

DIY Poly Fiber

by Danial Fisher

I needed to make some background “puffball” trees for my layout. For the puffs themselves, I needed some black poly fiber. You can imagine my dismay when I went to the Micro Mark website and found that they had discontinued the product. There are probably other sources for this material, but I really didn't want to hunt them down. Woodland Scenics has green poly fiber, but not black. And it's not cheap at their price.

The white material is cheap and widely available, but it would have to be dyed to be of use. An internet search shows that polyester is a difficult material to dye - it's basically a plastic. The dyes available are harsh and difficult to use. I also considered hair dye (hair is also a notoriously difficult material to dye), but it isn't much better chemically.

However in the course of my searching, I ran across a website that described how to remove ink stains from polyester fabrics. The light that turned on was bright enough to overwhelm the monitor. I already had a “dye” that was cheap, safe, readily available, and the right color - India ink. It may not meet the requirements for fabric dyeing, but I figured I would give it a try. After all, I'm not likely to run my puffball trees through the washing machine.

I mixed up some India ink and water in an old container. I then pulled out a bit of white poly fiber and dunked it into the ink. A few seconds later, I pulled it out and set it aside to dry. The initial color seemed good, so I did some more clumps.

The procedure is pretty simple. Mix up the India ink and water. I found a teaspoon of ink mixed in a cup of water worked well. Place a clump of poly fiber into the ink. Push it down and massage it a bit to distribute the ink to the interior. Lift the clump out and squeeze out the excess ink. Place the dyed poly fiber clump on a sheet of heavy plastic covered with several layers of newspaper. As you dye more poly fiber, you may find that the clumps are coming out a lighter color. It seems the ink sticks to the poly fiber and the water drains out. You may need to add more ink to the mixture. Remove your gloves and clean up any drops with the alcohol and paper towels. Let the clumps dry; this may take several days. Rotating the clumps periodically seems to help speed the drying. Clumps that did not get fully dyed can be redone as needed.

Here are some guidelines:

- DO mix up the ink in a wide container.
- DON'T add a lot of ink to the water initially. India ink is very concentrated. It's easier to add a bit more than to remove any.
- DON'T mix up a lot at a time. A little ink goes a long way.
- DO separate the poly fiber into smallish clumps.
- DON'T wear good clothes. The reason India ink works is that it's incredibly permanent.
- DO wear nitrile gloves (unless you want your hands to be black for a good while)
- DO have some isopropyl alcohol on hand for clean-up. India ink is essentially alcohol based and can be cleaned up with this.

As a cost comparison, the Woodland Scenics green poly fiber is about \$4 for a ½ ounce bag. A pound of white poly fiber is about \$5. If you don't already have India ink, a 2 ounce bottle is also about \$4. The bottle will dye a lot more material than 1 pound.



I have experienced only one problem with this procedure. As mentioned above, India ink is soluble in alcohol. If you spray the stained poly fiber with hairspray, some of the ink may come off onto your hands. With a light spray it wasn't too bad, but a heavy spray made things worse. Once the alcohol has evaporated, the ink stays put. I haven't had any problems with waterbased adhesives.