

"I could create the exact hues I wanted for my projects."



# YARN WORTH DYEING FOR

Colour has a real impact on projects that catch our eye and the yarns we want to crochet them with. Meet the folks who put the pop in yarns we find irresistible – the indie dyers.

**Y**ou're about to embark on a crochet project that will take the best part of the remainder of the summer. Surely you want to use a yarn that's been created with equal care and dedication? Meet the indie dyers – designer makers with a skill for selecting the ideal yarn and transforming it into something new and vibrant. They've got an eye for exquisite colourways and an impressive affinity with hard graft.

Many indie dyers are crafters who take up dyeing in a bid to create the yarn they can't find in the marketplace. "The first time I thought about dyeing yarn was while

learning to knit socks in 2006," says Jon Dunn-Ballam of [www.easyknits.co.uk](http://www.easyknits.co.uk). "I ordered some yarns but was sorely disappointed by what arrived – it didn't feel soft and the colours were just not me. I decided that I'd be much better off dyeing my own yarns."

It's a similar story for Cumbria-based Victoria Magnus of Eden Cottage Yarns ([www.edencottageyarns.co.uk](http://www.edencottageyarns.co.uk)), who began yarn dyeing after learning to knit while at university. "At the time, a lot of the indie dyed yarn was in jazzy, variegated colourways, which are good fun, but I just wanted a nice plain purple. I struggled to

find one, so I decided to dye my own. Everything grew from there!"

Linda Lencovic of Kettle Yarn Co ([www.kettleyarnco.co.uk](http://www.kettleyarnco.co.uk)) completed an MA in painting at Chelsea College of Art and Design, then spent much of her thirties "navigating London's crazy art world. I decided to try my hand at dyeing my own yarn because I had the colour-mixing skills and could create the exact hues I wanted for projects and garments."

Linda quickly realised that she found painting yarn even more satisfying than painting canvases. "There's something hugely rewarding about creating a product

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that's not only very beautiful but also very useful," she explains.

Debbie Orr of Skein Queen ([www.skeinqueen yarns.co.uk](http://www.skeinqueen yarns.co.uk)) got started after spotting a feature by Debbie Tomkies about dyeing your own yarn with Kool Aid in our sister mag *Simply Knitting*. "It sparked my imagination," she says. "I decided to try to source some undyed cashmere/silk, which took me around three months back in 2007. And I'm still using that very same supplier today."

## DROPS OF COLOUR

Using food dye or an instant drink mix in a pan over the stove is a crucial step in most yarn dyers' journeys. Having begun with Kool Aid, Debbie "progressed to fibre-reactive dyes, before moving onto yet another type of commercial dye." She then attended a dyeing course run by Debbie Tomkies, "to ensure that my self-taught techniques were up to scratch." By this time, she recalls, she "was accumulating a

fair amount of hand-dyed yarn. I remember mentioning to my husband that there was this new marketplace called Etsy and that I was going to open a shop on it. That night lying in bed, the name Skein Queen just popped into my head." Within a few hours of launching the new shop, Debbie sold her first skein of yarn to a customer in the USA.

Linda, too, started out by selling "a few skeins on Etsy and as things took off, realised I could grow this into a full-time business if I worked hard enough." Nearly two years on, Linda is now solely working for herself and has opened her web shop at [www.kettleyarnco.co.uk](http://www.kettleyarnco.co.uk). "The business is still a fledgling, but I'm proud of what I've accomplished so far."

The transition from 'dyeing for pleasure' to 'dyeing for a business' is somewhat a

blurred line for Jon, he admits. "I can't remember the exact day it happened, but the owner of my local yarn shop fell in love with my yarn when he saw it at a craft group, and asked if I would dye the yarn for a sock club he wanted to run. I was

surprised, but decided to go for it."

At this point, Jon was still working full time as a graphic designer. "The dyeing was a fun hobby and the extra income felt a bonus

for enjoying it." By 2008, two years after dyeing his first skeins, Jon had launched a website, attended some shows, and started a Ravelry group. When his job came under threat in 2010, he was ready to take the business full time, "splashing out on a better website, attending more shows and beginning to offer wholesale to stores around the UK. The business is still

"A FEATURE ABOUT DYEING YOUR OWN YARN WITH KOOL AID SPARKED MY IMAGINATION."



