



The lure of natural dyes in sustainable fashion



If there is one buzzword that aptly summarises the initiatives and undertakings of the last few decades, it is sustainability. This is especially important in the textile industry, where water use and the disastrous effects of artificial dyes on water bodies have been perennially criticised. Some manufacturers have turned back full circle, employing the use of natural dyes as an eco-friendly alternative to synthetics.

Why natural dyes are returning to fashion
Derived from plants, fruits, and other natural materials, many of which can be easily found in local markets or even at home, natural dyes do not

involve the use of petrochemicals in their processes and produce far less harmful waste. They do more than just add colours to fabrics; they offer a more sustainable option that significantly reduces the environmental and health impacts associated with chemicals.

In several parts of the world, traditional dyeing practices continue to be a crucial part of cultural heritage, with skilled artisans producing dyes on a small scale, preserving age-old techniques and supporting local economies. The process of creating these dyes is often cost-effective, as many sources, such as marigold, olive, and pomegranate peels, are everyday items that are both affordable and accessible to the community.

"We cultivate our own indigo in environmentally safe areas, such as alongside roads and embankments, to create sustainable dyes," reveals Nazra Sabet, Chief Executive Officer of



Friendship Colours of the Chars. The social purpose organisation also has a strong sourcing team that brings in items such as catechu, pomegranate peels, and olives to make into colourants.

Many of these natural dyes possess additional beneficial properties. For instance, certain dyes, like Acacia catechu (khair/katha) and Rubia cordifolia (madder), are equipped with bacterial and mould-resistant qualities. Others, such as pomegranate peels, are able to inherently repel insects, providing a natural way to enhance the functionality of textile products. Additionally, many natural dyes are effective in deodorising fabrics, thanks to their resistance to odour-causing bacteria.

However, despite their many advantages, natural dyes also present some challenges. Unlike synthetic dyes, which are known for their vibrant and colourfast nature, natural dyes can fade when exposed to sunlight or strong light sources. They often require the use of heat or steam to fix the colour and maintain colourfastness.

The challenges of colourfastness and consistency
According to Sabet, washing instructions play a big role in holding on to the longevity of these colours. "Proper care, including the use of mild soaps instead of harsh detergents, helps maintain the original colours for a longer period of time," she shares. Achieving certain hues, especially vibrant shades like orange and yellow, may require multiple dyeing sessions.

Natural dyes, derived from plants, fruits, and roots, are re-emerging in the textile industry as eco-friendly alternatives to synthetic dyes. They reduce chemical waste, offer antibacterial and insect-repellent properties, and preserve cultural heritage while supporting local artisans.

Challenges include colour variability, fading under sunlight, and labour-intensive processes, making them less vibrant and harder to scale than synthetic dyes.

Designers and artisans focus on sustainability, slow fashion, and traditional techniques, blending aesthetics with environmentally conscious practices.

Wider adoption requires innovation in extraction, production efficiency, and supply chains, while consumers can support both nature and artisanal livelihoods.