



MOTHER EARTH NEWS
ONLINE *Summit*
Practical Skills for Modern Homesteading

“Buckskin Clothing: A Beautiful Working Wardrobe From Your Backyard”

Woniya Thibeault

*** FULL TRANSCRIPT ***

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MOTHER EARTH NEWS
ONLINE Summit
Practical Skills for Modern Homesteading

Hosted By



Marjory Wildcraft

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Woniya Thibeault

Buckskin Clothing: A Beautiful Working Wardrobe From Your Backyard

Great Big Ideas & Takeaways:

- Discover why buckskin is so ideal for making clothes.
- How to make clothes that last 10X longer on the homestead.
- The tanning process—explained in a nutshell.
- Patterns made EASY: using your body or existing clothes.
- How to put together your own buckskin garments.
- The best tools for sewing buckskin.

About The Speaker:

From the first time Woniya Thibeault saw buckskin clothing, she was hooked. Long fascinated with both the natural world and off-grid living, tanning hides and making them into clothing seemed a natural way to merge these interests and apply them to everyday life.

Woniya has been living off grid, growing most of her own food, storing it without refrigeration, and teaching classes on these and other ancestral and homestead arts for decades. With both a Masters in Environmental Science and a lifetime of practical living, Woniya brings a wealth of experience to her teaching and writing.

Her first book "Buckskin Revolution" is now available in PDF form and hopefully, soon, in print.

You're Invited To Learn More Here:

<http://www.buckskinrevolution.com>



Marjory:

Hello and welcome to the Mother Earth News Online Homesteading Summit. My name's Marjory Wildcraft and I'm your host. Now I want to tell you a quick story about buckskin. I go to a lot of primitive skills gatherings and this is where people who are really I would say deep off grid living gather to learn skills and trade skill and mostly you see people that you would expect that spend a lot of time out in the back country, but there's this one woman named Janet who shows up all the time and Janet is perfectly made up, her hair is always perfectly done and her clothes are immaculate.

Janet lives in Southern California and is normally hobnobbing with types in Hollywood. She's retired now but used to do a lot with very, very, very upscale fashion clothing type things and I said, "Janet, what are you doing here? This just doesn't compute for me at all," and she said, "You know what brought me into this, Marjory? One day, I touched some buckskin that had been brain tanned in the traditional," and she said, "I knew instantly that I had to find out more about this material and the people who made it," and she shows up all the time at these gatherings. In fact, we call her "Cat mom."

Woniya going to talk about buckskin and the magic of it and the beautiful utility and practicality of it in this presentation. I just want to give you some backdrop for it really is an amazing material to create. The first time that Woniya Thibeault saw buckskin clothing, she was hooked and she's long been fascinated with the natural world and homesteading and off grid living, tanning hides and making them to clothing seemed like a natural way to merge these interests for her. She's been living off grid growing most of her own food, storing it and living without refrigeration and teaching classes on this for decades. She's not just kind of a back woods down home girl but she also has a Master's Degree in environmental science so she's definitely got the book learning that goes with that. She brings a wealth of experience to her teaching and writing.

She's actually right in the process of writing a book called "Buckskin Revolution" which we'll talk about a little bit more at the end. Let me let you get started with this presentation with Woniya.

Woniya:

Hi everyone. Welcome and thank you so much for joining me in today's talk about buckskin clothing. Now I want to state right from the outset that I'm really biased. I think buckskin clothing is one of the best things going. I'm super enthusiastic about it, it's formed major part of my life for the last couple of decades learning about buckskin, how to make buckskin, teaching people hide tanning and also figuring out all of the ways to make the best possible buckskin clothing that I'm really going to want to wear day in and day out and it's gotten to really serve my life and teaching others to do the same.

This talk is going to be a real quick run through everything relate to buckskin, so it's not meant to be actual step by step instruction because that's just too much



for a talk of this nature but it's going to be an introduction, give you the feel for it, and then at the end there's going to be some resources to follow up for more information on hide tanning and actually making clothing, so try to stick with me. I hope it's not too much information or too overwhelming but I really hope that you'll at least get the flavor and end up feeling as enthusiastic and excited about buckskin as I am right now.

I feel like a valid question is what is a talk about buckskin doing in a home grown food summit. Well granted clothing and food are 2 different things but I do feel like they're really related and that they're both things that we generally use in our everyday life and are pretty important to us in an ongoing basis, and I feel like buckskin is kind of a natural progression of wanting to do more for yourself, be more in touch with the things you rely on in your daily life, so whether that be growing the food you eat or making the clothes on your back, I feel like they're naturally really related, and then also, in terms of sustainability and ecological impact, buckskin is one of the least ecologically impactful styles of clothing out there.

