

A free project, compliments of...

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Two-Color Gradations

with fiber reactive dyes

There's nothing more exciting to a fiber artist than fabulous hand dyed colors. Just looking at a color range of hand dyed fabrics can give me goose bumps.

In this tutorial I am going to show you how I create my two-color hand dyed fabric gradations. You'll need to have a basic knowledge of fabric dyeing in order to do this successfully. If you don't, there are a lot of good books on the subject and you'll find some listed in the *further reading* box at the end of this document.

Start by cutting or tearing your fabric into the size you want to dye. I like to dye half yard pieces. The dye recipe in this tutorial will easily dye up to one yard pieces of fabric, perhaps with a little more mottling. If you wish to dye more than one yard or less than half a yard, you may want to adjust the recipe accordingly.

Next I mix up my dye. The amount of dye I use in this technique results in no left over dye that needs to get refrigerated. I like that!

Please remember to take precautions when using dyes and chemicals. Always wear your respirator when mixing dyes or dye chemicals, wear gloves and appropriate clothing and never use any utensils or mixing containers with food that you use for mixing or storing dye with.



Supplies

- White PFD mercerized cotton fabric
- Fiber reactive Procion dyes
- Soda ash solution
- Gloves
- Respirator
- Six to eight buckets or containers
- Measuring teaspoon
- Two plastic spoons
- One cup measuring cup
- Half cup measuring cup
- Three mixing containers

Dye resources

- Dharma Trading - www.dharmatrading.com
- Dick Blick - www.dickblick.com
- Pro Chem - www.prochemicalanddye.com

Choose two colors of dye for your gradation. For my samples I am using lilac and bronze. Remember to keep the color wheel in mind when dyeing. If you have a good sense of the color wheel, you will more than likely have success in your two-color mixes. With that said, remember that some Procion dyes are already mixes of colors in the powder form and that you could still end up disappointed or excited with your results.

Remember to wear gloves when dyeing or you could have some colorful hands for a few days.



Here is what you need to mix up your dyes. Two containers to mix the dyes in, one container to measure water in, two plastic spoons, one teaspoon from a measuring set, and dye powder. You can find a lot of these items at your local thrift store or dollar store.



Have one cup of water ready for mixing with your dye.

Using the one teaspoon measuring spoon, I scoop out a heaping or rounded spoonful of dye powder.



Place this into one of the mixing cups.



Pour a small amount of water, about two teaspoons or so, into the dye powder and mix with your plastic spoon to create a paste. Mix until smooth. Add the remaining cup of water and mix thoroughly. Set this color aside and repeat these steps to mix your second color of dye in another mixing cup.

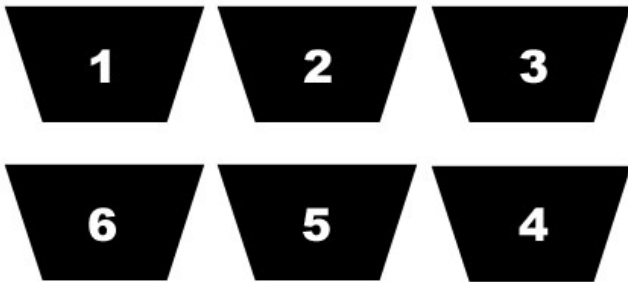
Once your dyes are mixed, you can get your dyeing workspace set up.

I have a folding table set up adjacent to my utility sink and find that this works perfectly for my dyeing needs. On the table I set up my dyeing containers. I keep an old towel under the containers to absorb any spills or water that is on the bottom of the containers. In my case I am using recycled ice cream buckets.



I always work in and over my sink. This way if I spill or dribble dye, it is easily cleaned up. Pour the half cup of dye into the mixing container.

I always set my containers up the same way each time (see next photo). I find that if I stick to the same procedure the chances of making mistakes are less. I'll explain the seventh container later (shown above).



Next I wet my fabric with water and squeeze out the excess.

Now fill the half cup measuring cup with water and add that to the mixing container. This is the diluted mixture you will add to your dye buckets.



Now it's time to fill the buckets with dye. You will need a half cup measuring cup and a mixing container for this step. Start with one color of your mixed dye. Pour the dye into the half cup measuring cup.

Fill the half cup measuring cup with water again, and add this to the original dye mix. Give this mix a stir so that it is blended well. Note: This dye mix is your dye concentrate. Don't mix this up with your diluted mixture. You don't want to accidentally pour this dye into your dye buckets or your gradation won't turn out.



Pour the diluted water/dye mixture into container number one.



Measure another half cup of dye concentrate into your mixing cup and again add half a cup of water to the mixing cup and half a cup of water back into your original dye concentrate mix. Pour the diluted dye mixture into bucket 2. Repeat these steps to fill buckets 3 through 6. Each time you add diluted dye mixture to your buckets, you are changing the value of the dye. Dye bucket 1 will be the strong color or value, and dye bucket 6 will be the weakest color or light value of that color. The next photo shows my six buckets filled with dye color 1.