**Opposite:** Beautiful, sunset-coloured skeins of hand-dyed yarn, photograph by Eden Cottage Yarns. **This page, clockwise from left:** Jon and his sidekick Sweep, photograph by Easyknits.co.uk; Get a load of those colours – it's Deeply Wicked yarn, photograph by Easyknits.co.uk; Another divine skein of Deeply Wicked yarn, photograph by Easyknits.co.uk



**This page, clockwise from left:** Well, aren't these yarns delectable? It's an Eden Cottage Yarns selection, photograph by Eden Cottage Yarns; Linda wearing a shawl made in her gorgeous Beyul 4ply yak, silk and merino blend, photograph by Kettle Yarn Co.



growing and I'm still learning lots. Some days I find it hard to believe that I actually do dye yarn for a living."

#### MAKING A GO OF IT

Choosing when, or whether, to take your yarn dyeing to the next level and make it a full-time job is one of the hardest decisions you'll make. As Jon advises: "Dyeing one skein in your kitchen is really fun, but re-dyeing that same colourway on 100 skeins in a week for a wholesale customer is very different."

Quite simply, it takes a lot of hard work, both physical and mental. "The dyeing itself is physically exhausting," says Victoria, "and it's something that requires full mental concentration, too. Of course everyone loves the exciting parts of running a business, but it's important to keep on top of the less glamorous tasks, such as tax and paperwork."

As Linda warns us, you'll need to be an excellent multi-tasker, especially in the

early days. "I do everything myself: marketing, photo shoots, graphic and web design, product development and planning, dyeing and preparing yarns for sale, customer service, wrapping parcels and postal runs, designing. The list seems endless!" she says. "Finding enough hours in the day can often be a challenge."

Then there's the marketing, because, as Victoria points out: "You can be the best dyer in the world, but if nobody knows you exist even, then it's not going to work."

A keen business mind is a vital part of the mix, too. "For every batch of yarn I sold, I reinvested the profit into buying more yarn and supplies," Debbie says. "I tried to build up a business based on good customer

service, adding nice little touches where I could. I attended yarn shows to get out there and meet customers and I raised the Skein Queen profile on social media. After two years, the opportunity to take redundancy came up – perfect timing! It's been a slow but steady process and now I

"I HAVE MANY MOMENTS IN THE PROCESS THAT MAKE ME DO LITTLE HAPPY DANCES."

have a thriving business with a workshop and studio, and an assistant to help."

Ask yourself, do you love yarn dyeing enough to do it, and every task associated with it, day in, day out? "I work long hours, evenings and weekends to get all the dyeing and other tasks done," says Victoria. "That said, I absolutely love what I do so although it's a lot of work, it's extremely enjoyable. I think that's important if you want to build a successful business. It's not the easiest way of life and if you don't really like it, you should be doing something else!"

#### GETTING CREATIVE

There's a huge amount of joy to be found here, however, especially if you have bags of creative energy.

"I have many moments in the process which make me smile, make me do little happy dances, or clap my hands like an excited child," Jon confesses. "I LOVE to see yarns come off the skein winder, go from 'blocks of colour' to 'variegated skein' – it really is a transformation and a beautiful thing to see."

The inspiration-seeking stage is also a delight. "I like when I have time to think

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about the creative process and put a lot of thought into the colourways," says Debbie, who launched subscription-based Queen's Surprise Club seven years ago, for which members receive specially created yarns each month, inspired mostly by books. "Club members read along and then receive the accompanying yarn with an inspiration sheet. My background is in literature and publishing, so the combination of the two brings me so much pleasure. I also really enjoy coming up with colourway names, which can be anything from Snow White's Lips to Neon Jelly Tots."

The creative process is a thrill for Victoria, too. "I love developing the colourways and seeing how the dyes react on different yarn bases," she says. "Sometimes the idea doesn't exactly go to

plan in the dyebatch, and that's fine. Some of my very favourite shades have been created entirely by accident!"