You hear a lot these days about eco-clothing and eco-fabrics and mostly people are talking about organic cottons or bamboo or hemp and all of these are still industrial products, so I'm not going to lie to you, making buckskin is a lot of physical work. It really is. It's difficult. However, if you look at the amount of labor required to make your own clothing in any other way sustainably, look at growing a field full of flax, processing that all into fiber, spinning that fiber into linen thread, weaving that thread into cloth and then cutting and sewing your own clothing, that's going to be far, far more labor than making buckskin, so while it is a lot of effort, I also think that in terms of rewards, it's actually the fastest way to get really dependable clothing and then it's also going to last a lot longer than any of those clothings.

In addition to it being a really nice way to stay connected to the landscape around you and being a really ecologically sound choice, buckskin is also a wonderful material to wear. It's incredibly durable. I can usually go through a pair in a season working hard on the farm, but I have buckskin pants that are 12 years and are still running strong, so it's very, very durable, it's also very comfortable to wear because it moves and gives with your body in a way that other cloths don't. If you think about it, it was grown to be the skin of a mammal just like yourself so naturally, it's going to have a lot of the properties that we're looking for in our clothing. Some amount of stretch and give, durability, protection from the environment, some amount of breathability.

Now granted, buckskin is going to breath less than other woven cloths but it's going to breath a lot more and be better on your skin than any other type of leather from bark tan leather and certainly to industrial tanned leather which is a pretty gnarly product with a lot of really toxic materials going into it, some of which remain on the leather in contact with your skin if you're wearing it.



Buckskin is also a natural choice for outdoor activities. Again, because it both keeps the outside environment out but allows you to breathe, it's going to be much more comfortable for really vigorous outside work. It's no coincidence that buckskin is the clothes that people have been wearing for countless thousands of years in this country and that homesteaders and mountain men and adventurers exploring the west chose to wear over industrialized cloth when they came west, and did I mention that it's beautiful? Seriously, this stuff is incredible. It looks amazing, it smells amazing, it feels amazing on your skin, it gives and moves with your body in a way no cloth ever can and a part that feels important to me too is this substance is a deep part of our history as humans.

On every continent, well every populated continent, people were making something similar to buckskin and wearing it, so I feel like it's a part of our deep ancestral heritage and our memory. There's something about having it on your skin and smelling it in your nose and wearing it that really seems to cue you in on what it is to be human and connect us to our past, so I think it's just so amazing on so many different levels.

Now we're about to launch into the nitty gritty of hide tanning and making clothes out of buckskin but before we do, I just wanted to say a quick note which is that don't get intimidated by all the hard work of making buckskin. It is possible to buy buckskin and not do your own tanning so you can make buckskin clothes even if you don't feel quite up for tanning. If this is something you're interested in, then please check out my website with the information given at the end of the slide and you can contact me and I can put you in touch with hide tanners that might be near you that you could look into getting your own hides from, and without further ado, let's move forward.

A quick overview of today's talk, we're going to look at how to obtain deer hides and then how to turn them into buckskin. Again, this is going to be an overview but enough to give you an idea of the process. We're going to talk about clothing design and give you some inspiration, we're going to talk about creating patterns, laying out those patterns on the buckskin, putting it all together, and then the care and feeding of your buckskin clothing, so what to do with your buckskin clothes once you've got them.

The first up of course is how do you get your hands on some hides. Well obviously, if you're a hunter, this is the easiest and also, this can be the best source because it's not uncommon for hunters to do a poor job of skinning where they end up slicing the hide a bit, so if you're skinning your own, this is the best case scenario. Now in order to get the best hides, it's a little counter intuitive because you actually want to make a few initial cuts and then put down your knife and use your hands to pull and push the hide off of the deer like you're seeing in this slide, so you do the initial cuts from the anus up the belly, up the mid line to the neck and then out what would essentially be like the



armpits, from that mid line cut out the armpits of each leg and then around the hooves.

Essentially you've got the whole thing cut so that it can be peeled off and then you set down your knife and you peel the hide off like this. Getting in there with your knuckles is a really great way.

If you're not so fortunate as to be able to skin your own hides, another thing you can do is actually go to areas where there are a lot of hunting and you can actually setup a skinning station in one of the access points, and it's not unusual for hunters to know that you're there and then bring their hides there and you skin the animal in exchange for keeping the hide. If you don't live in an area where there's good access to hunting, another thing is to go to game processors. These are people who hunters bring their hides to or their animals to for butchering and then you can sometimes get the hides from them for a nominal rate. It's good to kind of check around because some of them are going to end up slicing the hides more than others and you always want to look for the least sliced hides.

