

EARTH DYES

Nuunam Qaralirkai

DYES FOR GRASS MADE FROM NATURAL MATERIALS





EARTH DYES *Nuunam Qaralirkai*

by **RITA PITKA BLUMENSTEIN**
AND THE



INSTITUTE OF ALASKA NATIVE ARTS

JAN STEINBRIGHT, Editor

PREFACE

Not until 1976, was Rita given permission to share her culture's knowledge of the use of natural materials to make dyes. She had been teaching a variety of arts and crafts, offering special aspects of her culture to the Western world in hope of promoting better understanding. She also was active in seeking out young Native people whom she could teach to carry on the Native culture and keep it alive, growing thing. But in order to talk about the dyes with a general audience, she needed the permission of particularly three aunts with whom the information was kept. Upon receiving permission, she went to work and hasn't stopped since! Her energy is a sight to behold. Her tremendous love for life and all people is a driving force but also a magnet which attracts many to her.

In April of 1983, Rita instructed a Natural Grass Dyeing workshop for the Institute of Alaska Native Arts in Anchorage. It brought Aleut and Yup'ik grass basketmakers together for a week to learn dyeing techniques and to give the women from the two Native cultures a time to share. Rita remembers that time fondly, as very special and often powerful things happen when such a meeting of minds and spirits occurs. It was at that time she and I decided to do this book together.

Since that time, Rita has occupied herself constantly teaching and even spent part of last summer on the Mall at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. demonstrating her work.

This quiet little book has been pure joy for me to work on; from the early visits with Rita right down to organizing the material for the printer. Rita has told me the spirits of her mother and grandmother have been with us throughout this time and I know that this is true. It is in that certainty that we dedicate EARTH DYES to those two very special women and to the generations of Yup'ik basketmakers to come.

Jan Steinbright
Editor

INTRODUCTION

Rita Pitka Blumenstein was born on a fishing boat on the way to her mother's village of Tununak in Western Alaska. She is an Alaska Native of Eskimo and Athabascan descent on her mother's side and Aleut and Russian on her father's side. Rita spent her early childhood in Tununak learning the traditional Yup'ik Eskimo ways from her mother and grandmother. In addition to her extensive knowledge about dyes made from natural materials, Rita is an expert basketmaker and accomplished in skinsewing, beading, ivory carving, drum making, and storytelling. She teaches her skills through workshops and classes in schools and museums and in the community. She has traveled extensively, learning from other Native cultures and sharing her skills and knowledge.

When I was growing up, I was very curious and my mother used to say not to ask too many questions of other people but I could ask her anything and she would answer me. If I asked one question, that answer could take two to three days — stories. I used to be interested in unknown things like stars and mother earth. I wanted to know why we were here. My mother used to tell me about the old times and when she was telling stories, telling about those things, I became part of it. I pretended I was in it.

My grandmother taught me the future; what I'm going to be, what I should do. She said the first thing you've got to know is respect for your elders because they went through it and that's why they are telling you.

Rita's grandmother would sometimes use the designs on her baskets to teach Rita about the future. She explained that a spiral design is like the steps one takes in their life; taking each step, one by one; learning to crawl before walking. A person shouldn't try to learn it all at once.

NATURAL DYES WHY USE THEM

Traditionally, all dyes were made from materials found in nature: plants, animals and minerals. The common practice in Alaska today among basketmakers is to use commercial chemical dyes. In the 30's, basketmakers would bleed the color from construction paper to dye their grass for designs on baskets and in the 40's, crepe paper and hershey bar wrappers were popular. In the 50's, the commercial dyes became available. They were easy to obtain and use and produced a brighter range of colors than did the natural dyes. Rita is one of very few artists in Alaska today using the old natural methods of obtaining color and spends much of her time teaching this knowledge in hope that the younger generation will in turn carry it on.

