Tanning Leather

By Dragoona

If you hunt, raise your own animals or plan to do either in the future, you can make your own leather. There are a number of ways to tan leather and furs. Some are easier than others, like buying a tanning kit from Tandy or the Leather Factory. These contain pre-measured chemicals and instructions for using them. I am not going to cover the use of kits, but the old ways of tanning your hides.

Basics

Making leather is a time consuming and smelly process. The first thing you need to do is to prepare your hides for tanning. The hides can be from cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, horses and deer, elk or antelope. Actually if it can be skinned it can be tanned.

After the animal has been killed and the skin is carefully removed, the first job is to remove any bits and pieces of meat and fat. To do this the skin is soaked and pounded, then placed over a wooden beam and scraped with a dull knife. Take care not to tear the skins.

The hair and outer part of the skin is then removed by rubbing urine, quicklime or wood ash into the wet surface. This will loosen the hair and allow it to be scraped off.

After the hair has been scraped off, you need to prevent the hide from stiffening or rotting. There are several methods that can be used. You could rub it with an oily substance like tallow (animal fat,) egg yolk or “dubbin” (a mixture of fish oil and tallow. It can also be treated by rubbing salt, brain or potash alum into the surface to produce a very pale leather. Saving urine to use at this time will make an almost white hide. Any of these methods are quick and easy but if the leather gets wet, the oils or minerals would be washed out and the leather would rot. So it is time to tan the leather.

Tannin Tanning

The best way to tan the leather is by using a chemical called tannin. (Gross time) To do this the hide is rubbed with dung (which allows the tannin to penetrate the leather.) This is called bating. The bating process is remarkable one from the properties it imparts to the hide. The dung of carnivores, especially dogs is used as it contains an enzyme that digests collagen, which is an elastic component of the hide.

Prior to bating the hide is springy and “lively,” rather like having a mind of its own. After bating it is quite relaxed and will lay flat. It’s difficult to describe but easy to recognize when the hide is compared before and after bating. The dung is washed from the hide after bating, it has done its job and there is no reason to keep such a smelly component of the leather making process.

Now you need a clay-lined pit with a log or pole in it. The hide is hung over the pole and soaked in a mixture of water and crushed oak bark. This is what produces the tannin. Soak the hide for a

couple of days, then remove it and spread it out to dry. This leather can be carved, tooled or left plain. It can be used to make shoes, knife sheaths, holsters or bags.

Brain Tanning

This is a very primitive method of tanning leather. Oddly enough each animal has just enough brains to tan its own hide. Brain tanning produces a beautiful buckskin and it does require a bit of work to produce it.

After removing the hide from the beastie, stretch the hide out by laying it on the ground flesh-side up. Punch wooden stakes at intervals around the edges and drive them into the ground. You want the stakes close to the edge but not so close that the skin tears. It will all depend on the animal and the thickness of the hide. Don't stretch the hide beyond its original size. You don't want to stretch the hide, just keep it from shrinking.

Now you need to flesh it. This will be easier if you are careful while skinning the animal and not let a lot of meat or fat on the hide. You can use a stone, a bone flesher or the dull knife from above. Once again, be careful to not cut or tear the skin.

Scrap the skin to get every bit of meat or fat off, this includes the tiny veins that cling to the surface of the skin. Any fat or meat left on the hide will cause you misery later. Now that the fleshing is done it's time to decide if you are going to make buckskin or a fur.

Leather

Flip the hide over so that the hair side is up. The idea at this stage is to remove the hair as completely and easily as you can. You can mix up a slurry of wood ashes and water and rub it into the hide well. Cover every square inch then let it set until the hair starts coming loose when you pull on it. It can take a couple of days for heavier hides.

If you don't want to wait that long you can use a sharp knife and scrape/shave the hair off. You may have to scrape the hide even if you used the water/ash method. Scrape the entire hide, when you do this it will also scrape off the epidermis layer. This is important as it allows you to soften the hide later.

Furs

Simply omit the dehairing process and move to the next step.

It's stinky time

The tanning process breaks down the glycerin and loosens the fibers of the skin. The agent used in this method id found in the brain of the animal that provided the hide/fur.

Take the brains and cook them in a little water. Squish and squeeze them with your hands (wear gloves) to mash it well. When the brain soup is almost to hot for you to touch, rub it into the hide

using your hands and smooth round stones that have been heated. Start by rubbing the mixture into the skin side of the hide and then into the hair side (skip this side if you are making a fur.) Use all of the mixture including any “broth” left in the pot. Leave the hide alone and out of the sun for 6 to 8 hours before continuing.

After the brains have soaked into the hide for 6 to 8 hours, submerge the hide in water overnight. You want it to be completely saturated and pliable. While it is soaking, you can prepare your “graining” tools. There are two types needed. The first is a wooden wedge shaped tool, with or without a handle. The other is simply a sick about two inches in diameter. The end of the stick is carved into a smooth, blunt, rounded point.

Restake the hide after it has soaked and use the wedge shaped grainer to “ooze” the water out of the hide. Do this until you can’t get any more water out of the skin.

Now take the blunt stick grainer and work every inch of the hide. The object is to stretch and loosen every inch of the hide while it is drying. **If you stop before it is completely dry it will become stiff!** When the hide seems dry, unstake it.

You can now cut away the edges with the stake holes, since there may be areas you couldn’t scrape well.

Loop the hide through a rope loop or over a branch tied between two trees and pull it back and forth. This will stretch the hide and the heat/friction will dry the hide some more while breaking up the grain farther. When you are done, use a smooth stone to rub any imperfect areas.

Note: If you are making a fur be careful and **do not** run the fur side over the branch or through the rope loop, if you do you **will ruin it!**

The hide is now complete. However it will become stiff again if it gets wet. To prevent this, make a tripod of sticks and drape the hide over a small smudge fire. You want to smoke the hide until it becomes a nice buckskin color. Turn it over as necessary for the smoke to penetrate all parts.

Have fun, folks... it’s a brave new skill to learn.