Another thing is to put out barrels in areas where there's hunting labelled hides and hope that hunters will see the barrels and leave the hides there for you. Short of any of these things, there are also some wholesale hide distributors who it's sometimes possible to buy hides from.

Now that you've your hands on some hides, what are you going to do with them? For starters, it's important to mention that if you're not going to tan them right away, you need some viable way of storing your hides. A freezer is a really easy way but if you've got more than just a few hides or not a lot of room in your freezer, then this might not be an option because they take up a lot of room. Another option is you can drive them, so for this, you're going to want to flesh them and I'll go into that in a little more detail in a second, and then you can dry them by either tacking them out to say a piece of plywood or aside of a building and letting them dry in the sun in that way and then they dry flat and stretched out and then you can roll them up in a nice bundle.

The problem with this technique though is that they do become harder to scrape if you dry them with the grain on because once it's dried on then it's always going to take a little bit more force to get off than if it had never been dried, and then also it's possible for these hides to get chewed on by insects and rodents and whatnot. Hide beetles and wool moths will both attack the hair on buckskin hides so it's a bit of a liability. However, another great technique is what we call the "Wet salting method." In this way, the hide never has to dry out and is protected from both critters and rot, so the way to do this again is to flesh the hide.

To flesh a hide, it's kind of similar to scraping which we'll see in a couple of more



slides. You're going to throw the hide over a beam and you're going to push all of the flesh and fat off with ideally a long somewhat dull scraper, like the scrapers you'll see in the following slides. Using a draw knife or a knife is another method but it's a little more time consuming and you're more likely to actually slice the hide in some way, so I really recommend a dullish fleshing knife over a beam. Once you've done that, you're going to salt the hide anywhere from 1 to 2 quarts of salt on a good sized hide, so you're going to lay out the hide and you're going to work the salt in from the flesh side, so spreading that out nicely and then ideally, let the hide sit and drain for a while.

It's really nice for this to be on a slanted surface, like a slightly sloped hillside or a piece of plywood propped up on one or a slanted driveway because that salt is going to draw some moisture out of the hide and it's going to kind of drain off for a while, so it's nice to let it drain off rather than packaging it up so that it's kind of sitting in its own juices. Once it's drained, you're going to fold it up. I like to fold it down the spine so that it's flesh side to flesh side, nicely matched up, and then I just roll the whole thing up and I put it in either a tote or in a plastic bag, in a tote or in a 5-gallon bucket. My favorite method is both a bag and then a tote because that really both protects it and it keeps it from drying out.

The idea of this is to keep those hides moist and pliable but preserved, and in this state, they can last anywhere from 1 to up to 4 years although they're going to be a lot better if you get to them within a year or 2. Then once you're ready to actually tan the hides, if you salted them, you're going to want to rinse them for a while to get that salt out of it. If they're just frozen or dried, then you're just going to be getting them nice and pliable again, so either soaking or thawing out and then it's time to launch into tanning.

The first step is to get the hide ready for the scraping process, and we do that usually by soaking it. Now what we're doing with buckskin is we're actually removing the top layer of the skin, what we call the grain surface, and that's that shiny layer that you see on belt leather, boot leather, that kind of thing, so we're removing that entirely and in order to do that, what we need is something that will break down the glues between that top layer, the grain, and the middle part of the hide known as the dermis. There's a couple of different things that do that. One is bacteria. If you soak the hide in just straight water, then eventually the bacteria will start to work on the hide and break down some of those glues and get it ready for scraping.

The way that you tell that it's ready for scraping is what we call the "Hair slipping" and that's when you pull on the tips of the hair that it slides out of the follicle easily with just a little tug rather than having to really yank on it. If you use the bacterial soak method then you have to be really on the ball with not letting it soak too long because it can start to rot and you also need to know that this is a, well let's say "Fragrant" process. Your friends and neighbors might not be all that excited to be around your hide scraping.



If you want to get the hide ready to scrape without the aroma, another thing you can do is soak the hide in an alkaline solution. There's a lot of different things that are alkalines that you can use. Hydrated lime is a great one and that's what's happening in this slide here. Someone is preparing hydrated lime solution to soak the hide in and what that looks like is just type S lime from a hardware store. Make sure it's hydrated lime, not agricultural lime, and then you soak that with water probably about, I would say anywhere between 1 and 3 quarts of lime powder to say 5 to 10 gallons of water, or you can use a solution of wood ash and water. Hard wood is better for this.

