

Step Outdoors

A. The Curing Process

To preserve small animal pelts, such as rabbit, air dry them thoroughly. For hobby tanning, simply tack the skin flat to a board with the flesh side out and allow the skin to air-dry thoroughly. Although air-drying is sufficient treatment for small animal pelts, salting the hide as described below for large animal pelts may be done instead of air-drying.

Curing Large Animal Pelts

Although small hides will dry thoroughly from air circulation alone, large pelts must be salted. Promptly salt deer hides and other large pelts to remove moisture, prevent spoilage and discourage flies. In general, hides should be tanned soon after they are dried. However, dry hides may be stored as late as the onset of warm weather in April or May. Do not keep un-tanned hides or skins over the summer because they may deteriorate and be damaged by insects.

Salt the hide: Spread the hide, hair side down, on a flat surface. Sprinkle fresh, clean salt over the flesh side of the hide, using a pound of salt for each pound of hide. Be sure to sprinkle salt on all parts of the flesh side; rub the salt into the cut edges, neck, legs and wrinkles. Remember, any unsalted spot is unprotected. The salting procedure should be repeated after the first application of salt becomes saturated with moisture, usually in two to three days.

Dry the hide: Position the hide so that fluid can easily drain from it. The salt will serve to remove most of the moisture from the hide in 10 to 14 days. If needed, hang the hide after salt treatment until thoroughly dry.

B. Soaking and cleaning

Before tanning, the hide must be softened and cleaned thoroughly so it is free of flesh and grease.

Materials:

- 5- to 10-gallon nonmetallic container such as a wooden barrel, plastic garbage can or earthen crock. Never use a metal container, as the salt and tanning chemicals will react with the metal.
- Large smooth board
- Scraping tool such as an old hacksaw blade
- Baking soda or Borax-available at local grocery stores
- Dishwashing soap
- Stirring paddle
- Single-edged knife

Step Outdoors

1. Soak the skin in several changes of clear cool water. While a skin must be soaked until soft, do not allow it to stay wet longer than necessary because the hair may start to slip. Soaking time depends upon the condition of the skin; some skins require only about two hours while others need a much longer time.
2. When the skin begins to soften, lay it on a smooth board and begin working over the flesh side to break up the adhering tissue and fat. (To work the skin, hold the skin taut and pull it back and forth over the edge of a board.) All dried skins have a shiny tight layer of tissue that must be broken up and entirely removed; this can be done by alternately scraping and soaking the hide. Take care not to injure the true skin or expose the hair roots, especially on thin skins. A good tool for scraping the tissue is a metal edge with dull saw teeth or with notches filed in it. An old hacksaw blade works well.

C. Tanning

The best results for home tanning can probably be achieved by using tanning agents that are available commercially in home tanning kits. For those wishing to make their own tanning solutions, three procedures are given below.

Tanning Solutions:

- **Salt and alum tanning** is the least expensive method and probably the most common of the three.
- **Alcohol and turpentine tanning** is a simple but less common method best suited for small fur skins.
- **Brain tanning** offers a simple old-fashioned process for those who are more adventurous.

1. Salt and Alum Tanning

This is an old, widely used method for fur skin tanning. When properly carried out, it produces skins with stretch and flexibility. However, alum tanned skins often come out stiff and hard and must be worked repeatedly or sometimes re-tanned.

Materials:

- Ammonia alum (ammonium aluminum sulfate) or potash alum (potassium aluminum sulfate) - may be available at local pharmacy, farm supply store or through taxidermy supply catalogs
- Washing soda (crystallized sodium carbonate)-available in laundry section of many supermarkets

Step Outdoors

- Salt (non-iodine)
- Flour (if applying as a paste)
- Brush or scraper knife
- Borax

Step 1: Prepare a salt-alum tanning solution by dissolving 1 pound of ammonia alum or potash alum in 4 liters of water. Dissolve 4 ounces of washing soda and 8 ounces of salt in 2 liters of water. Pour the soda-salt solution very slowly into the alum solution while stirring vigorously. The soda-salt solution must be poured slowly enough to prevent an overflow of foam from the container.

Step 2: Immerse the skin in the tanning solution for 2 to 5 days, depending upon its thickness. Two days should be sufficient for a rabbit skin, while a deer hide may require up to 5 days. Since a hide cannot easily be over-tanned using this process, it would be better to leave the hide in solution too long rather than not long enough.

Step 3: Rinse the hide clean in 4 liters of water containing about 1 ounce of Borax. Rinse again in clean water. Put the skin on a smooth board and use a dull edge to press out most of the water. Proceed to the oiling and finishing process.

2. Alcohol and Turpentine Tanning

This method is best suited and perhaps the easiest for small fur skins (rabbit and squirrel). Although simple, alcohol and turpentine tanning is a method more valuable for preserving hides than for producing quality skins.

Materials:

- Large-mouthed gallon jar with screw top lid
- Wood alcohol (methanol paint remover) - available at local hardware stores
- Turpentine-available at local hardware stores
- Dishwashing soap or laundry detergent

Step 1: Mix the tanning solution in the jar, add equal parts wood alcohol and turpentine to cover a small fur skin.

Step 2: Immerse the skin in the solution and secure the lid. Shake solution each day, for 7 to 10 days.

Step 3: Remove the skin and wash it in soap to remove the alcohol, turpentine and grease.

Step 4: Rinse the skin well several times to remove the detergent. Dry the skin by squeezing, not wringing. When the skin is partly dry, proceed to the oiling and finishing process.

Step Outdoors

D. Oiling and Finishing

Finish by rubbing a mixture of egg whites and olive oil into the flesh side of the skin until it is soft.

EXTENSION

You can try to tan deer hides or other larger animals. With a little research on methods participants who are more skilled might try brain tanning.

REFERENCE

www.state.tn.us/twra/pdfs/tanninghides.pdf