Natural dyes last longer, even if it takes time and years to collect. Also, to me, it makes me feel like I'm doing it right and it makes me proud of my ancestors. When I'm doing it, I think way back to what they did and how it was a sacrifice. But they enjoyed it because that was the only way they could do it. All I have to do is turn a knob, turn the heat on. They used driftwood, rocks and a clay pot. I have an aluminum dish pan. It's a lot easier today. I don't know why the younger generation today doesn't want to do it, when they have better facilities and better containers and they don't have to walk far to pick the ingredients. They don't have to paddle a kayak to go out to get greens and spend five days out in the country to gather the stuff and come home, clean it and sun dry it. So I do it because I would like to wake up those old people and have them tell me, "We're glad you're doing it". If I don't do it, it's going to be lost.

THE NATIVE WAY

*When I was a little girl, I learned the Native way. I learned what to eat, what not to eat and things like that. Everywhere my mother goes, my grandmother goes, I'm with them. I felt like I'm part of the earth. We dig for things. We pick from the earth or from the ocean. Everything from the land. The only thing I didn't do was hunt because that's for men. The boys did different ways. I caught the end of the tradition of the boys living in the **qasgiq**. We women lived in the house and we bring food to the men in the **qasgiq**. The first schooling I had was learning how to do things like basketmaking. We did it because we needed it. We used it for things. The baskets we made, we used to trade in the store for flour, sugar, pilot bread and clothing. The way I learned was mostly from watching and doing it. They didn't actually show you. They'd just give you things and they'd say, "You do it." They'd give you grass and tell you to twine it for a fish basket.*

BASKETS



BASKET BY RITA BLUMENSTEIN

*The first baskets I saw weren't colorful. Some of them didn't even have any color at all. Some of them had birds feet, feathers hanging, things like that. That's the kinds of designs they had. And then maybe a few of them have seal gut and some of them have grass, only brown, blue and red, and that's from the berries and from the greens. And they were not very loud colors at that time. I guess my mother was an artist too because she tried everything. If something fades, if something colors, she'd try it on something, on cloth or skins. If it worked, she'd use it on grass. That's how I learned to do the grass dyeing. My mother and grandmother and other women used mostly berries and greens and roots from the ponds. They used the same things to dye the seal gut but they didn't boil it. They used cold water. I thought that was kind of interesting but I wasn't into it because basketmaking to me at that time was an everyday thing. It was nothing to me and I didn't even know they were important. When I first went into a school teacher's house and I saw this basket hanging on the wall I thought, "That's funny. Why do they put it there just to look at?" That was really silly because they didn't use it. They didn't put their clothes in it. They didn't put their food in it. They didn't fill it with **assaalyiatt** (fried bread). That was funny to me. Why was it so important? Now I know and I appreciate them that they did that. They understood that before I did, what work goes into it and the beauty of it. To me now when I feel a basket, I pretend that's the personality of that person whoever made it. Some of them are rough. Some of them are very beautiful. Some of them are badly made. That's the way I look at them. When you look at the basket, that person's personality comes right to you. That's the way they felt when they made it. Even if it's rough and it's badly made, some love went into that basket, no matter how it was made. Because that's all they know how. To them it's beautiful. I always feel that basket is a person. It's got a feeling. If you mistreat it, it doesn't last long. It's got feelings. If you mistreat a person they're not happy, so it is with a basket. When I feel it, when I look at it, even if it's old, like my old one from my grandmother...that's what I feel when I see a basket at somebody's home just hanging on the wall because they understand. They look at the beauty of it and I appreciate that now.*

GATHERING THE GRASS

First of all you learn how to pick the grass. When we were going out to pick the grass, we didn't just go out and pick grass. Before the season, we used to go out and I guess, meditate. We'd take a walk and we'd ask for good weather 4 or 5 days before the picking season. We'd go out and ask for good weather during the grass picking. Not all at once but I used to see some mothers and daughters going out, taking a walk. They'd go up to the mountain, down to the beach. My mother and grandma and I, we used to go out and would sit facing north. Then all of us would sit down facing the east and we'd be asking for good weather. We do that for 5 days. And then the tradition was before you go out picking, you clean yourself real good because grass picking wasn't something you would just go out and do. We prepare ourselves so we can appear to the grass with cleanliness. We clean our thoughts first and then we clean ourselves.

