

INDIGO, a dye prepared from the leaves and small branches of the *Indigofera Tinctoria*. See INDIGOFERA.

The ancients were acquainted with this dye, under the name of *Indicum*. Pliny knew that it was a preparation of a vegetable substance, though he was not justly informed concerning the plant itself, and the process by which it was fitted for use. Even at the close of the sixteenth century it was not known in England what plant produced indigo; but about the year 1731 it appears to have been first cultivated in England by Miller. It is found both in the East and West Indies, and is spontaneous in China and Cochin China, and is cultivated over all those vast empires. The indigo plant requires a smooth rich soil, well tilled, and not too dry. The seed is sown in little furrows that are about the breadth of the hoe, two or three inches deep, twelve inches distant from each other, and in as straight a line as possible. Continual attention is required to pluck up the weeds, which would soon choke the plant. Though it may be sown in all seasons, the spring is commonly preferred.

Moisture causes this plant to shoot above the surface in three or four days. It is ripe at the end of two months. In order to prepare indigo for use, a large quantity of the herb is put into a vat or cistern of strong masons' work, with so much water as is sufficient to cover it; and some wood laid above to prevent its rising up. The matter begins to ferment, sooner or later, according to the warmth of the weather, and the maturity of the plant, sometimes in six or eight hours, and sometimes not in less than twenty. When the liquor is in a proper state of fermentation, it is let out, by cocks in the bottom, into another vat placed for that purpose, called the beaters, or pounding vat. This liquor which consists of the dying substance and a useless salt is then forcibly agitated with wooden buckets, that are full of holes and fixed to a long handle. This part of the process requires the greatest precaution. If the beating is ceased too soon, a part of the tinging matter remains dissolved in the liquor; if continued a little too long, a part of that which is separated is dissolved afresh. The exact time for discontinuing the process is determined by taking up some of the liquor occasionally in a little cup, and observing whether the blue fecula is disposed to separate and subside. The whole being now suffered to rest till the blue matter has settled, the clear water is let off, by cocks in the sides at different heights; and the blue matter remaining at the bottom, having acquired the consistence of a thick muddy liquid, is drawn off into another vessel. After it is still more cleared of much superfluous water in this third and last tub, it is drained in sacks; from whence, when water no longer filters through the cloth, this matter, now become of a thicker consistence, is put into chests, where it entirely loses its moisture. At the end of three months the indigo is fit for sale. Before it is perfectly dry, it is cut in small pieces of an inch square, which detach themselves readily from the box, when the indigo is entirely dry.

Indigo is used, in washing, to give a bluish colour to linen: painters also employ it in their water-colours; and it makes a fine blue dye. The ancients procured it from the East Indies; in modern times, it has been transplanted into America. The cultivation of it, successively attempted at different places, appears to be fixed at Carolina, St. Domingo, and Mexico. That which is known under the name of Guatimala indigo, from whence it comes, is the most perfect of all.