

# LEATHER STORAGE

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Leather requires a bit of care for proper storage. If done well, your leather will last for years in an unused condition, ready when you need to use a special piece of leather you've been saving for just the right application.

The two major tannages are vegetable (veg) and chrome. We will address the veg tanned leather, for what applies to it is mostly true for chrome tanned.

Veg tanned leather is rather fragile. It light burns (or sunburns) upon exposure to light, just as your own skin would. The leather darkens in any areas exposed to sunlight (or any type of indoor light). Thus, if only part of the hide were exposed to light, only the exposed areas would burn, leaving the remainder intact. The intact areas would be very pale, whereas the exposed areas would be darker, with the degree of darkness determined by the amount of light received. This "burn" tends to stiffen and dry out the leather, making it a bit more difficult to work.

The other major factors are levels of heat and humidity. Humidity is problematic in many areas of the country, for too much of it tends to make mold and mildew grow on the surface of the leather. Conversely, too little moisture over extended periods of time will eventually dry rot leather, rendering it totally useless. Coupled with heat, too little or too much humidity is very destructive. Heat accelerates any growing process from molds and also speeds up the drying out process. Usually colder temperatures are less of a problem, but you don't want to freeze leather either. It can become "freezer burned" in a mild sense, becoming stiffer and more difficult to work.

**REMEMBER:** any damage sustained by leather during storage is almost always irreversible. Prevent it from happening in the first place.

**NEVER** handle your own leather unless you have clean hands!!

Ideally, leather should be stored away from light, in about 55% humidity or slightly less, at room temperature (about 65°-72° F.), and generally with a breathable protective wrapping.

With that in mind:

1. Store leather in a lightproof setting, or low light situation. **AVOID** direct light at all costs. Direct sunlight can even permeate protective wrapping paper.
2. Wrap with heavy brown protective paper to keep ambient light away.
3. Store in about 55% or slightly less humidity. Damp basements or closets should never be used

4. **NEVER wrap leather in plastic. It can't breathe and plastic wrapping can cause mold to form if tightly sealed. Mold damage is irreversible. Paper allows leather to breathe as well as keeping it clean. To keep dust off everything, drape wrapped leather with a well-laundered white bed sheet.**
5. **NEVER store leather where there are cement floors, or even cement flooring with carpeting on it. Cement acts a water magnet, seemingly holding and giving off moisture by the gallon! Therefore, KEEP leather off the floor and store it on slightly elevated shelving. Even a wooden pallet is better than the floor, but it is not really high enough off the floor to prevent moisture from creeping up into the leather**
6. **NEVER fold leather. Always roll it up to maintain its smooth appearance. There never seems to any consensus as to whether leather should be rolled up to the inside or to the outside. I generally roll it the way it came to me from the shipper, as it probably already has a "set" to it by the time you receive it. But, ALWAYS roll it from the neck to the butt, as the butt is the stiffest part of the hide and cannot withstand a sharp bend to initiate the rolling process. You may roll softer leather around a clean cardboard tube, such as carpets or paper is rolled on. When rolled up, cover the roll with protective paper, tucking in the ends of the paper around the leather edges. Tie gently with a soft string or a thin leather thong that will not bleed through the paper (oils or colors can bleed through, causing an irreversible stain). Tie gently, as the string can leave a mark on your leather.**
7. **Roll saddle woolskins with wool to the inside, beginning at the neck and rolling toward the butt. Tie gently with a soft string. For short-term storage, it's not necessary to wrap woolskins with paper, for if the "leather side" light burns a bit, it won't matter, as this will be hidden when the saddle is made. However, prolonged exposure to any kind of light (direct or indirect) should be avoided for long-term storage.**
8. **Keep oily leather (such as harness, bridle, or latigo) away from non-oily leather. Don't even stand or lay one next to the other without an impenetrable barrier in between. The oils will migrate to irrevocably stain the non-oily leather.**
9. **Keep colored leather that may bleed its color (some varieties of latigo, for instance) away from everything else. Again, place an impenetrable barrier in between.**
10. **Keep insects away from leather. Spiders like to build nests in it, flies deposit nits on leather, roaches are filthy, and some larval stages of insects like to dine on leather. The same is true for rodents and larger predators. Even household pets fall into this last category. Muddy paw prints are impossible to remove, as is mouse urine, and general dirt left behind by napping cats.**
11. **Keep unknowledgeable people away from leather. Fingerprints can last for centuries and sticky fingers from children must be avoided at all costs.**

12. **NEVER** allow metals to contact leather, as the tanning agents in both veg tanned and chrome leather are very reactive with metals. This includes all ferrous metals (iron and steel), brass, nickel, silver, copper, and bronze. Metal stains are impossible to remove and affect the working properties of leather. Most metals tend to destroy the part of the leather they have contacted.
13. **ALWYS** store rawhide carefully by itself. The salted surface will stain anything else near it and rodents love to nibble on it. Always allow it to dry thoroughly before long-term storage. Do not roll up rawhide when wet: allow to partially dry first. When still a bit flexible, begin to form into a large loose roll. “Baby-sit” rawhide as it dries, making sure it forms in the shape you need for storage while drying. Keep moisture levels very low, so rawhide does not smell like rotting flesh. Remember: rawhide is not tanned (preserved in any way), and with a little bit of moisture, it will putrefy.
14. **NEVER** mix different types of leather in the same storage bin, shelf, or area. Thus, keep the same kinds of leather together: the same tannages, the same color(s), the same levels of oiliness, etc.
15. All of the above is true for storage of scraps. Keep them in separate boxes or bins. **NEVER** put wet leather or wet rawhide into scrap boxes, lest it mold or stain other valuable scraps. Allow to dry first. You also may wish to sort scraps by size as well as leather types.

Some useful methods of leather storage are:

1. Erect heavy commercial steel shelf framing with wooden shelves that can hold a lot of weight. Leather is very heavy, especially when you have many rolls on the same structure. 4 ft depth x 5 ft width makes a good size shelf unit. Make the top shelf no taller than you can comfortably reach for a 25 lb side of leather above your head (for most people, the top shelf will be about 5-6 ft tall).
2. Lay open-ended PVC tubing, 8”-15” in diameter, on shelves in which to place paper wrapped soft leather inside. The tubing prevents the leather from being crushed. Fasten the tubes together to prevent them from rolling about. Larger leather rolls such as skirting, may not fit in tubes, so you’ll have to place the paper wrapped rolls directly on the shelves, taking care to avoid contact with the steel edges.
3. Skirting and heavy strap can be laid flat as long as there is some way of preventing light from discoloring the edges. For this type of storage, the shelves must be about 4 ft. x 8 ft. in size, necessitating very large shelves. On separate shelves, bridle, harness, and latigo may also be stored in this way.

Leather is a very expensive commodity. You must gain the greatest use of it to maximize your profits. Proper storage will prolong the life of your leather so that the next time you need just one itty bitty piece of a special leather, you’ll have it ready to go, as good as the day you received it from the tannery or shipper.