Then we go out and pick. Men didn't go picking. It was the girls' and womens' traditions. It was our chore. And then everyday we take our food and spend a whole day. We build fires on the beach and then we pick. Most of us girls would want to play but the mothers and grandmothers used to tell us, "It's not time for playing, it's for picking." so we had to pick. Everyday at that time during September and the first week of October, we concentrate on that grass. Then after the grass picking, we have a celebration. We feed our men. We call it "thanksgiving", for giving us good weather. Seems like ever since I can remember our prayers are always answered. Then at the end it's either raining or snowing, after we are finished, after the dance and big feed. We feed the whole village and the teachers are invited too. They loved that. And when the teachers have kids, girls, we take them out grass picking with us. We always include the whole village. But they don't do that anymore. Those old days were very fun. We never had a boring time. We didn't have time to be bored in those days because we were busy all the time. The minute we open our eyes, we do something. Either we do all these things or we play. We always had time to play when we were kids. And then after that celebration, we do something else. It's our mother's and grandmother's job to take the grass out and bring it in and store them.

SEASONS FOR PICKING

We had three seasons for picking. In springtime, as soon as the snow melts before the new grass comes up, we cut the grass for the fillers and for liners for the fish ditches where you put the herring fish before you clean them. They also used the wintered grass for fillers for basketry and they used it also for lining their sod houses. As soon as they were through picking, they would burn the grass on the whole spit; only when the wind was blowing from the east because it goes toward the water. I remember, I used to participate. I had a little gunny sack to kill the fire. And then the men would rake it and we'd clean it. No old grass in the bottom. New grass would come up in the middle of May and no trails, nothing, just all grass. We didn't play around there on that grass.

And then in summer we pick the grass from the beach. There are little clumps of grass on the sand. We pick those for coloring because they are the strongest. And then you bleach them out. You lay them on the beach and every so often you turn them over to make sure they don't mildew or grow fungi. Then after they are bleached out, you braid them into hanks and you hang them on the side of the house. Then you roll them in brown paper and store them. It takes about a year to cure the grass to make it pliable. You don't use the ones you pick this year. You wait a year. Then they would dye them with berries, fish galls, lichens, pond plants, flower petals and urine [a mordant used then.] In the wintertime, they would make the baskets. There is too much to do in the summer with fishing, and in spring, you clean seals and preserve foods. The baskets are made in winter and traded off when the first ship comes. In the fall, they pick the new grass that grew on the spit for wrappers. They pick the medium ones, not the very tall ones as the medium ones are the strongest and more appropriate for Yup'ik baskets. The long ones are for weaving, twining mats, drapes and fish baskets. The grass has become very strong because it has been sprayed with salt water. The salt water also makes the grass soft and pliable. If you pick inland, they (the grass) are brittle and hard. We have to go a long way now to get grass. They are building roads and airports over the places where we used to pick.

Rita and many other contemporary basketmakers are finding it difficult today to obtain the materials they need for their work due to encroaching developments. Where open dunes of grass used to thrive, there are now housing areas or roads.

People don't respect the places where the grass grows. They walk all over the grass, trample it down and ride three wheelers and motor cycles over it. They don't burn the grass every spring or keep off of it or take care of it like they used to.

Also, many of the traditional wilderness areas where the natural materials were gathered are owned by the Federal government with restrictions put upon the land's use. Today's basketmakers have to be able to travel farther to collect their materials or else purchase them from a supplier who has access to such materials.

