



Azaleas in the Evening

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Measurements: Fits size 6 misses. Bust 34", waist 26", hip 36". Full length 96"

This flowing silk organza evening dress was designed using fabric hand dyed with azalea blossoms. It consists of three layers of silk organza designed in a low-waste, wrap across the back style with asymmetric hem.

Expression of my sustainable design values through use of natural dyes has been part of my creative work for many years. A tenet of my design scholarship is to constantly challenge myself by learning new dyeing, surface design, pattern making, and/or construction techniques, combining learned techniques in different ways. Exploration of the contact method of natural dyeing as a new textile design technique was the first goal. My second design goal was to seek out dyestuff sources that I had not used before when developing the color for this textile and garment design.

The contact method of natural dyeing is a very low water use method of dyeing and is a sustainable alternative to the more common method of immersion dyeing. In contact dyeing the natural dyestuff is placed directly on the fabric, the fabric and dyestuff is compressed into a bundle, and then steamed to release the color. Complex random patterns and colors can be achieved (Kadolph & Casselman, 2004). Prior to bundling, Kadolph and Casselman recommend use of both a wet and a dry mordant. The fabric is lightly wet and then a dry mordant is added. Compression or bundling of the fabric so the dyestuff has direct contact with the fabric is essential. The fabric may be placed in a plastic bag and steamed in the microwave or steamed on the stove. Then, the fabric is cured by drying it for several days and heat setting with an iron (Kadolph & Casselman, 2004).

Azalea blossoms were a readily available potential dyestuff and one that I had not used in previous designs. I found that use of these flowers as a dyestuff was an experimental opportunity, because no information was discovered regarding use of azaleas in either the historical or contemporary natural dye literature. Three different color varieties of azaleas were used in the initial round of contact dyeing to judge depth and shades of color obtainable. "Hershey red" azaleas provided the color for the final design.

When preparing the silk for contact dyeing, I decided to disperse the azalea petals heaviest along one edge to achieve a border design. Colors achieved in two trials of the pink azalea resulted in slightly different shades. The first fabric dyed in this manner produced more fuschia pink color, while the second has more purple undertones and more variety of other shades across the fabric length. The two lengths of fabric were dyed two weeks apart, so variations in growth of the azaleas during that time may be one explanation of the color difference. The “chance factor” as Kadolph and Casselman (2004) describe it is pronounced in contact dyeing. It is difficult to predict specific outcomes with contact dyeing because the focus is on use of innovative materials with this method of obtaining color. To me this adds mystery and opportunity to the design process.

The dress design was achieved by draping. The center of the fabric length was slashed for a v-neckline, then the fabric was wrapped around the body to overlap to opposite back shoulders. This draping technique achieved a low waste garment design with only the armhole and back shoulder areas cut away.

Three layers of silk organza are used to complete this dress. Two lengths of silk were dyed with azalea blossoms, while the third provides a solid white underlayer. The outer layer is from 3 yards of silk organza; the other two layers are made from four yards of silk organza each. Thus, the two lower layers provide a trailing hem for the garment. There are button and loop closures at each shoulder. The neckline has a self facing and a tuck at the front shoulder helps shape the bust.

References:

Kadolph, S.J. & Casselman, K.D. (2004). In the bag: Contact natural dyes. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 22(1/2), 15-21.

