



**Working with an Iron blanket -
Tutorial by The Kitchen Witch**

Iron helps to both create prints and to make them permanent. There is an affinity between the iron and the tannin in the leaves which can create beautiful prints. You can work with iron in several way ways:

Bundling vinegar/water soaked fabric and leaves around a rusty objects and steaming gives really nice results with plants that do not print very well (try sprinkling a few tea leaves on before you wrap and steam for that extra bit of tannin)...these are the sort of results you can get from this technique:



Another technique is to soak the leaves in iron water, pat them dry and place onto damp vinegar soaked fabric (I use a 50/50 water to vinegar mix) bundle and steam as normal, this technique will give you a full print of the leaf and depending on the strength of your iron water the colour of the print can range from grey to black as can be seen in the picture below



An iron carrier cloth tends to outline the leaves rather than turning them into a solid black/grey.



So what is an iron carrier cloth?

A carrier cloth is a way of transferring a dye or mordant to another piece of fabric, in this case we are using iron, but it can be used to transfer other natural dyes. Any cloth will do for this, I like to use old sheets from the charity shop. The cloth is dipped in iron water, the leaves are placed between the cloths, the whole package is then bundled, tied and steamed to create the prints.

Sometimes the carrier cloth is attractive in its own right and you may want to keep it



This cloth had been used several times before it got to the stage where I thought it interesting enough to keep

I tend to use my carrier cloths many times, just washing them and re dipping into the iron water

Making Iron water

Soak rusty objects in plain water until the water looks like cold tea (it generally only takes about a week) Keep the objects in the water as you will have to keep topping it up as you use it, some people add vinegar to their iron water, I do not. If you are in a rush you can buy Ferrous sulphate powder from sites like Wild Colours but I tend to avoid the powders and it is not the same as home made iron water

Working with an Iron Blanket with silk

Hand wash the silk to get rid of any size and soak for a couple of hours in a 50/50 vinegar water mix, you will be using the silk damp but not wet through.

Dip a strip of old cotton fabric, larger than the piece of silk, into the iron water don't leave it to soak for more than a couple of hours as it will get too iron rich and will send everything black, this is your iron blanket again you will be using the cloth damp but not wet through so hang it on the line to dry for a little while.

Lay the leaves out on the iron cloth with the underside of the leaf facing upwards, (this side prints better and it is the silk you are printing on not the iron cloth)

There are a few example of leaves that print well further down in the tutorial



Lay the silk on top of the iron blanket and leaves. Smooth the silk out, (at this stage it is sometimes worth adding an extra barrier of paper or reusable plastic on top of the whole pile to prevent the prints from blurring or ghosting, this is particularly useful if you are folding a larger piece of work) then roll both cloth and silk (and barrier if you have used one) together as tightly as possible around your stick, smoothing out creases as you roll, the tighter the contact the better the print.



Try to get the silk as crease free as possible
If the silk becomes (as in this picture) too dry to smooth out just give it a spray with a 50/50 water to vinegar mix and smooth down gently with both hands

Tie very tightly and steam for one hour 30 mins.
Open as soon as the print is cool enough to handle but don't wash for a couple of days. Some eco printers wait a few days to open the bundles, that is up to you.



Remember to keep your string and reuse it!

Making a Steamer

I use an old aluminium jam pot which I found online, I bought a trivet from Amazon and the lid is an old tin tray, I also use a fish steamer for larger pieces with the trivet turned upside down so that the handles act as legs ...just improvise

Practical and Safety Issues

Have dedicated pots for dyeing and keep them outdoors away from kitchen pots and pans. NEVER use a pot you have used for dyeing for anything other than dyeing.

Use gloves, the iron and tannin from plants can irritate your hands and will most certainly stain them!

If you dye indoors then make sure that the room is really well ventilated keep doors and windows open all of the time. If you are using powdered iron use a mask and make the mix up outdoors.

Watch your pot! you will be steaming quite hard so will have to keep topping up the water, use boiling water to top up so that the pot doesn't come off the boil

Watch out for steam burns!! Have a dedicated pair of oven gloves for checking your pots

Leaves

Leaves and plants that are high in tannin tend to work better, some examples are:

- Oak
- Sycamore
- Rose leaves
- Acer
- Maple
- Alder
- Eucalyptus
- Rosemary

- Lavender
- Dyers Chamomile Flowers
- Walnut
- Sumac
- Smokebush (leaves and flowers)

This is not a definitive list and it only covers leaves I can easily find in the UK, so just try a few leaves and flowers on small scraps of fabric and keep notes of which work best for you.