When I bring natural materials into my home and put them into a grass, I feel the beauty of the berries, leaves, petals, roots. Any color on the ground, even when the snow covers it, it's still in my house. It takes a long time to collect things, but when it's on the grass and when it's on the basket, it's the beauty that you see. It's going to be there for a long time and all that hard work stays a long time on that and makes the basket beautiful. And when someone compliments your work, it makes it worth more. The sacrifice: getting dirty and getting cold, falling in the water and getting wet. But after you do all this, and you put it on the basket, it's beautiful. It's more than color; it's love.



LONG TIME AGO...

Long time ago I used to watch my mother go outside and make a little fireplace out of rocks and put the wood in there and then she'd put her big iron pot (we had those big iron pots that you put crabs and stuff like that in) in the middle of the fire on sticks anchored with rocks. She would keep feeding the fire. One side of the fireplace is facing the wind and there's higher rocks on the outside to stop the fire going away from the pot. The fire stays in the middle, sort of, and it takes a long time to heat that pot. She put her grass in there without soaking it after she split them. I helped her split them. Then she put the dye material in there with it. She would crumble the flower petals in there and then sometimes she'd mix all petals and the colors would come out different. It comes out new name. When she does it, she does it lovingly. She stays with that fire all day long. Before she starts, she got everything out, even food so we stay all day and do that. When she takes the grass out of the pot, she puts two sticks together and pulls it out and puts it in another pot. And then she puts some rocks in there so the grass can drain in there. She saves the juice. Then she rinses the grass in the salt water, the ocean water from the sea. She dumps that and keeps rinsing until no more color comes out of it. Before they had iron pots, they had clay pots. I used to watch my grandmother when she would go clay hunting, clay digging. We had a kiln made out of mud and it had a little hole. It's a little house and you burn your things in there. You feed it with coal or wood. It has a little ledge. My grandmother would mix the clay with caribou hair or other hair or grass and then shape it into a pot. For utensils they would use bones and stones and sticks. I learned a lot from watching my grandmother and mother.



DYEING

SOME TIPS ON DYEING GRASS

Always wet the grass before putting it in the dye bath. Use warm water and leave the grass in for about 3 minutes.

For best results, split the grass before dyeing it. Use rocks to hold the grass down in the dye bath while heating it. Save the leftover dye juice for future use. Store it in glass containers with lids. From time to time, open the lids for a few minutes so the mixture doesn't get moldy. You can experiment with colors by mixing two or more of the dyes together to get a new color.

The last two ingredients in each recipe, the vinegar and water, make a mixture that is a mordant for the grass. The mordant sets the color. Mordants can change the final color of the dye, depending on what is used.

UTENSILS NEEDED

Use a 3 gallon aluminum dish pan for the container to boil the dye and grass in. Have another large pan on hand for draining the dye from the grass. The heat source for the dyeing can be an electric or gas range, hot plates or an open outdoor fire. Dyeing outside, when the weather permits, can be a very satisfying experience and also allows one to be more messy without hurting anything. Have prongs or two forks or two knives on hand for taking the grass out of the dye. Use rubber gloves to prevent dyeing your hands also.

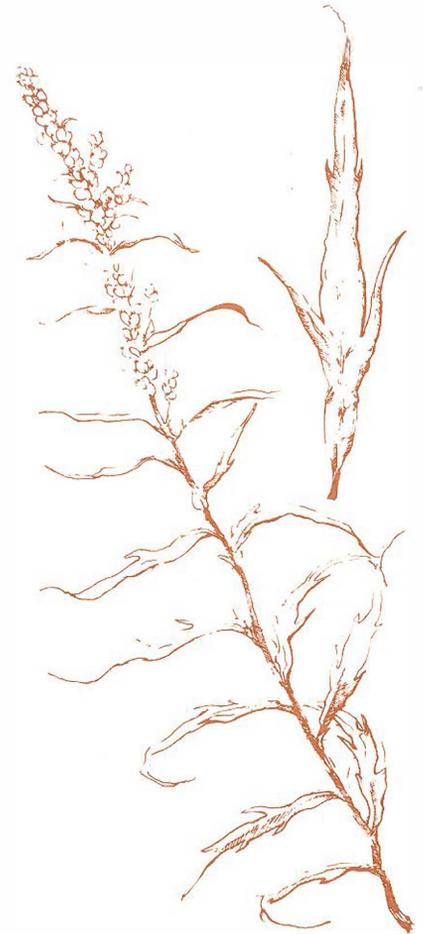
STINK WEED (*Caigelluutt*)

