June Dye Plant of the Month:
Mullein, great mullein, flannel mullein, woolly mullein, torchweed, hag taper, parson’s staff (Verbascum thapsus)

by Janet Bare

Plant Family: Scrophulariaceae, Figwort Family

Description: Herbaceous biennial from a taproot. Foliage densely covered with stellate (star-like) hairs. The first year, the plant forms only a dense basal rosette of woolly leaves. The second year it sends up a tall flowering stalk up to 7 ft or so tall with a dense spike of yellow flowers. The leaves are densely spaced along the stem and are oblong to oblanceolate, ranging in size from about 20” long at the base up to just a few inches long just below the inflorescence.

Origin and Current Range: Native to Europe, northern Africa and Asia; introduced and naturalized in the Americas, Australia and many other areas of the globe. Often grows along roadsides and in other open, sunny, disturbed areas in Colorado.

Reproduction and Cultivation: Reproduces by seeds, which are very tiny, sometimes more than 700 seeds per capsule, that may remain viable for decades (perhaps up to 100 years).

Dye Color and Parts Used for Dye: Stalks and leaves, fresh or dry, yield a color-fast yellow, grayed yellow, or yellow-green in wool and silk mordanted with alum. Cotton and linen may also be dyed with this plant (ref. 3). Jeanie Reagan (ref. 4) recommends twice as much chopped plant material as fiber/yarn.

Other Information: Mullein has been used for many centuries for a wide range of purposes. The long spikes, dipped in tallow, were used for torches. Pliny the Elder linked the plant to witches, and the plant was used to ward off curses and evil spirits. Medicinal purposes in many cultures have included the treatment of skin, throat and breathing ailments, prepared in teas, emollients, poultices or tobaccos. Dioscorides recommended the plant 2000 years ago to treat pulmonary diseases (ref. 15). Recent studies have shown that the plant materials contain glycyrrhizin compounds with bactericide and potential anti-tumoral action (see ref. 12 for much more information about various uses).

Mullein is legally listed as a noxious weed in Colorado and Hawaii, and in some other parts of the world. The plants host a number of insects, including some beneficial ones, but also is a potential
reservoir of some problem diseases, including cucumber mosaic virus and Texas root rot (ref. 10), and may serve as overwintering places for some insect pests (ref. 6).

Please check out the references below for a wealth of additional information about mullein!

References:

11. Styles, Dede. Slowly She Turned blog: Natural Dyeing with Dede Styles, Part II. http://slowlysheturned.net/2013/06/03/natural-dyeing-with-de-de-styles-part-ii-dye-pots/