

Los Angeles Times

Cotton plants: You can grow your own, but there is a wrinkle

THE GLOBAL GARDEN

June 25, 2013 | By Jeff Spurrier

Jamie Jamison still has the 1996 copy of Spin-Off magazine dedicated to cotton and color, the issue that inspired her to plant her own cotton.

A member of the [Southern California Handweavers' Guild](#), she already knew how to dye her own fabric for weaving. The logical next step was to plant some cotton seeds near the clothesline in her West L.A. backyard. She tried brown and green varieties but had her best luck with the white.

The cotton took over its first location and had to be moved. Three years later, it's closer to a tree than a shrub, putting out more snow-white pima cotton balls than Jamison can use.

"You get more than you'd expect," she said. "I give away a lot. I'm a slow spinner. The nice thing about pima cotton is you can peel the seeds out easily."

After the cotton is cleaned and deseeded, the remaining "lint" -- the white cellulose fiber that protects and helps to propagate the seeds inside -- gets spun out with a toy-like drop spinner, perfect for the fine, long strands. Jamison bags any lint she can't spin immediately for later use.

She grows white pima (*Gossypium barbadense*), one of the four main cotton species. Cotton developed independently in Africa, India and the Americas, although the greatest diversity is found in Mexico, where cotton seeds and fabric 7,000 years old have been found in

caves.

Cotton does well in Southern California but only in the ground. The plant sends out a tap root that can go down a foot in the first month, and the roots grow aggressively until the flowering begins. When the white or yellow hibiscus-like blooms appear, they last only a few days before dropping, revealing the tiny "boll," or capsule of white fluff, developing inside.

Cotton is easy to grow, but here, as in other states, home plants are regulated because if allowed to grow continually (and often organically), they may become vectors for disease or pests that can threaten agricultural crops.

"Hobby cotton" seed must come from a state-certified source, according to the California Department of Food and Agriculture, and it can be grown legally only from March to October.

For Jamison, spinning the thread is simply one of many steps that begins with the cotton boll. She also grows woad, the prehistoric Old World blue dye that some say Celtic warriors wore to frighten invaders. Just as indigo influenced the blues of Asia, woad helped to define the blues of Europe. We'll look at woad next week.

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Woad, the plant that's also a DIY blue fabric dye

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Jamie Jamison remembers her early introduction to woad. She was on a road trip with her parents, stopping at a Stuckey's shop and seeing a tiny souvenir Navajo rug that illustrated where the natural dyes came from.

She has her own now -- blues, greens and yellows, all grown from her yard. Yellow is easy. Even onion skins will make a usable yellow. Blue, however, is another story. For that she is growing woad, *Isatis tinctoria*, a member of the mustard family.

Woad originated in southern Europe and western Asia. Commonly known as dyer's woad, the plant made its name as a source of blue hues.

The Egyptians dyed mummies' wrapping cloth with woad, and by some accounts, woad was the source for the body paint used by Celtic warriors to confront Roman invaders. Centuries later Medieval European cities grew thanks in part to the profits of the woad trade.

Woad works on wool and cotton, and when combined with the red of madder root, it produces purple. When mixed with the common oxalis, wood sorrel, it makes the warm green favored by Robin Hood.

The plant also contains unusually high quantities of glucobrassicin, GBS, a compound that some believe to have cancer-fighting properties -- the same one found in broccoli.

"It looks like cabbage," says Jamison, who has documented her woad

work on [Backyard Dyer](#), her blog. “It gets shrubby and sends up a seed pod.”

She collects the seeds and keeps control of her crop so it doesn't spread to her neighbors' yards. In some places, woad is considered invasive, popping up alongside roadways and in ranch lands.

To extract the dye is a complicated, multiday process. The plant's leaves are chopped and soaked in alkaline baths. The water is gently extracted with a turkey baster, letting the blue flecks of woad particles settle to the bottom.

“You let it dry out,” Jamison says, holding up a sample of the blue powder. “I get about one tablespoon from a plant. You don't need tons of it.”

Woad starts easily from seed, available through www.localharvest.com, based in Santa Cruz. The green spinach-like leaves (a favorite of raccoons) are the main harvest for dye and can be cut back several times during a season. The plant over-winters well and sends up a flowering stalk the second year before it fades.

The dye, however, lasts years.