Color: brown

- 1 large (quart size) bag stink weeds
- 2 gallons water
- 1 handful grass (6" dia.)
- 2 cups vinegar
- 1 gallon cold water

In a large dish pan, put 2 gallons water, stink weeds and grass. Boil 3 hours. Turn the grass over and boil 3 more hours. Drain and put into vinegar and water mixture for 1/2 hour. Rinse, drain, braid and hang to dry.

note: Gather the weeds when they are green. Braid the roots and hang the weeds upside down until they are dry (3-4 days). Crack the dried weeds up and put into quart size plastic bags. Seal at top. Poke holes in the bag with a needle so the weeds can breathe and not get moldy.



ONION SKINS *(Tep tuulitt quell taitt)*

Color: gold.

- 1 large shopping bag dried yellow onion skins
- 2 gallons water
- 1 handful grass (6" dia.)
- 2 cups cider vinegar
- 1 gallon cold water

In a large dish pan, put onion skins, 2 gallons water and grass. Bring water to boil. Lower heat to medium. Simmer 3 hours. Turn the grass over and cook 3 more hours. When grass is dyed enough, drain for a few minutes. Mix vinegar and water and put the dyed grass in for about 1/2 hour. Rinse, drain, and braid. Hang to dry.
note: Cook longer if deeper color is desired. Go to your super market and ask your grocer to save onion skins for you.



FISH GALL (*Neqett cung aitt*)

Color: green

20 drops of gall
2 gallons water
1 handful grass (6" dia.)
2 cups vinegar
1 gallon cold water

In a large dish pan, put 2 gallons water, and 20 drops fish gall and grass. Cook about 2 hours or until green enough. Drain and put into vinegar and water mixture for about 1/2 hour. Rinse, drain and braid. Hang to dry.

note: Collect galls when cleaning fish. The gall is a little green bag right above the liver. Store the galls in a small bottle in a cool place or you can freeze them. When they are thawed, pop the sacks for the liquid. Do this just before you are going to use them.



SQUID. (*Tall-il egett*)

Color: black

2 cups squid juice

2 gallons water

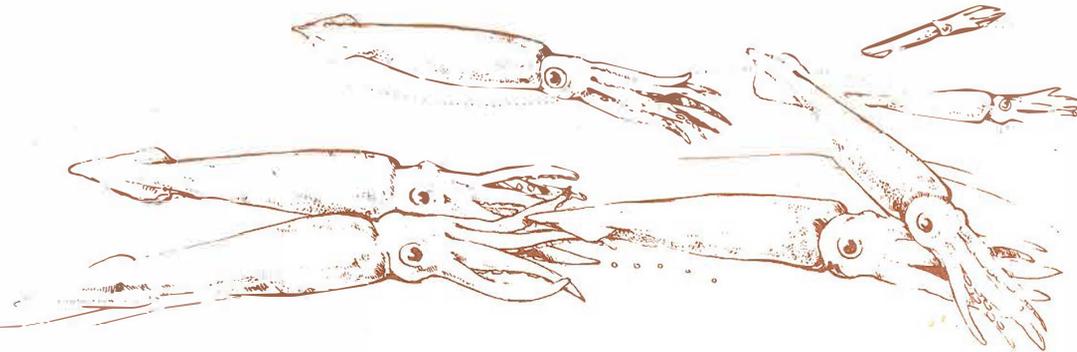
1 handful grass (6" dia.)