It's a little bit trickier to get the alkalinity right. There are directions for this in the Deer Skins Into Buckskins book that I'll talk about at the end of the show, or you can use actual lye that you would buy for say drain cleaners, so often sold under the name "Red devil." This is sodium hydroxide, or you can also buy potassium hydroxide. Both of these are a strong chemical that again, it's possible to get too strong and burn the hide or yourself so you're going to want to make sure that you know what you're doing ahead of time and have a way to test the alkalinity. One of the standard ways is to soak an egg or a potato in the solution and if an area of the egg or the potato is exposed above the water to about the size of a quarter, that's about the right alkalinity. Short of that, you can also get alkalinity test strips.

You're going to get your hide soaking and then again, you're going to be checking it daily to see when that hair is starting to slip, and it's temperature dependent so it's going to go faster when it's warmer temperatures but usually I figure on anywhere from 3 to 6 days soaking and more towards the short side if it's warmer.

Once you've got the hair slipping and you can see in that hide being held up in the background that a lot of the hair has already been slipped from that hide, you're going to throw it over a beam, and now this is the same thing you're going to use for the fleshing process which I mentioned earlier if you are going to be salting your hides, so you can use a log or half a log or a piece of PVC. Usually if you're using a log then a hard wood is better because it's hard but if all you have is soft wood, then the PVC is a good solution, so I have about an 8-inch diameter piece of PVC over these logs here and the tools these guys are using to scrape are planer blades from a planing mill at a lumber yard, and what these are, they're narrow long blades and they're quite sharp when they first come off of the planing mill so you actually want to dull them down.

You want them to be sharp enough that they grip the grain layer as you're pushing but that they don't actually slice your hide, so they should be so dull that you can actually push on them with your thumb with pretty good pressure without it cutting your thumb. This is really critical or you'll slice your hide to ribbons, so now you're going to throw your hide over the beam with the hair



side up and you're going to scrape using a fair amount of force and remove that top layer of the skin, and it should a little bit like this. Here you can see that it's not just the hair but it's that top layer of skin that's being removed from the hide.

Now this is a little tricky to get to where you can see when you've gotten all the grain off and this is something that comes with experience, but this is the aim going over the entire hide, removing that grain layer and all of the hair and then once you're done, you flip the hide over and you scrape it on the opposite side, the flesh side. There's a fine membrane on the flesh side that you usually can't get off with fleshing because of the cushioning of the hair on the backside, but once you removed all of the hair, then you can scrape the other side and get off this fine membrane. Now this stage is less critical to the tanning than the grain removal and it doesn't take quite as much pressure so it's kind of a nice break once you finish the scraping to do the membrane.

Now if you soaked just in water then you can go straight from the scraping right towards the dressing stage, but if you soaked it in an alkaline solution, then you need that hide to come back to neutral or even a little on the acidic side before you can tan it. Here I am soaking that hide in a stream, so running water is certainly ideal for rinsing a hide but if you don't have access to a stream, you can also do it in a 5-gallon bucket or a garbage can or a bath tub. Ideally, you would have the water running a little bit so that it's constantly moving, and warm water is going to rinse it faster than cold water. I also sometimes add a little bit of vinegar to my rinse water because that's going to help neutralize the alkalinity of the bucking solution that use. I'm not sure if I mentioned, but soaking the hide in an alkaline solution as opposed to water is known as "Bucking" it.

Once you've got your hide back to neutral, now you're going to put it in a dressing. Now this is where the term "Brain tanned buckskin" comes from because one of the traditional dressings is brains mixed in water. It can be the deer's brains or it can be another animal's brains. Another thing that you can use as a substitute which I often do because it's a lot easier to get are egg yolks and water. I use about a dozen egg yolks for one medium sized deer hide. You can also make a solution with oil and soap mixed with water.

The common factor with all of these different dressings is that what you're going for is fat that is emulsifiable in water, so if you think about typical oils, they're going to separate from water, right? You're going to see a film of oil on top of the water, but brains and egg yolks both contain natural emulsifying agents that help those fats break up into small particles and actually be suspended in the water. Now soap is trying to do the same thing if you're using a soap and oil solution. It needs to be a lightweight oil, like an olive oil or a neatsfoot oil, fish oil is traditional in some places but some very lightweight oil that's going to be dissolvable in water, and my favorite is actually a combination



of egg yolks and a little bit of oil and a little bit of soap and water.

