jennifer M., and Clarissa A. Rentz. “Observed Well-being among Individuals with Dementia: Memories in the Making, an Art Program, Versus Other Structured Activity.” American Journal of Alzheimer’s Disease and Other Dementias 20, no. 4 (2005): 220-227.*

*Cover photo: Easter eggs colored with natural dyes.*



# Activity Plan

## SESSION 1 (1 HOUR, 15 MINUTES):

(Discussion, thirty minutes; egg-dyeing, forty-five minutes.

Alternatively, this activity can be divided into two sessions; the first for discussion and the second for dyeing.)

**1.** Start this activity with a group of folks gathered in a space where they can comfortably talk to one another. Introduce Easter decorations and traditional celebrations as the theme and explain that they will dye eggs for their Easter breakfast. Point out the decorations in the room and give each participant a plastic egg to hold. Invite the group to recall their memories of Easter celebrations: such as preparations for a family gathering and an Easter meal, family and/or friends who usually attended the family gatherings, recollections of signs of spring, church activities, and specifically the dyeing of Easter eggs. Discuss the color preferences of participants and how they have decorated Easter eggs in the past. Ask some questions to help focus their thinking. For example:

- Did your mother and/or father dye the eggs, or were the children allowed to do it, as well?
- What was done to the eggs after they were dyed?
- Were the eggs used for decorations or were they eaten?
- Did you or someone else write your name on an egg?
- Were pictures or symbols drawn on the eggs, such as a cross, a bird, or a flower? What did the pictures and symbols stand for?

- What kind of dye did you use to color your eggs?

**2.** From page 200 of the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*, read folklore item “15. Onion Skins.” Invite each person to share one story about dyeing Easter eggs.

Explain that they are going to dye Easter eggs using yellow onion skins, blueberries, beets, coffee, red cabbage, and turmeric. (Coffee, red cabbage, and beets really dye eggs well.) These are traditional dyes that were used in homes before commercial dyes could be bought in the store. Have these dye materials on hand, so that you can show them to the participants. For those interested and capable, invite them to help with the preparations by doing such things as cutting cabbage, and measuring vinegar, water, or other dye materials.



*Coffee is a natural dye traditionally used to dye Easter eggs.*

*Egg dyed with coffee.*



3. Introduce the natural dyes by saying, “Part of the fun of using natural dyes is that they often produce unexpected results.” For example, eggs dipped in red cabbage dye don’t turn red. They turn a soft blue. To darken the blue, let them soak overnight in the refrigerator. This dark blue egg will taste a little like cabbage, and you may want to use it for decoration rather than eating, unless, of course, you like cabbage. Yellow-orange onion skins give a nice warm yellow color, but red onion skins don’t give any color to speak of. Explain to participants that vegetable material used as natural dyes can produce different colors depending upon the time of year or even the time of day the plant was harvested and processed. Many variables account for the color produced by natural dyes. This unpredictable aspect of natural dyes will provide the participants with the fun of being surprised by their resulting colors.



*Red cabbage is a very effective traditional coloring agent.*



*Light blue Easter egg dyed using red cabbage.*



*Dark blue Easter egg dyed using red cabbage.*



4. There are two methods of coloring eggs with natural dyes: (1) boiling the eggs with the dye material, which cooks and colors them at the same time; and (2) cold-dipping the eggs that have been boiled ahead of time and cooled. Some natural dyes work better with the boiling method, and others with the cold method. If using the cold-dip method, boil the eggs ahead of time and let them cool in the refrigerator.

Again, some natural dye materials respond best with one method or the other. Blueberries and cranberries can be used with either the cold-dip or boiling methods. Cranberries produce a pink dye. Paprika and chili powder both give a variety of shades of orange color using the boiling method. Boil eggs in red grape juice for a blue color. If you boil your eggs in one quart of strongly brewed coffee, you'll get a deep mocha color.

When boiling eggs with the dye material:

- Place the eggs in a single layer in a pot.
- Cover the eggs with water, ensuring that there is an inch of water above the eggs.
- Add about 2 tablespoons of white vinegar per quart of water.
- Add the natural dye ingredients and bring everything to a boil. Lower the heat and simmer for 20 to 30 minutes. Yellow onion skins work well with this process. You also can wrap each egg in many layers of onion skins, enclosing it all in cheesecloth or a four-inch-square piece of panty hose held in place at both ends with twist ties.