2 cups salt

2 gallons boiling water

In a large dish pan put the squid juice and 2 gallons water. Stir. Add the grass and boil about 3 minutes. Then turn the heat down and simmer for an hour more. Take the grass out of pan and rinse well. Prepare mordant by mixing together well 2 cups of salt and 2 gallons boiling water. Rinse, drain, braid and hang to dry.

note: Ask fishermen for a squid. Use a syringe and put it right into the bag of the squid and then turn the squid upside down. You can store the juice for a long time in the freezer.



ALDER BARK (*Cuuk fag u a att*)

Color: rose

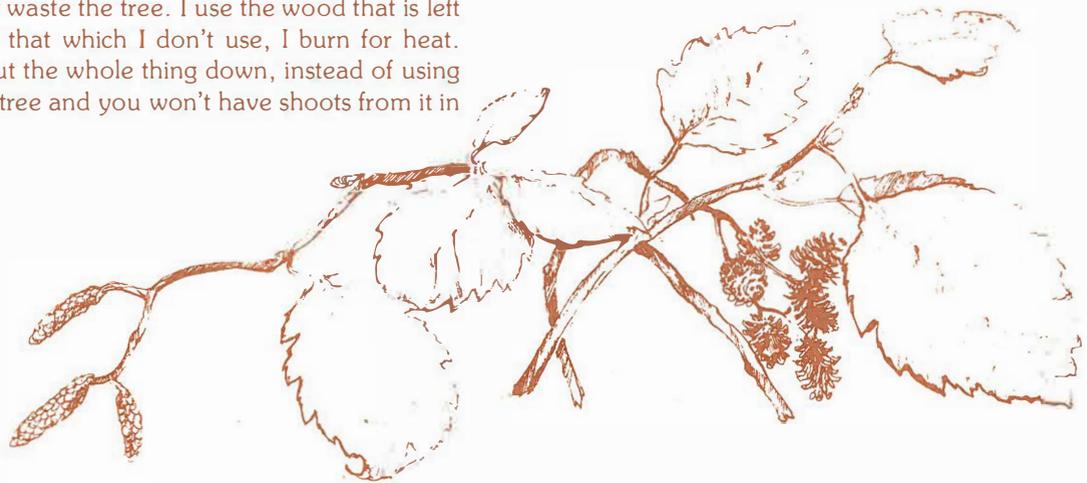
4 large quart size bags shredded alder bark (from approx. 6 shoots)

2 gallons water

1 handful grass (6" dia.)

In a large dish pan, put shredded alder bark, 2 gallons water and grass. Boil 1 hour. Let cool and leave the grass in the mixture for 4 hours. Drain, braid and hang to dry. A mordant is not needed.

note: Always take the bark from the male alder. It is the one that bleeds red and on which the bark grows horizontally. (On the female, it grows vertically.) Use the shoots, not the main tree. Cut them and strip off the brown bark. What is left is the red. Using a knife or ulu, scrape that red off down to the white. The red scrapings are what you use for the dye. I don't waste the tree. I use the wood that is left for handles for drums and that which I don't use, I burn for heat. Never kill the tree. If you cut the whole thing down, instead of using the shoots, you will kill the tree and you won't have shoots from it in the future to use.



BEETS (*Beets-aat*)

Color: wine

- 2 gallons beet juice
- 1 handful grass (6" dia.)
- 2 cups vinegar
- 1 gallon cold water

In a large dish pan, put the beet juice and the grass. Bring to a boil and simmer until the grass is dyed to suit you (about an hour or more). Drain and put into vinegar and water mixture for 1/2 hour. Rinse, drain, braid and hang to dry.

note: Cook diced beets until soft. Mash and press through a strainer. Put juice (pulpy and thick) into gallon jugs. Color will depend on the species of beet and growing conditions.



