

## How to Tan Rabbit Hides

The small size, variable colors, patterns and textures of rabbit skins make them a perfect for the home tanner. Various tanning agents are available commercially in kits. For those wishing to make their own tanning solutions, Salt and Alum tanning is the least expensive method and probably the most common. Small pelt tanning is neither excessively time consuming, difficult, nor expensive. Home tanning costs very little and requires minimal equipment. You'll find the biggest investment will be your time and energy. However, the rewards are enjoyable and often profitable. If you have even the slightest inclination to make full use of your rabbit hobby, consider tanning hides!

### Rabbit Age

The main problem you will face is what age to butcher the rabbits. Younger rabbits have small, thin pelts and most rabbit-raisers process their rabbits for meat at 8-12 weeks of age. A factor to consider is the seasonal cycle a rabbit's hide goes through. The skin (leather) is often depleted of nutrients to grow the plush winter coat, thus yielding thin leather; while the summer pelt will have thicker skin, but thinner fur. Thus the best skins are taken from fully mature rabbits in winter. We found a happy medium holding back young rabbits with the best coats to grow out into winter, until about 4 months of age. The result is both a larger fur and thicker leather easy to work with.

### Preparing the Skins

Once a rabbit has been killed and the head removed, suspend it by both back legs to allow the blood to drain. The animal is then 'flayed', a term referring to the act of removing the hide from the carcass. To perform this, simply cut the skin around each hind foot and carefully slit the hide inside each leg from hock to anus. Strip the skin from the carcass by gently pulling downward toward the rabbit's head. Use your fingers or a sharp knife to loosen any difficult spots. The freshly flayed hide, also known as a 'green' skin, is now 'cased' with the fur on the inside and the flesh on the outside. Let the cased hide soak in cold water while you finish dressing out and storing the meat.

Take the soaking hides and thoroughly rinse them in cold water to cool. Don't worry about any remaining fat or flesh at this point. Concentrate on washing all the blood out of the skin, since any that remains will stain the leather dark brown after tanning. Soap or detergent is not needed. Carefully squeeze the excess water from the hide. *Never wring or twist the fur!*

Thoroughly rinsed green hides can be preserved for tanning at a later time. We store our hides in the freezer until we have enough to tan an entire batch. Make sure *all* body heat is cooled from the skins, and that excess water has been pressed out. Cut the skin in half from shoulders to rump. Then, fold in half lengthwise, skin-to-skin, and roll *with* the direction of hair growth. Seal in a Ziploc gallon size freezer bag (about four hides fit in each gallon bag) squeezing out as much air as possible to prevent freezer burn. When ready to tan, simply defrost and continue with tanning steps.

### Salt and Alum Tanning

This is an old, widely used method for fur skin tanning. When properly carried out, it produces whiter, softer leather, with stretch and flexibility, and is easy to work with. The following recipe is enough 'pickle', the term for the tanning solution, to tan from six to nine skins.

#### Materials:

- 2 to 4, 5-gallon plastic buckets (depending on how many hides you have)
- 1 cup of common Alum (aluminum sulfate)–may be available at local pharmacy, farm supply store or through taxidermy supply catalogs
- 1 cup coarse or granulated Salt (not iodized)
- Knife

### First Solution-

1. Pour two gallons of room temperature water (about 70 degrees F) into each bucket, add the correct amounts of salt and Alum for each very carefully, do not allow to splash. Stir to make sure the powders are completely dissolved before adding the skins.
2. Immerse the skins, one at a time, in the pickle and swish around with a stick or your gloved hand, working the solution into the fur and skin. Two days should be sufficient for a rabbit skin to remain in the solution, stirring them at least twice a day. 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. If the pelts tend to float, weight them down using a plate or jar filled with water.
3. After two days, squeeze out the excess pickle, *set aside for use in the Second Solution*, and rinse in cold water.

### **Fleshing**

'Fleshing' is the process of removing the fatty tissue and flesh to expose the leather to the chemical action of the pickle. To us, fleshing is the most difficult part of the tanning process. The flesh separates more readily at the rump section, so start there and peel toward the neck. A knife can be used to scrape and loosen difficult areas on the belly and legs. *Be careful* not to peel too deep, this tears the leather and exposes the root hairs, but do try to get as much tissue off as possible. When finished, rinse the hides in cool water and squeeze out the excess.

### Second Solution-

1. Add the same amount of Alum and salt to the First Solution you set aside. Follow the same mixing procedure.
2. Put the pelts in the solution, one at a time, working each hide to coat it with the pickle. Keep the skins soaking at room temperature for seven days, stirring at least twice per day.
3. If you'd like, test for doneness after a week by boiling a small piece of hide for a few minutes. A well-tanned skin will show little or no change, but return for another week if it curls up or becomes hard and rubbery.

### **Drying**

After the pelts are done, remove them from the pickle and squeeze out the excess liquid. Take care to discard the mixture where animals can't drink it and it won't contaminate ground water. Next, wash each pelt thoroughly with a *mild* detergent, such as Eucalan Wool Wash made specifically for use with natural fibers. Then, rinse the pelt several times in lukewarm water, squeezing out the excess. Hang the pelts *in the shade* to dry. It will take from six hours to two days for the pelts to dry, depending on humidity, temperature and thickness of leather.

### **Breaking the Skin**

Partially dried hides are stretched, or 'broken', to soften the leather. While the skin is still damp, pull the pelt in all directions, working a very small area at a time. You will see the leather begin to turn white and soften. If the skin becomes too dry, wet it with water and a sponge, called 'damping back', until pliable enough to stretch again. Be firm as you pull, but *do not* use too much force or the skin will tear. Continue working until the pelt remains soft as it dries. If you wish, the broken hide may be tacked to a board to encourage it to dry flat.

### **Finishing and Storage**

After the pelt is soft and has dried, you can brush the fur with a small baby brush, if you'd like. Then, massage mink oil or a leather conditioner/preservative, like Lexol, into the leather. As a final and optional step, you may buff the leather with pumice or fine grit sandpaper to give it a velvety feel. Like all leather, rabbit fur breathes. Therefore, do not store your finished rabbit pelts in airtight containers. We keep ours in a cardboard box; add a lavender sachet for a pleasant aromatic bug repellent. Enjoy the many unique handicrafts possible with your beautifully tanned rabbit fur pelts!