

Michaelmas Star Ball
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The Michaelmas Star Ball is a variation of a felt ball, weighted in the middle with a rounded stone, and attached to a tail ribbon that streams behind it when thrown. We bring this project at the end of September when the meteor showers of the night skies have heralded Michaelmas.

Materials:

Medium size (like that of small olives or cherries) stones with rounded shapes creek bed or ocean sculpted are best.

Good felting wool - fleece that has been washed and carded.

Dish soap or shampoo, dish tub.

Thick (1/4 - 1/2 inch wide) ribbon 2436 inches in length for each ball.

Alum powder and cream of tartar for mordanting.

A marigold garden.

Little brass stars (optional).

Process:

Wrap the carded fleece in thin layers around each stone, tightly pulling narrow strips around the form similar to wrapping yarn around a yarn ball. The fleece ball that results should be firmly formed, the rock hidden within, a comfortable size to be cupped in a child's hand. To a certain degree, the balls will shrink as they are worked.

At a table at a comfortable height for children, put a dishtub with 2-3 inches of bath temperature water. Submerge the fleece ball in water until soaked through.

Bring out of the water and squirt generously with soap. Cup the ball as if making a snowball and “pack” the wool with a pressing inward motion - this can be alternated with a rubbing motion, always being conscious of sculpting a round form.

It is important to do this with the children watching so that they will imitate the motion. If you work quickly, the outer fibers will begin to “lock” before you hand that form to the child. This is the ideal - to work the ball long enough that the children take in the movement and also that the felting begins. Then hand the ball to the child and let her work it over the dishpan. It is only necessary to dip it in the water if it becomes dry. Optimally, it should be very soapy, but not too wet. Each child has different capacities, but I generally encourage 5-7 minutes working the ball with packing, rubbing, and rolling motions. Then I rinse the ball in icy cold water trying to increase the friction while I work it. This helps to firm the locking of the fibers.

Re-submerge the ball into the tub of hot/warm water, soap it if it needs it, and return it to the child to be worked another 5-7 minutes over the washtub. This working usually creates a ball that will be felted

enough to hold its form. The more it is worked, the firmer it will become. The teacher or child can then rinse the ball in cold water until all of the soap is squeezed out. Then rub it in a towel and place somewhere to dry.

When the balls are all felted, a long ribbon or streamer tail can be sewn in. At the midway place in the ribbon, secure it with a strong over stitch. The children watch as I do this in free play time.

The night before the Marigold Harvest, I soak the balls in 1-2 tsp. of alum powder and 1 tsp. cream of tartar, together with enough water to cover (24 balls) in a dye pot. Bring it up to a simmer over the flame, then turn off the heat and let it sit overnight. In the morning, pour alum water off, rinse balls, and let them rest in the pot.

All is ready for the Marigold Harvest. Taking care that the plants are thanked and carefully walked around, we harvest about 1-2 gallons of blossom heads in the garden. We then bring them back to the kindergarten and cover the marigolds with water in a large pot. Bring them up to a simmer on the stove for about 15-30 minutes. Strain off the spent blossoms.

We have a favorite place for the dying of the balls; outdoors in the kindergarten yard we set up a board and towel on a low table beneath a crabapple tree. Calling the children one at a time so that there is not crowding, we caution them that the flower bath is VERY hot! Each child is handed a felt ball by its streamer tail to clip it into the magic marigold bath. The color, a deep earthy gold, deepens the longer it steeps. The tail can be dipped to a certain point but, no fingers in the flower soup! Then each ball can be hung on a tree branch to dry. That is a wonderful tree to behold in the autumn light with the fruits of our labors hanging from the branches.

When the balls are dry, I often sew a little star on each as my gift to the children. On a clear autumn day, before the balls are taken home, we go to the meadow hills to fly them. Swung by their tails, the “meteor” showers are a glorious sight raining down from the blue sky.

Janene also sent directions for felting a gnome's beard and Easter eggs. We will include them in the fall issue.