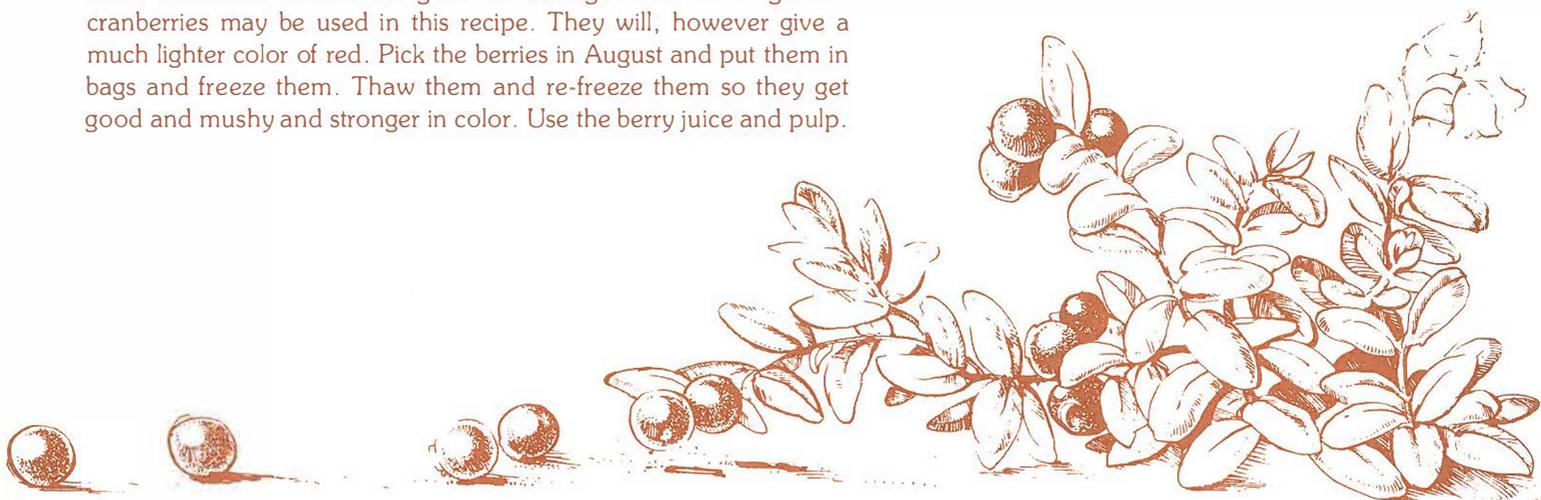
CRANBERRIES (*Tum mag litt*)

Color: red

- 8 cups lowbush cranberries (crushed)
- 2 gallons water
- 1 handful grass (6" dia.)
- 2 cups vinegar
- 1 gallon cold water

In a large dish pan, put crushed cranberries, 2 gallons water and grass. Boil 2 hours. Turn the grass and boil 2 hours more. Drain grass and put into the vinegar and water mixture for 1/2 hour. Rinse, drain well, braid and hang to dry.

note: Lowbush cranberries give the strongest red but highbush cranberries may be used in this recipe. They will, however give a much lighter color of red. Pick the berries in August and put them in bags and freeze them. Thaw them and re-freeze them so they get good and mushy and stronger in color. Use the berry juice and pulp.



