







RURAL BUSINESS











cquiring a dog made all the difference to
Nicola Cliffe, whose fabric business used to take
up every waking moment before the four-legged
addition to the family. When you meet Ernie, a
Parsons Russell terrier, you can see why he would be
the perfect distraction for a workaholic. Full of energy and character,
he is also a handsome addition to photo shoots for Nicola's business,
blending in with the natural colours of the soft furnishings and
accessories that make up the Madder Cutch & Co range.

"If you want to know the secret of a work-life balance, I'd say, 'Get a dog," Nicola laughs. "I never had one before, but I've met so many new and interesting people when out walking - I know all the dogs' names, though not necessarily the owners!" In addition to meeting other walkers, strolling through the meadows near her home in the Georgian town of Stamford in Lincolnshire also gives Nicola time to think, quite literally, outside 'the box' - the name she has given the studio in her garden. This is where she turns her plant drawings into simple, flowing repeat patterns transferred onto linen that is woven in Scotland. The 10 x 5 metre space contains everything she needs - storage for samples and reference books, drawing materials, screens, dye pots and pastes - plus a family gym at one end, which is useful for letting off steam if a paint recipe goes wrong. The windows look out on a half-acre garden where Nicola grows several of the plants that feature in her work and which offer inspiration for the natural dyes she mixes

With Ernie the Parsons Russell looking on, Nicola sketches designs inspired by the natural

world and transfers them onto Scottish linen in her striking garden studio



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to provide her beautiful muted colours. Natural plant dyes, and pigments such as charcoal, are Nicola's passion, while William Morris provides her inspiration. "My designs echo the philosophy of the Arts and Craft movement, which moved away from the brightly coloured textiles of Victoriana," she explains.

The craftsmen of that period – which focused on decorative and fine arts – produced exquisite work before the invention of synthetic colours, and Nicola is evangelistic about following their example: "I love the imperfections, and the way all the colours sit together, as they do in nature." She refers to Morris, who wrote in 1889, "The art of dyeing, I am bound to say, is a difficult one, needing for its practice a good craftsman, with plenty of experience. Matching a colour by means of it is an agreeable but somewhat anxious game to play." Appropriately,





Nicola lives in a 1904 Arts and Crafts house, with her husband Jonathan and youngest son, Bertie, 16.

It's not simply for nostalgic reasons that Nicola has such a strong aversion to synthetic dyes. Before she started her business, she was a chemistry teacher for 18 years at Stamford School (where she taught her two older sons, George, now 26, and Ted, 23). It was while studying for her chemistry degree that she became aware of poor regulation in the Asian textile industry and, as a result, the potential damage to human health and the environment. In order to learn more, when she left the classroom in 2014 to study at Chelsea College of Art and Design, she pursued the theme of sustainable textile production, gaining an MA with distinction. Wanting a practical application for what she'd learnt, she used the savings from her teaching salary to help fund her business. The first year was a time spent experimenting with linens, colours, techniques and patterns, building a website, devising a logo and, the fun part, choosing a name. The word 'madder' came straightaway, as it's a favourite plant widely used in dyeing. 'Cutch' is short for 'catechu', a shade of brown derived from the acacia tree: "I liked the sound of the words together."

She launched a collection in October 2016, featuring *Achillea millefolium*, or yarrow, which grows in her garden: "I drew it not knowing what it was and wanted to identify it." Now the fern-like foliage and dense clusters of tiny flowers adorn everything from pencil cases and notebooks to cushions, curtains and quilts. "My aim has always been to print fabric by the metre, so I made the

After creating her specially formulated dyes from natural plant extracts, Nicola and

Ellie, who works for her, hand-print with a screen using traditional methods



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"I love making things – I always had a sewing room, even as a schoolteacher"

products to show off my designs and get into the marketplace," Nicola says. "Also, I love making things – I always had a sewing room, even as a schoolteacher. The first item I made was a laptop case, because I couldn't find one I liked." It would be easy to assume that Nicola would have started her business earlier had circumstances allowed but she says not: "For me, the timing was right, with some savings behind me, and the family grown up. When I was choosing a career at 18, I loved art but I knew my job prospects would be better with a chemistry degree, and I had always wanted to teach."

Once Madder Cutch & Co was up and running, Nicola had a stroke of luck when a friend told her about Helen Cormack, the founder of Tissus d'Hélène, a boutique showroom specialising in hand-printed fabrics and papers. She emailed her and was amazed to get a reply the next day: "Helen liked my designs and encouraged me to develop my ideas. She has remained supportive ever since."

Over the past two years, Nicola has had time to fine-tune the process of transferring flower to fabric, which she does using a traditional screen-printing technique. The design is photographically stencilled onto a screen – a frame containing

Nicola sells her fabric in shops and uses it to make stylish homeware products such as cushions. Achillea Yarrow (above right) was her first design and remains a favourite a fine mesh that is coated with a light-sensitive emulsion. When exposed to a light source, through a film or acetate printed with the design, the emulsion sets in the areas the light has reached, blocking some holes in the mesh. The fabric is placed on the printing table and the screen set on top; then the coloured dye pastes are dragged over the mesh using a squeegee, the colour going through the open holes to reveal the design. To apply a second colour, another screen must be used.

While Nicola is keen to share her knowledge, often working with an intern – she recruited her current one at the *Country Living* Spring Fair in 2017 – there is one aspect of the process she keeps to herself. She won't divulge how she makes the dye pastes, saying only that her method involved a lot of experimentation and patience. It's clear there are other secrets to her success, but she modestly says, "I don't see myself as an artist. I am more of an artisan, offering a bespoke service. I control the whole process, from start to finish." And she is determined to keep her business small: "I am not an entrepreneur, which to me implies being commercial. I never want to mass-produce or be bought by a big company – I would like each one of my designs to offer my customers something special."

7 For more information and to see Nicola's designs, visit maddercutchandco.com.