Now you're going to be soaking your hide and the idea is to get the hide as fully penetrated with the solution as possible, so what that's going to look like is interspersing soaking the hide in water, taking out and wringing the solution through and out of the hide and putting it back in the dressing, doing this a few stages. Usually, I do it 3 times. Here we have a demonstration of the wringing. You're going to throw the hide over a bar like this and then make it into a loop and then roll up the sides of the loop so you end up looking like you've got 2 doughnuts slung over a branch. Then you're going stick a stick or pipe or some sturdy thing about 2 to 3 feet long through that loop and you're going to twist it and wring that solution through, so you're going for pushing as much of the solution through as possible and that's forcing it past the fibers of the hide to get all of those oils lining all of the fibers.

Once you've got the hide thoroughly dressed, it's time to soften. Now this is where the real process of tanning comes in. The word "Brain tanning" is a bit of a misnomer because it's not actually the brains themselves that are tanning the hide, it's your physical effort that's making it turn into soft, fluffy, stretchy, beautiful piece of leather. What the fats are doing is they're lubricating the fibers so that you can keep them moving. The trick here is to keep those fibers constantly stretched and pulled and moving past one another as the hide goes from wet to dry, and that's what lets it remain soft and stretchy. The hide is full of these glues and if 2 fibers of the hide stay next to one another long enough to dry, then those glues are going to glue the 2 fibers together, but if you keep them constantly back and forth past one another, then they can never get glued down, so that's what you're after in the softening process.

What she's doing here is pulling the hide back and forth over a cable which is stretching the hide and to do this kind of softening, you're keeping it constantly moving, going over a different part of the hide around the edges, up and down the spine, across the spine from side to side and every which way.

Another option is to pull the hide between 2 people, so you're going to pull and then let go and grab the hide somewhere else and then pull, so again, you're constantly stretching and pulling the hide in different directions. You can do this with 2 people, with a group of people, by yourself with just your arms, draping the hides over your knees and pulling with your hands, a variety of different ways. Now all of these slides are demonstrating the hand softening process which is what I usually do, but you can also do a frame soften process where you lash the hide in to a frame and then push on it with a stick or some kind of implement.

After you've finished softening the hide, you'll have a beautiful white fluffy soft hide but if that hide was to get wet, it would turn right back into raw hide because of the glues in the hides, so the thing to make the softness permanent



is smoking the hide, and here I am gluing the 2 hides together into a bag in order to smoke them. Once you've got your hides in a bag, then you attach a skirt to the bottom of it and you suspend it in some way over a smoky fire, so in this case, I've got one hide bag hung from a tripod and it's being smoked over a pit in the ground. Now it's very careful that you don't have flames, you have coals and you're going to add rotten wood on top of the coals. This is going to smolder rather than catch fire.

Now a lot of people think that leather is naturally brown but it isn't. The hide itself is actually white and it's the smoking process that give the hide the color, so the longer you smoke it, the darker it'll be, and you can see down at the base of this hide, the color's typically a little bit darker down at the neck of the hide which gets a little bit more smoke than up top. There you go. Finished, smoked, beautiful buckskin. Now you're ready to move on and actually make something out of this stuff.

There are all kinds of ways to make buckskin clothing from really simple to very elaborate. I really recommend starting with a simple project. I like making a bag for starters because this is something small, it's relatively easy to finish so it's not going to be super daunting, and it's going to give you some confidence and a little less nervousness in terms of taking that hide to the bigger projects. Also starting with simple garments like vests or skirts. It's a fabulous way to go.

Here's a slide, a variety of different types of skirts from very simple to a little bit fancier, so the first skirt in the upper left corner is actually what we call an apron style, so this is actually just 2 hides. One that's tied around from front to back and one that's tied around from the back to front. These are really nice because they're super adjustable, anyone can wear them. You can adjust your size a lot so if you're going from slender to heavier or vice versa or if you get pregnant or any way your body changes, it's really easy to make adjustments with an apron style skirt and they're going to be super comfortable and give you a lot of ease of motion.

The top middle skirt there is a panel skirt, so this is a much more elaborately sewn skirt which gives kind of a nice A line and a more fitted and tailored look. The skirt on the top right is a wraparound skirt, and this one, the hide is wrapped around the body with the spine of the animal going around the hips perpendicular to your spine as opposed to with your spine and it gives kind of this more organic asymmetrical form to the skirt which is a nice aesthetic fit.

