

Tanning Goat Skins at Home

**AUTHOR: Helen Simmonds,
"Rowan Park", NSW.**

Many goat growers have been asked to try their hand at tanning goat skins, either for their own home, or for craft workers who are willing to pay a reasonable price for just the right skin. They are also useful for demonstrations at field days, where they incur no health regulation problems, no feeding, or clean-up afterwards.

Leather is the tanned skin of an animal, the fleece having been chemically removed. Most goats, dairy, feral, boer and cashmere, produce fibre from two types of follicles in the skin. The primary follicles produce thick medullated fibre, usually called hair. The more numerous secondary follicles produce fine non-medullated fibres known as "down". When the fibre is removed the subsequent "grain" can be seen in the leather. Angora goats have only one type of follicle to produce their long lustrous fibre, therefore the grain from this type of goat leather is different from the others.

Most home tanners do not want to remove the fleece from the skin, that would defeat the purpose! There are books and products on the market, in produce stores, horse equipment suppliers, and via the phone book, giving excellent information on home tanning, as well as the wherewithall to tan skins. For more information, see "A Handbook on Knives, Skinning and Tanning" by John Leidreiter.

Apart from the completely "home product", there are two methods of producing tanned skins. One leaves the skin with a bluish coloured back, and is machine washable, the other leaves the skin soft and white, but it must be dry-cleaned.

When removing the skin from the goat, try using a compressor to blow the skin from the animal. Cut a very small hole in the lower leg and insert the nozzle, the carcase will swell up and when let down will be much easier to skin, especially if you are inexperienced or not very strong. Flaying by hand needs a great deal of care not to cut the skin, and not to leave any meat or connective tissue attached.

The alternative is to acquire skins from the abattoir. They are usually available at a nominal cost. Also, the animal is no longer there! Most abattoirs have converted to mechanised drum-type skin-pullers, rather than flaying by hand. The skins may have some small cuts, and be presented as a cylindrical, rather than a flat skin.

Skins decompose very rapidly, so cleaning and salting must be done immediately. In an emergency, the skin may be frozen for a day or so before salting.

Step 1.

The skin must be cleaned, that is removal of any pieces of flesh or connective tissue, before salting. Ordinary coarse cooking salt, flossie fine salt, but not pool salt may be used. Cut off any tag ends of skin, and spread a layer of salt over the skin, fold the sides to the middle, then roll up loosely. See photos 1 and 2.

Step 2.

Place in an orange bag or similar, and hang to drip in a cool, shady, airy place. Next day add more salt, and replace as before in the bag. See photo 3.

Step 3.

A nine litre plastic garbage bin is a suitable container for soaking the skins in the tanning solution. This size may hold three average sized skins. Soak for no longer than three days if using the "blue" method. See photo 4.

Step 4.

Wash the skin to clean the fleece when the chemical reaction is finished, in ordinary dishwashing liquid, then stretch and straighten the skin, and peg out to dry on a piece of chicken wire, or similar. Paint on the lubricant, or neats foot oil, to soften the skin, and let it dry for a week or more. See photo 5.

Step 5

When the skin is stiff and dry, spread it on a work area at a comfortable height and nail it down. A circular sanding disc on an electric drill makes "breaking" the skin very easy. Careful use of wire brushes, or discs, gives a very good finish. This is not the way the traditionalists work, but for beginners it does help. To finish the skin, fold in half, and mark and cut each side to the same shape. Cutting from the skin side with a sharp knife, tends to avoid cutting the fleece as well.

Boer, and boer cross skins are heavier than other breeds, and make firmer floor mats, i.e. they have more "substance". Feral, dairy and cashmere skins are lighter, but still make good mats. Angora skins are the lightest of any, therefore quite delicate, and are useful as trim, but may not take hard wear and tear.