Gradation Dyeing in Zipper Bags

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Deeply dyeing fabric for quilts and textile projects does not have to be complicated. It’s a thrill to pull hand-dyed fabrics from a freezer bag and discover what you have created. This process is best done in a laundry/utility area with a sink.

**Instructions**

This recipe is designed for 6 gradations, but typically there is enough to fill 7 bags. Cut 7 squares of PDF fabric.

1. Put on the rubber gloves and dust mask. In a 2-cup measuring cup, dissolve the dye powder in 1 cup of water at slightly above room temperature (75°–95°). For a medium to light value, 1 teaspoon of dye may be a good starting point; if you desire darker hues, 1 tablespoon may be needed. The amount of dye depends on the depth of shade required. Stir well to completely dissolve the dye powder (a small whisk is helpful). Set the cup of dye aside.

**Materials**

- 2½ yards 100% cotton prepared for dyeing (PFD) fabric, cut in large squares (I use 22” x 22” pieces.)
- Rubber gloves
- Dust mask or respirator
- Procion® MX dye powder
- Plastic measuring cups
- Plastic measuring spoons
- Long-handled stirring utensil (e.g., whisk or slotted spoon)
- Soda ash or dye activator
- Common table salt
- Small bucket
- Small pitcher
- 7 one-gallon, freezer-weight zipper bags
- Rectangular, plastic storage container
- Synthrapol®

**Optional**

- Thermometer
- Notebook to record dyeing recipes and results

**Caution:**

Always wear a dust mask and gloves while working with powdered dyes and chemicals. All tools used in this process must be dedicated to non-food use.

**Note:** Wear a dust mask from the time you prepare to open the jar of dye until the dye is dissolved. Place dampened paper towels on the work surface and place the dye jar, spoon, and cup on top to collect any dye powder. Close the jar immediately and rinse the measuring spoon. Once the dye is dissolved, you may remove the mask or respirator.

**Tip:** To test the depth of color of the dye solution, begin with 1 teaspoon of powder and mix well in the cup of water. Take the spoon and streak it across the damp paper towels underneath. Although this test produces a color that is darker than the anticipated final result, if a deeper shade is desired, add an additional ½ teaspoon or so of dye powder and test again.
2. Dissolve ½ cup of salt and 2 tablespoons of soda ash in a small bucket with 1 gallon of warm to hot water (95°–110°). Stir well until the soda ash and salt are completely dissolved. Fill a small pitcher with water (95°–110°) and set aside.

3. Set the 7 zipper bags upright in the rectangular, plastic storage container, with all of the zippers on the same side and open at the top.

4. Measure and fill each bag with 2 cups of the warm water/soda ash/salt mixture from the bucket.

Note: Be prepared to move quickly in the next steps. As soon as the dye is added to the soda ash mixture, it begins to react. You will need to add the dye to each bag and then add the fabric squares immediately.

5. Add ½ cup of dye solution to the first bag. Fill the measuring cup containing the remaining dye solution with water back to the 1 cup level. After a quick stir, add ½ cup of dye solution to the second bag. Fill the measuring cup containing the remaining dye solution with water back to the 1 cup level. Repeat this process until each bag has received ½ cup of dye solution. There will be ½ cup left at the end.

Note: As water is added, the dye solution begins to lighten with the addition of each ½ cup of water, providing the perfect gradation.

6. As soon as the dye had been added to the bags, take the first piece of fabric and scrunch it down into the bag that was the last and lightest color, making sure it's fully immersed. Take the second piece of fabric, and do the same into the next bag, continuing to scrunch the fabric into each bag ending with the darkest color.

Tip: Working from light to dark in this manner prevents your gloves from marking the white fabric with a darker dye stain.

7. After all of the fabric has been added to the bags, push some of the air out of each bag and zip each one up. Depending on how much mottling and patterning is desired, mash them around, tip them over and manipulate the bags. Typically, after several minutes, I leave the bags to rest for the remainder of the dye process, but if less patterning is desired, more movement and manipulation will even the tones.

8. Allow at least 1 hour for the dye process. Do not remove the fabric before 1 full hour has passed! The fabric can remain in the bags for a longer time—even until the next day—and often this will result in slightly more intense colors. (figure 1)

9. Unzip the bags, remove the fabric, and rinse it until the water is nearly clear. Wash the fabric in HOT water with 1 teaspoon of Synthrapol and dry. Rinse out the freezer bags; they can be reused for other dye projects.

Color results can vary based on many variables including water, temperature, fabric content, and the colors of dye. Keeping notes (how much dye, the color, and the results) of the process each time will assist in producing more consistent and expected results in the future.

This process produces fabrics that are not evenly dyed, but rather mottled and patterned. Instructions for different types of dye processes are widely available online and in books on dyeing.

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