

Hand-dyed yarns, like these from Gamer Crafting, often vary from skein to skein

Behind the skeins

We answer all your biggest questions about independently dyed yarns, from who makes them and how they're created to how they're sold and where to find them...



Clockwise from left: Marina Skua's hand-dyed 4ply skeins in autumnal shades; Marina in yarny winter warmers; Eden Cottage Yarns' Victoria Magnus; hand-dyed skeins from Eden Cottage Yarns

Time and time again, we crocheters find ourselves enraptured by independently dyed yarns, also known as 'indie-dyed yarns'. With dreamy colour effects, squishable fibre blends and imaginative shade names, it's easy to fall in love with a one-of-a-kind skein. But independent dyers – often just one to four people working out of a kitchen, shed or art studio – operate very differently to major yarn brands, and it can be helpful to know what to expect. Therefore, to demystify all things indie dyer-related, we've spoken with some of our favourites and put together this short guide to answer some of your major questions about these yarns and their makers. Discover the who, what and how of the hand-dyed yarns we love to love!

WHO MAKES INDIE-DYED YARN?

Behind every extraordinary yarn is an extraordinary creator, but what does the term 'indie dyer' mean? Put simply, an indie dyer can be defined as anyone working independently to produce small batches of hand-dyed yarn. This allows the makers a certain level of freedom – without the constraints and demands of large-scale manufacturing, indie dyers can work much more creatively. Victoria Magnus from Eden Cottage Yarns loves the freedom of this arrangement. "Being independent means

being able to make decisions for the benefit of my business without anyone saying no," she says. "I can try new things, grow and develop with circumstances, as well as be reactive if things aren't working. It's hard work, but the payoffs are worth it."

For dyer and knitwear designer Marina Skua, it's all about small business. "Most indie dyers are single-person businesses, or very small teams," she says. "So often the person dyeing the yarn also packs orders, sells at shows and runs their own social media."

WHY IS IT MORE EXPENSIVE?

In the same way that buying from a small business can be more sustainable, boost a community and support an artist, shopping from indie dyers can be a more thoughtful way to purchase yarn. However, this is often reflected in the cost. Angie from Gamer Crafting puts it this way: "You're not getting a pre-packaged yarn churned out from mills for maximum profit; you're getting skeins that someone stood in their kitchen or backyard studio dyeing."

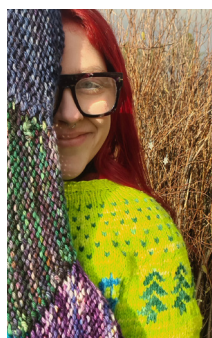
So is indie-dyed yarn worth the extra cost? For Marina, the artistic nature of the yarn makes the cost worthwhile. "The joy of hand-dyed yarn is that there's often a subtle depth to the colours, and a lot of artistry can go into creating interesting shades and colourways," she says. "Smaller batches allow

for more flexibility and experimentation, with interesting techniques and limited-edition colours." Marina is also able to work more sustainably by sourcing local fibre and having it custom spun, keeping a firmer handle on the supply chain.

Due to their quality and longevity, indie yarns can also be seen as an investment. "Indie-dyed yarns are made to stand the test of time if they are taken care of, and they can be repurposed," explains Frances Lee of LeFrances Handmade Crafts & Fibre Art. Victoria agrees: "We choose the highest quality fibres to ensure our yarn is of the best quality possible and will last for many years."

So, scarcity, high-quality materials, unique artistry and the slow, labour-intensive nature of the processes all feed into the heavier price tag of indie yarns. But there are also a couple of intangible yet valuable qualities that you won't find among the big-box offerings. "As a dyer, I put care into every skein," shares Angie. For instance: "I won't send out multiple skeins of a single colourway from different dye batches. I try to make sure people love every stitch they're making; it's something I continue to strive for."

"Purchasing from an indie dyer gives you the peace of mind of knowing where and who you are spending your money with," adds Frances. "You can guarantee your skein of yarn was made with love!"



Clockwise from top left: Frances Lee of LeFrances Handmade Crafts & Fibre Arts; Frances' dye bath during the dyeing process; Angie of Gamer Crafting; hand-dyed green skeins from Gamer Crafting

HOW IS IT MADE?

