



# Icelandic Sheep Breeders of North America

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## Preparing Your Sheepskin for Tanning

Lee Bates

As a sheep producer, you are looking for Value-Added products to enhance your butcher-lambs value. Have you considered having your pelts tanned after butchering? This process requires some time, on your part, but is very worthwhile in adding value to the lambs you have chosen to sell for slaughtering. This procedure is not for those lambs sold at livestock auctions, but for those you sell to customers for filling their freezers full of delicious, young, tender lamb that far exceeds that imported product also called lamb that is usually of one year of age and has been in cold storage for a long time before arriving in the U.S. and your local market.



First of all, find a good butcher who is skilled at butchering lambs and is good to work with. Your butcher needs to be practiced at skinning your animals with minimal use of knives for the bulk of the hide. You do not want butcher cuts that compromise your lovely pelt for the tanning process. Cutting with knives is necessary to separate the skin from the body, legs and around the tail, but when the pelt is beginning to be taken off the hanging carcass, it is removed from rump to neck while the carcass is hanging upside down from the gambrel. It is fisted or punched off away from the body and usually slips easily unless the animal is very thin or is an intact male with little fat under the skin. I stay with my lambs being butchered for the entire process, so I can collect the skins and rush home with them to prepare them for lovely soft sheepskins.

There are some things you will need to have on hand before you prepare your skins for drying.

1. A sack of hay salt. It can be purchased in 50 pound sacks from your local farm feed store. There are no extra additives, so the cost is low, usually less than \$4.00 for 50 pounds. **DO NOT USE ROCK SALT!** Rock salt is for making ice cream or keeping ice melting from drives or sidewalks. Hay salt is fine grained and easy to handle. I use a washed out and dried tuna or cat-food can for my scoop to take out a portion as I heavily salt each skin.

2. Racks to dry your skins on. My husband is a handyman, and while I had been using old sturdy wooden pallets spread evenly all over our garage floor, he thought a better method would be to have 4x4 inch legs on the pallets of about 6-8 inches in height. Then, as the pallets were covered, wool side down on the wood and each skin thickly sprinkled with hay salt, at about 4-5 pounds of salt per hide, they all could be stacked taking up less floor surface space, and accomplishing the same task.

3. A dry, closed building that will be the location your skins can cure and dry in. The skins SHOULD NOT be exposed to direct sunlight, for this will cause drying and cracking of the skin. No artificial heat should be applied to hasten the process, but allow the skin to drip off and drain as the salt works at removing all the fluid from the hide. Remember, the skin is the largest organ of any living mammal's body and much fluid is retained therein. I mention having a closed building to cure them in. My first effort was in a three sided shed, and a neighbor's dogs attempted to rustle my drying sheepskin. These skins are very tempting to canines, so protect them from being damaged. Even chickens will attempt to trim the hides.



Now, you are ready to begin. With your wooden pallet laid out with the most crosspieces of wood on the upper side, carefully spread your skin out the long way onto the long way of your pallet. Drape the legs over the edges, as these will not be tanned. They also make good troughs for fluid to drain from the hide. I use plastic disposable gloves to protect my hands from the drying qualities of the salt I will be using. Using your gloved hands, push and spread the salt thickly over the legs skin and across all of the bared meat-side of the hide. There may be some fat or thin connective muscle that held the skin onto the sheep, but do not be concerned with these. With the heavy salting, this will all drain and dry and will later be buffed away when the skin is being tanned. When you are finished with one skin, work on the next and repeat this process. I stack my footed pallets to 6 or 7 high at a time. In dry summer weather, the skins may be dry enough to ship in about 2 weeks, as here in northern Idaho, our humidity is low. In the rainy season, this drying time could be up to a month in length, but whatever you do, do NOT send raw non-cured skins to your tanner, for they could spoil and be discarded as rotten product. And, your local shipping service may refuse your future business!

Many times, the wool around the neck area will be contaminated with blood. Do not wash it off or further wet the woolled hide, as this prolongs the drying time. Your tanner will be using water in his process, and that will lyse the blood stains and they will be all cleaned away.

It is imperative to process your skins immediately after butchering, as body heat can ruin a hide as well as leaving them lying in a pile in the sunlight.

When you are ready to ship your skin(s), find a sturdy cardboard box. I use those boxes that large water coolers are shipped in. I inquire at my local water distributors of those large carbuoys that are

delivered to homes and have them save the boxes for me. They flatten them and I collect many each time I go there. Two to three dried salted skins can be rolled together and fit nicely in the box. Put your name and address plus that of where you are sending them to on the box flaps in case of damage in the shipping process. Label your box and ship by U.P.S. (cheapest carrier) and after about 3 -4 months, you will receive a bill for payment, or else, the tanner will ship by C.O.D. Sometimes this is not convenient to the recipient, so I have an agreement with my tanner to bill me. Then, upon receipt of my check, he ships me my paid for beautiful sheepskins. It is a joy to open that package when they arrive. They have been carefully trimmed, are soft, clean and the leather side is soft and buffed like chamois.

I would like to encourage anyone who produces butcher lambs to try this, as you will be sold on the beauty of your product that will last for many years and be witness to some of the animals you have raised. These by-products or value-added products are what will keep us all in business, even when the market prices go so low that we cannot recover our expenses in the raising of the lambs.

I have used two tanners with success. They have reasonable prices compared to others I have researched. I list them in order of preference.

Stern Tanning Company, Inc.  
4010 W. Douglas Ave.  
Milwaukee, WI 53209  
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(877) 783-7682  
FAX (414) 578-8640  
E MAIL: [info@sterntanning.com](mailto:info@sterntanning.com)  
(updated 9/2011)

Bucks County Fur Products  
P.O. Box 204  
220 2 North Ambler Street  
Quakertown, PA 18951  
Phone # (215) 536-6614