

Care of Leather Tack and Trappings

Our topics for this week:

- **Quality leather**
- **Maintaining leather**
- **Storage of leather**

Tack is equipment for horses such as saddles, bridles, and harnesses. The best tack is made from quality vegetable tanned leather. The same is true for the best trappings for riders. Trappings are riding wear accessories. Examples include chaps, chinks, and vests. Well made tack and trappings can last a lifetime if not excessively abused and is given routine maintenance.

Leather Quality

Leather is tanned animal skin. Most leather in the U.S. comes from cattle hide. Thick, strong leather for safe tack comes from select steers, not heifers, and is vegetable tanned. Tanning makes leather more durable, pliable, and resistant to wear and rot. The most common methods of tanning are vegetable tanning and chrome tanning.

Vegetable tanning produces leather that is non-corrosive to metal, non-irritating to the skin, can be carved or molded, and is strong, if thick. Vegetable tanning is used for saddle and other tack construction. The Hermann Oak Leather Company, founded in 1881 in St. Louis, Missouri is the leading vegetable tanned leather manufacturer in the U.S. and tans only high quality steer hides.

Chrome tanning is less time-consuming and less expensive than vegetable tanning and more commonly used. It produces leather that is soft, pliable, and strong when thin. It is often used for making leather clothes.

Leather Maintenance

Well-tanned quality leather can last generations if treated properly. It should not be constantly stretched, repeatedly soaked with water, or allowed to dry out. Leather can be shaped by wetting it to create the desired shape, but must be dried slowly with gentle ventilation. It should not be heated during the drying process.

Leather should be moisturized 1 to 4 times per year with warm oil, usually a variable combination of lanolin or neatsfoot oil, mink oil, cedar oil, beeswax, and a petroleum-based solvent, and then beeswax is added to the surface. This lubricates the internal fibers and inhibits

drying leading to cracking. The frequency should be more often if exposed to moisture, drying, or dust.

The procedure I currently prefer is to wipe the leather with a microfiber cloth to remove most of the coarse dust. Next, I use a slightly damp cloth to remove the fine dust and a soft bristle tooth brush for tight corners and stitching. After the surface has been cleaned of most dirt, I moisturize with neatfoot. I prefer to apply it with a soft bristle, 2 to 4 inch, paint brush. I allow the oil to soak into the leather for 24 hours. The final step is to clean any remaining dirt that has been softened by the neatsfoot oil with saddle soap. The leather surface is gently wiped of excessive water or saddle soap and allowed to dry another 24 hours. Another layer of beeswax can be applied if more shine or better water resistance is desired.

Leather should be cleaned with a damp cloth as often as needed based on its use. Abrasion can wear the external surface of leather and small particles of grit ground into the leather can abrade internal fibers.

Storage

Leather should never be stored in a plastic bag where it would likely mold. Exposure to extreme heat and very low or high humidity should be avoided. Exposure to air and gentle ventilation reduces the risk of mildew.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Leather should be wiped clean of dirt on a regular basis.**
- 2. At least once per year, leather should be moisturized.**
- 3. Leather tack or trappings should not be stored in plastic bags or in areas with direct sunlight.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources. My new spiral-bound handbook, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling* was recently published and available from all major science book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 150 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.