The bottom left shows a fancier skirt with some antler buttons and some fringe there. In the middle, you see kind of another really organic styled skirt with panels that are cut kind of every which way on the hide rather than in a very specific way, and so again it gives this kind of organic look and you see some fancy bead work there, and in the bottom right is a nice long 2 hide skirt with one hide for the front and one hide for the back with the spines of the hides



parallel to her spine.

Here's some inspiration for different styles of vests. Again, from a fairly simple vest that's not very fitted on that bottom right slide to a very fancy wedding vest in the middle bottom. This has some applique with some abalone shells and the front of this vest is actually a fancy tweed, so this was a very fancy hybrid cloth and buckskin vest. The bottom left there again is a fancier vest with some buckskin applique involving bark tan and brain tanned hides and the fletching on those arrows is tanned salmon skin for a beautiful effect. The top left vest again is a combination of grain on bark tan leather with buckskin, a beautiful fitted vest, and then we've got some lovely bead work on that top middle vest and a very tailored fitted vest in that top right corner, so again the whole spectrum from loose and unfitted, very simple to as elaborate and tailored as you want to make it.

Dresses are another real classic buckskin garment and again, the whole gamut of dresses represented here from the girl's dresses there in the middle with some bead work and more traditional styles to some very different contemporary styles in all different variety.

Pants are another wonderful buckskin item. They're, again, really durable and you see on that top left, an interesting style of gusseted pants, the top right, a more standard kind of jeans style pair of pants, and in that middle top there, that's a pair of pants in the middle of construction showing some of the fitting to get them to fit just right. Buckskin shorts again are very similar to pants and a great buckskin item everywhere from the longer shorts to shorter shorts and under a variety of styles. Basically, your imagination is the limit with buckskin. There's a lot of different things you can do with them. From doing your own free form patterns to basing them on your favorite pair of jeans.

Let's talk about that. How do you go about creating a pattern for your buckskin clothing? There are a lot of different ways you can go about it. If you're not too sure of your tailoring skills, one kind of fail safe way is to use a piece of your favorite clothing and create a pattern out of that. Now I really recommend not just eyeballing or tracing the piece but actually cutting it up, so you might not want to do this with your favorite garment but a good solution is to go to a thrift store and find something that fits how you like it and use that piece to pattern your buckskin clothing after.

It's really important that use specific fabrics if you're going to go this route and that you avoid any knit fabrics at all cost, so it needs to be woven fabric and ideally something that's a little bit heavier weight, a little more like buckskin, so denim is a really good option or duck cloth or canvas. Corduroy is also nice or a variety of other woven cloths, but again, avoiding knit cloth because with knit cloth, it isn't the pattern that makes it fit you, it's the cloths' ability to stretch and hug the body. Likewise, even if you're going with a woven cloth, you need



to make sure that it isn't elastic at all, so a lot of jeans these days actually have some stretch to them and you don't want to use that for a pattern for buckskin.

Once you've done this, you're going to cut apart that piece of clothing and what I like to do is actually cut out the seam allowance of the clothing. Now that's that extra part that you see if you use a seam ripper to pull apart something. You've got that kind of flap that was to the end side of your clothes, that's what we call the seam allowance.

Now buckskin stretches. It stretches more than most standard cloths, so you actually want to make your garments a little bit on the snug side to start off because they're going to stretch and get bigger, and what you want is a piece of clothing that's going to fit just how you want it for a long time not just the first time you put it on, so in order to do that, rather than use a seam ripper and take the whole piece apart in that way, I just cut it at the seam lines and remove that little strip of fabric where it's sewn together. The reason why it's better to use a piece of clothing for a pattern than a paper pattern is because you really want to be able to try this thing on and make sure that it fits you.

Now buckskin is a wonderful material that it's either very expensive to buy or very labor intensive to make, so it's very important that you're going to get the piece of clothing that you really want and it's really important to be able to put it on your body, so if you're just buying a paper pattern from a fabric store, there's no way to try that on and put it on your body. You want as few abstractions from the body as possible, so I really recommend the clothing or cloth as pattern, so that's one option.

If you're a little bit more adventurous and want to get a more creative and make your own pattern, you can also make a pattern by using your body. One of my favorite ways to do this is to drape cloth over the body and mark on the cloth. In that way you can cut it out and sew it together and make a mockup of your garment and then try it on and make sure that it fits just how you want or adjust it accordingly before cutting it out of buckskin. This is a really great way to go. What we're doing here is a jacket that's going to have a wool liner, so this is going to be a very fancy buckskin jacket with a beautiful warm liner for very cold weather. If you're a little more adventurous, you can also make the pattern directly on the buckskin itself so that it's the buckskin that you're laying over the body, and here's an example of making another style of coat and using the buckskin to make the pattern.