For Linda, it comes down to relishing the chance to play with colour and the satisfaction of collaborating with designers. "Mixing and creating hues that work together – that sing together – always excites me," says Linda, who is currently planning her first publication, *Boardwalk Brights*, which will showcase designs using Kettle Yarn Co's Islington DK, a British

Bluefaced Leicester/Silk blend. "Creating with others is so rewarding and I love seeing the items come together!"

And for Jon, it all comes back to the yarn. "Each day, I get to play with yarn," he says. "The 12-hour days dyeing and preparing for a show are always made worthwhile when you can step back and look at the

display of your hand-dyed yarns and think 'yes, I did this, and I'm happy with it'. It's the best feeling there is."

## YARNING ON

The true magic of the hand-dyeing process is the alchemy between yarn and hue, so it's no surprise that a love of the yarns themselves really shines through all of our dyers' beautiful collections.

"I enjoy dyeing most yarns," Jon says. "Right now, my absolute favourite to dye is my custom-blended exclusive for [www.easyknits.co.uk](http://www.easyknits.co.uk) base called 'smoke' – it's a gorgeous blend of British wools and has a naturally grey tone to the undyed yarn. When dyed, it has such rich depth and tone, and it looks amazing in any colour."

Linda is particularly well-known for her work with animal fibres such as yak and camel, which she came to partly for ecological reasons. "It's hugely important to me that my business has strong ethical and environmental principles," she says, explaining that camels and yaks are

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**Clockwise from top left:** Skein Queen's glorious Voluptuous Skinny yarn, photograph by Skein Queen; The Skein Queen Debbie Orr, photograph by Skein Queen; Vibrant dyes, photograph by Kettle Yarn Co.





**This page, clockwise from left:** Three shades of Kettle Yarn Co's Beyul yarn, photograph by Kettle Yarn Co; Beating Hearts wrap from *Simply Crochet* issue 30, worked in Kettle Yarn Co Islington; A shawl in Eden Cottage Yarns, photograph by Eden Cottage Yarns.



farmed in environmentally conscious ways "which do not harm the animals or deplete resources. It's vital to me that Kettle Yarn Co supports animal welfare and the environment through these kind of informed choices."

Having given such thought to her yarn choices, Linda struggles when asked which she most likes to work with. "That's like asking which child is your favourite!" she says. "I couldn't possibly choose. All natural fibres have their own qualities and beauties."

Debbie agrees, saying: "Each yarn or blend absorbs colour in different ways. I love dyeing natural grey or beige yarns such as the Gotland or the camel/silk, because the base colour means that they produce intense, rich but muted shades. Then I love to switch back to a crisp, white

sock yarn base that produces a true colour. Producing a random spatter-dyed effect on high-twist yarns to get a couple of stitches of each colour is time-consuming, but a really fun technique."

Linda hopes that Kettle Yarn Co's yarns will help her customers enjoy their makes far into the future. "Along with the ethical

issues that I try to educate my customers on, it's also my goal that Kettle Yarn Co yarns will always be a pleasure to create with and wear, and will continue to look

amazing for years to come for those who believe that fashion shouldn't be disposable," she says, before finishing on a note that we fervently agree with. "I want customers to take great pride in what they make and cherish their beautiful handmade items for generations."

**Written by Judy Darley**

**"EACH YARN OR BLEND ABSORBS COLOUR IN DIFFERENT WAYS. I LOVE DYEING NATURAL YARNS."**

## DYE WELL

**Thinking of taking up yarn dyeing? Here's some advice from the pros.**

"What are you supporting with your business? Even a small business can make a difference." Linda Lencovic, [www.kettleyarnco.co.uk](http://www.kettleyarnco.co.uk)

"Only ever sell a yarn that you are 100% happy with. I try to make sure every skein I sell is a skein I'd love to receive myself." Jon Dunn-Ballam, [www.easyknits.co.uk](http://www.easyknits.co.uk)

"There are ups and downs to working for yourself, but you CAN do it. You'll make mistakes, but it's how you deal with them that helps you learn. Try to find your own style – that way, you can always be proud of your achievements. And stay appreciative of your customers – they're the reason that you get to do what you love every day." Debbie Orr, [www.skeinqueenyarns.co.uk](http://www.skeinqueenyarns.co.uk)