

## **Preserving Skins 101**

from <http://VermontNaturalSheepskins.com>

We often get questions about how best to preserve skins after slaughter, to keep them stabilized before they can be tanned. We prefer receiving salted skins.

### **First remove the skin with care:**

Immediately after slaughter, carefully remove the skin from the carcass. It is best to pull the skin rather than using a knife, to avoid punctures and tears. Ask your butcher to take similar care if someone else is doing the slaughter for you.

***Do not wash*** the skin before preserving it. Adding moisture will encourage the growth of bacteria and slow the curing process.

### ***Allow the skin to drain and cool.***

Cut off ears, remove the tail, and trim around any areas with excessive tags (manure that has formed clumps in the wool), particularly in the rump area. Remove excess flesh or fat from the skin by pulling or gently scraping. Do not try to scrape down to the bare skin - just pull off any big chunks the size of a golf ball or larger. If legs are in sleeves (tubes) leave them that way, being careful to salt them completely (see below). Remove hooves and shank bones if the butcher left these on.

**DO NOT over-trim the perimeter of the hide.** We need a certain amount of excess skin on the legs and in the underarm and udder/crotch areas because we physically nail hides to boards for drying. The extra skin in these margins gives us something to nail into. All hides are trimmed to a final clean shape as part of our process.

### **How to salt-cure a skin:**

(If you have frozen skins they will need to be fully salt cured before shipping - see below.)

Before slaughter day you will need an ample supply of *granulated* salt, which you can buy at your local feed store. A 50-pound bag

should cost about \$6-\$7, and will be enough to cure 8-12 skins depending on their size. You'll also want to wear rubber or nylon gloves as salt is irritating to skin.

Some butchers will offer to pre-salt skins for you. However, you should not rely on them to do a thorough job. This pre-salting will hold the skins for a day or two until you can pick them up and finish the salt treatment.

1. In a place that is shaded from direct sunlight, lay the skin, flesh side up, on a non-metallic surface tilted slightly to allow fluid to drain off. We use wooden pallets propped with one end on a cinder block. The open slats allow air to circulate from both sides. (**DO NOT allow skins to touch any metal, including pallet nails!** Metal rust residue makes permanent black stains on the skin when tanned.)

2. If skinned in "sleeves" i.e. the legs are not cut but turned inside out, you can cut these open, not off. Or leave them whole and turn them skin-side out, being sure they are thoroughly salted.

3. While wearing gloves, rub the salt into the entire surface of the skin. Work methodically and pay special attention to the edges as these will tend to fold and curl back on themselves - you may have to stretch the edge out with one hand while administering salt with the other. Don't just pour the salt on - rub it in thoroughly. Use a generous amount of salt; 5 pounds per skin is about average.

4. Allow skins to cure in this state for at least 2 weeks - more if stored at very cold temperatures, as chilling or freezing will slow the curing process. A well cured salted skin will feel firm but will be completely flexible, like cured bacon. Overly dried skins become stiff and brittle. Well dried skins can keep for months.

5. When the skins are cured, flip them over and check the fiber side for debris. Burdock and thistle heads, nettles, blackberry canes, wood chips, excessive hay, even dried leaves or stalks from weeds entangled in the wool will cause felting when the skins are washed. You should "skirt" the fiber and pick out as much of this debris as possible for best results. For long wool skins especially, the fiber side of the skin should resemble the same level of cleanliness as if you were going to

send it off to a yarn mill. (Small amounts of hay chaff is natural and can be combed out mechanically at the end of the process).

6. To store the cured skins, fold them outside edges to the middle (skin to skin, like an empty animal lying on its back) then roll from the head down. Store skins out of sunlight in a spot with good air circulation. A shelf in the shady corner of a barn or shed works well. Monitor skins closely for signs of rodent or bug activity to prevent damage.

If there will be more skins later, then putting each skin into a paper feed sack can put cured skins "on hold" and save shipping costs. To ship salted hides, wrap in either empty paper sacks (grain sacks work well) or plastic bags and place in your shipping box.

In every shipment, include a [customer information sheet](#).

Place the sheet in a plastic bag to protect it from moisture. If shipping multiple boxes label each clearly on the outside with your name and "box 1 of \_".

*If you have previously frozen your skins:*

Lay the skins out on a non-metallic surface, out of sunlight, and allow them to defrost. Keep a close eye on the skins as they thaw and gently unroll or peel them apart as they do so, applying salt to each section of skin as soon as it is thawed. Check skins every hour and keep unrolling and applying salt along the skin surface.

Frozen skins will release much more water than fresh ones initially do, so you will have to change the salt on the second day. Scrape off the wet salt and reapply fresh salt to the surface of the skin and allow to fully cure, about 2 weeks. Then store and ship as above.