This is a demonstration of a yoke for a jacket and it's showing how to get a nice fit on the shoulders without a seam on the shoulders. Most standard jackets or shirts are going to have a seam on the shoulder that gives the nice shaping there, but buckskin is so thick and bulky compared to most cloths that the seams can be quite bulky and if they're on top of your shoulder, then it's really going to push in to your shoulder if you have any kind of strap or bag, like



backpack straps pushing it down, so it's quite uncomfortable. I really like to use a yoke for shirts and jackets to avoid having any kind of seam anywhere on top of the shoulder where it's going to press into you.

The way to do this is to use a yoke that's going to do the shoulder shaping for you. You start out with a piece on the back of the shoulders and then you're going to pull it in front so that the 2 fronts overlap like you're seeing here and then you're going to cut both of those straight and that wrapping and overlapping in the front at an angle is what gives you this nice angle to the shoulders there for the yoke. It takes a brave soul but you can use the buckskin directly to make your pattern.

Now this is very important. Once you've got your pattern all lined out, then you're ready to transfer it to your buckskin. It's very important that you keep in mind how you lay your pattern on the buckskin. Now buckskin is very different than industrially processed leather. Those leathers are put through graters so they end up pretty uniform, mostly pretty uniform thickness and the leather all kind of acts the same way. Deer skin, that isn't the case. When you're making a buckskin, it's going to retain all of the properties that it had on that living animal. What that means is there's going to be really thick and tough parts and there's going to be really thin and stretchy parts. Lucky for us, those are in predictable areas.

The thickest, toughest parts of the hide are going to be the part where that animal needed the most protection, so if you think about it here, a prey animal, it gets attacked by cougar sometimes, and where do cougars attack? They attack the neck, right? That's where the jugular is, where the spine is close to the surface, so the neck of the deer is going to be the thickest, toughest part of the hide. The next thickest and toughest part is going to be the rumps. Now those, if you can picture a cow out in a field where it's got those real jutting hip bones, that's essentially the rump. Deer don't have those jutting hip bones but it's the same part of their body that it's going to be a thick, tough spot because attack can also come from there and because the bones are kind of pressing against it, so that's also thick, tough, not very stretchy part of the hide.

Then along the spine is the next thickest and toughest. Now it's going to stretch a lot from side to side along the spine but not lengthwise down the spine. Now the thinnest and stretchiest part of the hide are around what's the outside of the hide. These are going to be the stomach and the armpits, so what I'm getting at is that the rule of thumb is that you always want to try to keep the line of the spine of the animal, so running down the middle of your hide, in line with your spine, and what that means is that you're going to have that thick, tough, not very stretchy part in the middle of your body and then as you go out towards the sides of your body, you're going to get into thinner and stretchier hide. What this means for you is that while the sides might stretch a bit, each of your sides is going to stretch equally.



The worst thing that you can do is lay your clothing at an angle to the spine. Now this is really tempting because again, buckskin is really expensive or really hard to make so people are going to tend to get as much use as possible and kind of squish things together, and sometimes what seems like the most economical hide use might look like your different pattern pieces in all different angles in all different places in the hide, so say you're making a dress and you end up with one top part of the body on the spine of a hide and one in the armpit of a hide. Well once you start wearing that dress, that side that was in the armpit, it's going to start to stretch out and get longer and bigger on all sides while the other part isn't going to, so you're going to end up with a really awkward twisted stretchy garment, so this is very important.

The spine of the animal of the hide in line with your spine, and then second, if you have 2 equivalent parts of a garment, like I was talking about, they need to be cut from equivalent parts of the hide, so if you look at number 1 and number 2 of these pattern pieces, those are going to act very similarly. Now you would think that number 3 should be really similar to number 2 because they're in a line, they're the same distance from the hide but number 3 is in the rump part of the hide whereas number 2 is in the armpit part of the hide so they're actually going to behave really differently, so cut like 1 and 2, not like 2 and 3 or 1 and 3.

All right. Once you've got your pieces cut out, now you need to figure out how to put them together. You don't need a lot to work with buckskin but there are a few basic tools that are really helpful. There are a couple of different ways of going about sewing your hides together and some people sew with needle and thread and the other option is sewing with buckskin thong. Now usually I get a few snickers when I start talking about buckskin thong. Often people are picturing a garment rather than a piece of lacing. The original use of the word "Thong" meant a thin piece of leather. When I was a kid, the sandals we call flip flops today were called thongs and that was named after that piece of leather or what have you, fabric between your toes, and today's garment that a lot of people think of when you hear the word thong is similarly a thing piece of something, right? I am all for taking back the use of the word thong to its original meaning.