When your six buckets all have color 1 in them, you'll notice that there is still some dye in your original dye mix cup. The mixture is quite diluted by now and some people choose to toss this remaining dye down the drain. I can't waste a single drop of it so I pour the remaining dye into bucket 7. In the end I'll have a light valued fabric that coordinates with my gradation set.



Now it's time to add dye color 2 to the dye buckets. You will add this color in the same manner as you did with color 1, but you will start with your strongest/darkest value in bucket 6 and work your way backwards to bucket 1. In the end all six buckets will have a varying degree of both dye colors with bucket 1 having the strongest amount of color 1 and bucket 6 having the strongest amount of color 2.

Again, you will have some dye color 2 left over in your original dye mix cup. You can add this to bucket 7 and mix it with what's already in the bucket, which is what I do, or you can add it to bucket 8 and dye another piece of fabric.

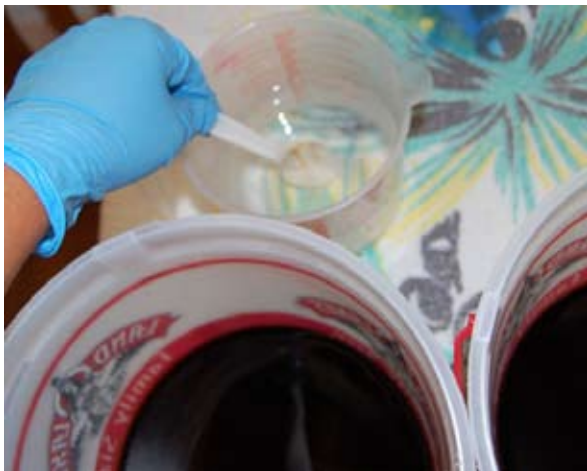
Once all the dyes are distributed to all the buckets, I like to give them a stir to mix the colors. I use one of my plastic spoons for this.



When I do this stirring, I can see on my white plastic spoon an indication of what the color will be.



Before I put my spoon into the next bucket to stir, I dunk it in a container of water to rinse it off. This way I'm not changing or altering the color that is in the next bucket. I don't think this small amount would really make much difference, but I feel better doing it.



From this point forward the dyeing process is the same as basic dyeing. I put my fabric into each bucket and smooch it around, flip it upside down, and so forth. I rinse my gloves between each bucket so I don't get the lingering color on the next fabric.



Here are my seven buckets with the fabric soaking.



I usually wait 15 to 30 minutes before I add the soda ash solution. Sometimes this time frame can extend to around an hour or so if I get busy with other things and forget. I add about a cup of soda solution to the buckets and swish it all around for a minute or two to make sure the soda solution is blended in well.

If you prefer to soda soak your fabrics in the beginning, by all means do what you prefer. I usually am too busy to think about doing that ahead of time so I add the soda ash solution at the end.

Batch your fabric for as long as you usually batch them. I normally let my fabrics batch overnight. Once you are done batching, proceed with the rinsing and washing.

I also always put the lids on my dye buckets while they are batching. I have cats and I certainly don't want them to get into these chemicals and dyes and get sick or anything.

Here are my results with the lilac and bronze mix. You'll notice in the photo that I've also dyed some perle cotton to match. The fabric on the far left is the piece from bucket 7.



Keep in mind that your gradations don't have to be six fabrics. You can make smaller gradations or larger. You will want to experiment with your dye concentrate to adjust it accordingly for smaller or larger dye runs.

Another thing that is variable in this process is the value (light or dark) of your resulting dyed fabrics. The more dye you mix into your concentrate, the darker your fabrics will be and smaller amounts of dye in the concentrate mixture will yield lighter shades.

Don't forget that you can dye other items along with your fabric. Items like cheesecloth, threads, and more. You'll just need to be sure that the fiber content of these items is the right type for the fiber reactive dyes.

The following photos are the charts of the two-color gradations I have made. Note that the fabric swatches on the far right of each group are the fabrics from bucket 7.

It is handy to have a record of these color combinations in case you want to try making them again. Remember that because we didn't weigh or precisely measure our dye powders when making the concentrate, that you may have variations in your repeat gradations. I think that is what makes this process so fun—the surprises and unexpected colors you get in the end.



Have fun!

Further Reading

Color by Accident: Low-Water Immersion Dyeing,
by Ann Johnston
ISBN 978-0965677608

*Dyes & Paints: A Hands-On Guide to Coloring
Fabric*, by Elin Noble
ISBN 978-0972825207

Fabric Dyeing for Beginners (Paperback),
by Vimala McClure
ISBN 978-1574328134