Part of the magic of indie yarns is the mesmerising range of colour effects. Dyeing by hand broadens the scope of what dyers can achieve, and they employ a myriad of special techniques to lovingly create their signature styles. Painting, dip dye, speckling, semi-solid – you name it, indie dyers have mastered it. "I'm sure that, like me, most dyers use a whole range of dye methods with our own personal processes that we've developed over the years," Victoria says. "Sometimes I'm in the mood for speckles, sometimes I'm in the mood for layering up colours, and sometimes I want the simplicity of semi-solids. That's the whole point of running a creative business!"

All dyers have their preferences – immersion or kettle dyeing is Marina's forte, for semi-solid colours and low contrast variegation. Heavy speckles have been Angie's thing lately, and Frances is also a fan.

SYNTHETIC VS NATURAL DYES

For the colours themselves, dyers can go one of two ways: natural or synthetic. Both have their benefits and downsides. "Natural dyes are biodegradable, compostable, non-toxic and made from renewable resources," Frances tells us. However, "natural dyes are more expensive because it requires a large space of land to produce material needed. Natural dyes require a mordant to bond colour that can be toxic.

"Synthetic dyes yield more consistent and reliable colour results, provide a range of

colours to choose from, and are cheaper to make. However, synthetic dyes contain more chemicals, it can be difficult to treat the wastewater from dye factories and [they] can lead to skin allergies."

Natural dyes aren't necessarily more sustainable than synthetic dyes, Marina explains. "I've used natural dyes a lot in the past and enjoyed the process and the fact that I could get colour from plants I've grown or foraged myself. The environmental credentials on that front are great! However, the methods involved are more laborious and intensive on water and energy and give a result that is less colourfast and predictable than synthetic dyes."

So, in the end, it's all down to the dyers' personal choice, which is often based on how they prefer to work and what's best for their style and the particular kind of yarn they use. At the moment, most dyers favour non-toxic colourfast synthetics.

WHAT ARE CLUBS AND UPDATES?

Seen the terms 'shop update' and 'yarn club' on an indie dyer's website and wondered what they mean? These are two distinct ways you can get your hands on gorgeous indie yarns – ways that are well suited to small batch production.

A shop update refers to a dyer adding new stock to their store, most likely online. Dyers may do countdowns, mailouts or special announcements for their updates so shoppers don't miss out, and the frequency of these updates can vary.

Angie updates weekly or bi-weekly, while Marina favours special one-off updates for new collections or big range changes: "A lot of dyers will work towards a shop update on a specific date, where a big selection of yarn becomes available all at once. Doing it this way tends to save a lot of admin work, especially if there are new colours in the update. Getting yarn ready to sell involves a lot of specific tasks once the yarn is dyed, and it's often easier to twist a lot of skeins at once, then label them, then photograph and edit, then create the listings for an online shop all in one go. It's also fun to get customers excited about your new yarn!"

Yarn clubs follow a subscription model, where stitchers sign up to receive exclusive yarns for a particular length of time. Again, frequency is down to the individual dyer, so it may be monthly or for a set season. Yarn clubs are often themed, so it's another opportunity for that brilliant independent creativity to shine. Angie runs hers annually, creating 24 shades through the year and shipping out monthly. "Our theme for 2023 is Video Game Landscapes! [The theme for] 2024 isn't set in stone yet, but I'm thinking about doing something magic themed," she says.

Marina's clubs, on the other hand, are colour-led. "I tend to do three-month clubs around a specific theme, whether it's a season or a historical art movement – I like to choose something that creates a mood that inspires me for colours. For my clubs, I dye two colours each month: one semi-solid and one variegated. The two colours for the month will always pair nicely together, and over the three months I like to create a specific palette (six colourways in total) so that all the colours could be used in the same project."

WHERE CAN I FIND INDIE DYED YARN?

Make your local yarn store the first port of call to discover new indie dyers – ask if they stock any. Yarn shows should be top of your list, too – often you'll meet the dyer themselves and can learn what inspires their unique yarns. Then, of course, indie yarns from all over the world are available online. Try Etsy, or tap your favourite colours, themes, fibres or dye effects into a search engine and go down an indie rabbit hole. It's worth asking fibre-loving friends for recommendations, and you can always find indie dyers in the pages of *Simply Crochet* too. There's such amazing variety in the indie yarn world, so you're sure to find your perfect skein somewhere.

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