DYEING BASKET REED WITH NATURAL DYES

1. BASIC DYEING PRECAUTIONS

Pots must be non-reactive—not copper or aluminum or cast iron—so they won't interfere with dyeing. Pyrex or enamelled steel (no chips on the *in*side) or stainless steel. When you're not applying heat, plastic buckets or trash cans will do.

Keep dye utensils separate from food utensils. Keep mordants (especially tin and copper) away from children and pets. Always wear rubber gloves while handling dyes and mordants, especially when they're in liquid form.

2. MORDANTING

Because Reed does not dye easily, it is necessary to help the bonding along by adding a mordant. Alum and tannin (tannic acid) are the usual choices. You can use just alum, or use alum and tannin together. Either way, first soak your reed in warm water for about an hour; rinse well.

Alum alone.

For each pound of reed, dissolve 2 ounces of alum (potassium aluminum sulfate) in one half gallon of water. Heat to a simmer. Pour 2 1/2 gallons of hot water into a 3-4 gallon container (bigger is fine). A plastic bucket will work here, because this is as hot as it gets. Pour in the alum solution, mix well. Add the soaked reed—lay it in loosely, be sure it's completely covered. Crowding can cause streaking. Let the reed soak in the mordant solution overnight.

Deeper shades, and sometimes more fast colors come from the combination of tannic acid and alum. The tannin bonds easily to the reed and the alum to the tannin. No natural dye is completely color fast on reed, but using tannin with alum does improve fastness.

Alum and tannin.

For each pound of reed, dissolve 1/2 ounce of tannic acid in enough hot water to cover the reed, about 2 1/2 gallons. Let the reed sit in this mixture for at least 24 hours, 36 is better. Rinse thoroughly. Dissolve 2 oz of alum in another 2 1/2 gallons of hot water. Dissolve 1 ounce of washing soda in two cups of water and add to the new bath. Some chemical reaction between the alum and soda can be expected—it is not a hazard. Again soak the reed for 24 to 36 hours—lay the reed in loosely, cover completely, don't crowd.

The mordanted reed can be used right away or dried and saved for later use.

3. DYEING

Prepare your dyestuffs as each material requires. Any wool dyeing recipe will work for reed—the colors will be lighter on reed, and not as fast. Happily natural dyes fade evenly and in harmony with each other.

Dyeing is similar to mordanting. Prepare the dye liquor; heat it to a simmer; mix with boiling water in a container large enough to submerge the reed without crowding. Let the pot stand—from one hour to overnight, depending on the depth of shade you want. Remove the reed in batches, if you like, to get deepening intensities of the same color.

Rinse the dyed reed in cool water until the rinse runs clear. Hang reed to dry, giving plenty of room between the strands (reed damp for too long will mildew). Make sure the reed is completely dry before storing. When you resoak the reed for use in a basket, put each color in a separate pan—there will be some bleeding.

If there is still color in the dyebath, you can save it for later use: store in a sealed container, out of light, cool. It will keep several days, possibly weeks, depending on the dye. Eventually, you will have exhausted all the pigment, and there will be nothing to save.

4. ELABORATIONS

The color of the dyebath can be altered by adding a secondary mordant—Iron, Copper, or Tin.

Dissolve the secondary mordant completely in a small amount of your dye liquor. Mix this solution into the dyebath—with no reed in the bath. Add the reed and let stand. *Iron* saddens (dims) or darkens: use 1/2 - 1 teaspoon per pound of reed. *Copper* greens, changing yellows to greens, softening blues and reds: use 1/2 - 1 teaspoon per pound of reed. *Tin* blooms or brightens: use 1/8 - 1/4 teaspoon per pound of reed.

It's usually true that all colors from the same dye and the same dyeing session, no matter how different they appear, go well together.

It is possible to heat the dye bath on the stove. This will give you darker colors in less time. Remember you must use a non-reactive pot for this. And always remember that the more you heat and handle the reed, the more damage may be done to it.