Free First Saturday at Home
Will You Be My Plant Neighbor?

I would like to acknowledge and give gratitude to the Indigenous, Black, and people of color farmers and plant-based dyers who have been holding and stewarding these practices, the land, and our connection to it for centuries. Thank you.

Hi, my name is Maddy Bartsch and today I’m going to take you on a walk through my neighborhood to meet some of my plant neighbors. You might be wondering what’s a plant neighbor? Well, you probably know about people and animals, who are your neighbors, but what about plants? You probably have trees, grass, flowers, all sorts of things around you. So let’s take a look and meet some of these neighbors.

Here we are at my garden. One thing we’re going to learn about our plant neighbors today is what pigment they might be hiding. It’s a gift that they give us called natural dyes. A little later, we’re going to do an activity called flower pounding to see what color they have. Be sure to ask an adult before harvesting anything you might find.

Here’s a plant you may recognize: a dandelion. Let’s gently grab one of these and harvest it and put it in our basket. This is birdsfoot trefoil. Let’s harvest some and put it in our basket.
This is Black Knight scabiosa, one of my favorites. Harvesting one flower is good for the plant and encourages more flowers to grow, which is great for pollinators.

These are Johnny Jump Ups, or wild pansies. Let’s take a couple of these and try them out. Bright, colorful flowers like these are a great place to search for pigment.

These are Dyer’s coreopsis. Aren’t they bright and sunny? Again, let’s just take one of these and gently harvest it so we don’t harm the plant.

This is Tango cosmos. Its bright orange petals will make a great print. Remember your senses when meeting a new plant neighbor. How do you experience that plant?

This leaf is Japanese indigo. Let’s see what it could do. Remember, pigment might be in leaves as well as flowers so try some of those too.

And there’s also lots of edible things you can use. This is purple basil. Let’s grab some of these leaves and see if we can use it.

This is bronze fennel. Let’s harvest some of these feathery leaves for our flower pounding.

This is a mint plant. Let’s take some of these leaves and see what they might do.

This is peppermint. Let’s grab a couple of these leaves too.
Now we’re ready to start flower pounding. We need all of these materials in order to do this activity. Most of these you can find at home. First, on your table, lay out some newspaper or other paper—I’m using newsprint here—to help contain the mess. Then put a hard surface down like a piece of wood, or a book, or a cutting board. Then, oop, sometimes the wind grabs your paper, so adjust that if necessary. Then you’ll want to use a piece of paper like watercolor paper. Any white paper will do, but the thicker paper is better for this activity.

Then we’re going to take all those fresh materials we gathered: our leaves, our flowers, and our culinary herbs, and lay them out. Then, this is the fun part. Take all those flowers we collected and arrange them however you want on your paper. You can make shapes, designs, you can even try to spell words. I’m just going to do lots of little clusters of plants so that way we can kind of just see what color does what. You can do a whole flower head, or you can take the petals off individually and lay them out.

It doesn’t matter which way you put them. They can be facing up or facing down it doesn’t matter. But you want to fill up your paper so that way you have lots of pigment to try. And here I’m taking my cosmos leaves and just kind of spreading them around.

So whenever you get as many as you want on your page and you feel like you like the design, then you’ll move on to the next step. I’m putting a few dandelions over here. And I
think I’m going to put a little more trefoil, some cosmos, maybe a purple basil leaf—there.

Now take a piece of paper towel and place it over your piece of paper with all your plant materials. Next, you’re going to use a hammer, a wooden mallet, or another hard object like a rock and gently pound the paper towel. The goal is to be able to see the transfer of pigment through the paper towel, but we don’t want to rip the paper towel. So it’s a firm but gentle tap. If you’re not seeing pigment, you’re probably not hitting it hard enough. And if you’re ripping the paper towel, it’s probably too hard.

As you can see, some of the pigment will come through really quickly and others you have to work a little bit to get it out. You’ll do this until you’ve covered all the areas. Make sure to watch for fingers. And if you need an adult to help you with this step, I’m sure they’d be happy to help with it too.

And so I’m just going to go through and do the whole paper and make sure I try to get everything. If you want to, as you’re working, you can lift up a corner just to check. I saw lots of pigment coming through my paper towel, so I decided to just keep hammering without checking. I’m making my way around my paper towel one more time just to make sure that I’ve gotten all the plant material.

When you think you’re ready, go ahead and take your piece of paper towel off and set it to the side. Now you’re going to gently remove any plant part that’s still left on there. So that
could be petals or leaves. Some of them are going to come off easier than others, but if you haven't hammered too hard, it should be pretty easy to remove them. You’re going to be able to see the imprint of the pigment pretty quickly here. And all of these plant materials can go right into your compost or yard waste, or even right back by the base of the plant. It’ll help contribute to healthy soil.

And now the flower pounding is complete. You can turn this into a piece of wall art, you can make a card for a friend, or as you’re going to see, I’m going to turn mine into a bookmark. If you’re making a bookmark like me and need to use scissors, make sure an adult can help you with that. I’m going to cut my bookmark out of this section right here, because I really like how it looks.

This book needs a bookmark. Perfect. Now I have a homemade bookmark from my plant neighbors. Thanks for watching. I hope you enjoy meeting some new plant neighbors.