*Top left, moving clockwise, Easter eggs dyed with chili powder, coffee, and paprika.*



*Top left, moving clockwise, Easter eggs dyed with red grape juice, cabbage, and blueberries.*



To dye eggs using the cold-dip method:

- Combine one quart of water, 2 tablespoons of white vinegar, and the natural dye ingredients in a large pot.
- Boil and then simmer for 30 minutes, strain, and cool the liquid.
- Dip hard-boiled eggs in the cold dye until you like the color you get. This technique will give you softer colors. Blueberries and red cabbage work well with the cold-dipping method. If you boil eggs with 3 tablespoons of turmeric, you'll get a bright yellow color. When the eggs are cool, dip them in the red cabbage dye to get a bright green color. The advantage of using the cold-dip method is that you can prepare the boiled eggs in advance. Be sure to refrigerate the eggs until you're ready to do the dyeing.



*Easter egg dyed with turmeric.*



*Easter egg dyed with turmeric, then dipped in red cabbage dye to produce a mottled green color.*

5. Here are some fun options that can be used to add personal touches and decorations to the egg-dyeing process. Names and symbols can be drawn onto the eggs before or after the dyeing process. Discuss the pictures of Ukrainian decorated Easter eggs as shown on pages 106, 107, 154, and 297 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. Explain that understanding the meaning of the traditional symbols used on these eggs adds to the beauty of the decorations. Information about the symbols and their meanings can be found in the text. On page 297, for example, the Ukrainian Easter egg with a German-Russian iron cross design is said to represent renewal and life. Invite participants to add meaningful symbols as decorations to their own individual eggs. (Other extensive related information can be found in the publication *From the Wellspring: Faith, Soil, Tradition—Folk Arts from Ukrainian Culture in North Dakota*.)

Drawing or writing with a white wax crayon on the egg prior to using the cold-dip dye method will result in a “white” image on the colored egg. For another variation, simply position a blossom, fern, or leaf facedown against an egg. Then wrap the egg in cheesecloth or a four-inch-square piece of panty hose. At each end of the egg, snugly secure the panty hose or cheesecloth with twist ties. Using twist ties at both ends will help prevent the leaves or ferns from moving. The leaf or blossom will protect the egg from the dye and appear as an undyed pattern on the egg. This works best using the cold-dip method, and most likely will not work for the boiling method. If the weather is nice and the participants are able, perhaps invite them to go outside to collect leaves or blossoms they think are pretty and would like to use. Leaves from plants grown indoors also may be

used, if available.

As described in *Sundogs and Sunflowers*, rubbing the dyed eggs with a soft, buttered cloth gives them a beautiful shine. The eggs, if refrigerated, can be served with breakfast on Easter morning or any other spring morning. For the process of using yellow onion skins to dye eggs, refer to folklore item “15. Onion Skins” on page 200 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*.

Note: In the recipe book *Food 'N Customs: Recipes of the Black Sea Germans*, published by the Germans from Russia Heritage Society in 1988, there is a Sweet Easter Bread (*Baska*) recipe on page 52 that describes how to add raw, colored eggs into braided yeast dough prior to baking. The yeast bread wreath may be traditional for some participants and would make a wonderful bread-baking activity.

### **AUTHOR • LILA HAUGE-STOFFEL:**

Lila is a retired professor of art education who is an avid gardener and uses natural dyes to color the wool she uses in her weavings. She is a traditional folk artist who grows her own willow, which she uses to make willow baskets as learned from LeRoy Graber, an elder Mennonite traditional basket weaver. Currently living at Lake Lida, Minnesota, she paints and exhibits watercolor paintings throughout the region. Lila holds an M.A. degree in Art Education from the University of Minnesota, as well as an M.F.A. degree in Fiber Art from the University of North Dakota. She has worked with the North Dakota Council on the Arts' *Art for Life Program* since it first began, in 2001. She has also conducted workshops for healthcare providers and has designed and conducted residencies for the elderly in North Dakota, Minnesota, and Arizona. Lila has witnessed firsthand the positive effects the arts can have on the quality of life for the elderly.

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