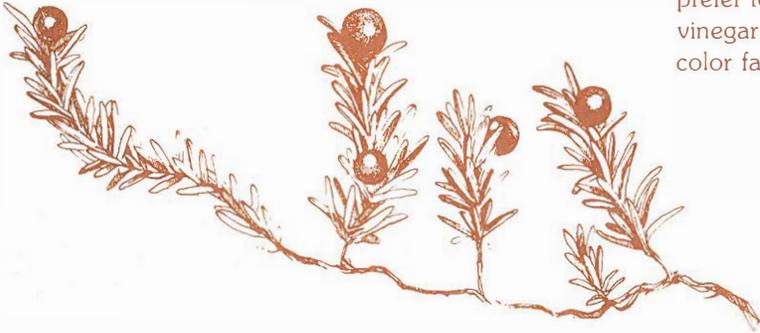
BLACKBERRIES (crowberries) (*Tanegerpiit*)

Color: black

- 2 quarts crushed blackberries
- 2 gallons water
- 1 handful grass (6" dia.)
- 2 cups vinegar
- 1 gallon cold water

In a large dish pan, put crushed berries, 2 gallons water and grass. Boil 2 hours. Turn grass and boil 2 hours more. Drain grass and put into the vinegar and water mixture for 1/2 hour. Rinse, drain, braid and hang to dry.

note: Pick blackberries in August. Put them into bags and freeze them. Thaw them and re-freeze them so they get nice and mushy and stronger in color. Black is the hardest color to get. The berries prefer to give a blue-black instead of black-black. You can add more vinegar or less water for a stronger mordant to make the color more color fast.



BLUEBERRIES (*Cu r ratt*)

Color: blue

- 8 cups blueberries
- 2 gallons water
- 1 handful grass (6" dia.)
- 2 cups vinegar
- 1 gallon cold water

In a large dish pan, put crushed berries, 2 gallons water and grass. Boil 2 hours. Turn grass over and boil 2 hours more. Drain grass and put into the vinegar and water mixture for 1/2 hour. Rinse, drain, braid and hang to dry.

note: Pick the berries in August and put them into bags for freezing. When frozen, thaw them out and then re-freeze them so they get good and mushy. Use both the berry pulp and juice.





WILD IRIS PETALS (*Iris-aat caqelngataruarit*)

Color: purple

- 4 large shopping bags dried petals
- 2 gallons water
- 1 handful grass (6" dia.)
- 2 cups vinegar
- 1 gallon cold water

In a large dish pan, put 2 gallons water, iris petals and grass. Boil 3 hours and turn over the grass and cook 3 more hours. Drain and put into the vinegar and water mixture for 1/2 hour. Rinse, drain and braid. Hang to dry.

note: It takes about 5 years of solid picking in the middle of summer to collect petals to make enough to dye a handful of grass. It takes a long time to collect the material but it is certainly worth it for the color this flower gives.

CLOVER TOPS (*Clover-att kang eritt*)

Color: fushia

- 2 large (quart size) bags fresh clover tops
- 2 gallons water
- 1 handful grass (6" dia.)
- 2 cups vinegar
- 1 gallon cold water

In a large dish pan, put clover, 2 gallons water and cook 1 hour. Then put wet grass in and cook 4 hours. Turn grass and cook 4 hours more. Drain and put into vinegar and water mixture for about 10 minutes. Drain, braid and hang to dry.

note: Use scissors and cut the very tops of the clover. Take the hulls off. Do not dry the tops but cook them right away as they don't preserve very well.



OTHER FLOWERS THAT CAN BE USED

Geranium - light pink color

Fireweed - very light pink color

Dandelions - yellow color (leaves give a green color)

Marigolds - yellow color

Lupine - light blue color

Chimning bells (Blue bells) - very light blue color

Monkshood - purple color

Marestail - green color

and many more...

Rita would like to correspond with people who use her dye recipes and welcomes additional recipes, comments and conversation. Anyone interested can write her at: 398 N. Eklutna, Palmer, Alaska, 99645, or in care of the Institute of Alaska Native Arts, P.O. Box 80583, Fairbanks, Alaska 99708.



Jan Steinbrigt

RITA WITH A BASKET MADE BY HER GRANDMOTHER

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Nuunam Qaralirkai is Yup'ik for Earth Dyes.

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Chugachmiut
HERITAGE PRESERVATION

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