I sew with buckskin thong as opposed to needle and thread for a lot of reasons. One is that I can make it myself so I don't have to run to the fabric store, I don't have to be dependent on the thread or something industrially produced. I can make all the lacing that I need from the hides that I'm already tanning and already making my garment out of, so I like it from an energy standpoint. I also like it because the buckskin thong is going to move and stretch and give a little bit just like the hide itself does, so it's kind of more in keeping with how the buckskin itself wants to move. If you have a static piece of thread that doesn't give it all, then that's going to affect how your buckskin wears.



Additionally, because the stitches are so much visible, the buckskin thong creates quite a nice aesthetic element to your piece, and also there are a variety of different stitches that you can use and these can have different functions, so you can use stitches that allow for stretch some places, stitches that allow for a gaping seam that's going to breath, alternately you can use stitches that don't stretch or that create a nice air tight seam, so it gives you a lot more variability in a lot of ways where you can create the garment really custom suited to your own needs.

What you see here is a tool kit with a nice pair of buckskin cutting scissors. I really like these scissors because their tooth on just one side which means they grip the buckskin really well so you can get a really nice precise cut, and then up to the upper right of the scissors is an awl and this is one of your prime tools for sewing with buckskin. A really nice awl is going to make a huge difference in your sewing. In the middle there is a scalpel which I use more for really fancy applique, a really detailed cutout pieces or for shoe making.

Those 2 tools that are silver and look like scissors are actually hemostats. These work like both clamps and like pliers. They're really helpful, and then you see on the right, things for sewing with needle and thread, so what we call "Artificial sinew" which is actually a wax nylon on that bottom right, and then a leather thumb guard to keep the needle from punching backward through your thumb when you're sewing and then a variety of different needles, but if you're doing thong sewing, the only 2 tools that you really need are just the needle and awl.

If you're cutting thong, you're going to be making all of your own lacing and there are some important techniques for making the best thong. One of those is rather than cutting in a spiral which is what a lot of people think for making lacing out of leather, you actually are going to be much better off cutting along the longer sides of scraps of hide rather than around and around. You can get a lot of lacing from cutting around and round but it's usually going to be weak inferior lacing so I really don't recommend it, and then it's also important that you keep the hide under tension as you're cutting. My favorite way is to pinch the tip of the thong between my thumb and my third finger and then use my first fingers to hold the piece that I'm cutting from as you see in this picture. This allows you to hold it in tension and then you just keep kind of sliding the scissors up along the outside edge as you go.

Another thing is that you're going to cut a little bit wider if you're going through a thin part of the hide and a little bit narrower if you're going through a thick part of the hide, but I really try to cut from medium thick hide. Neither really thin nor really thick for the best quality thong. If I had to choose, I would rather go with thinner hide than thicker hide. A lot of people think that thicker hide yields stronger thong but it's not actually true. It's the surface area, the outer surface, the grain surface of the hide that's the strongest part so it's better to



have more of that rather than more cross section of hide.

Now using an awl, there's a lot of things to look for in a good awl and I don't consider that there are very many really good sewing awls in the market so I make and market my own. One of the things you're going to look for is a good quality tool steel. You'll also want to get a really narrow awl so that you can make a small hole and use thin thong. I find that your stitches and your seams are going to hold up way better over time if you're using smaller thong and your stitches close together. If you're using big, thick thong and bigger holes, then there's going to be a lot more room for your pieces to gap between the seam and your seams aren't going to keep the function that you want out of them, so a small diameter awl and then really important is an awl that is going to taper the whole way from the tip to the base where it meets the handle.

A lot of awls that you buy, all of the taper happens in the first half inch and that means that you would necessarily have to make a really big hole. They're also much harder to push through, and then another important thing is having the awl short enough that when it's in that meaty part at the base of your thumb, your fingers can reach past the end of the thong, of the awl tip, and that way you can pull with your fingers as well as push with your hand to get the awl through. It really multiplies your strength and make it ever so much easier to sew. That's the way you're going to look for in an awl and you're going to be using an awl technique kind of similar to what I'm demonstrating here in this photograph.

Now if you're using just an awl, you don't need a needle. I prefer sewing without a needle at all even with buckskin thong. Some people like to use a needle for it but I find that it's really hard to get the eye of the needle through plus most needles are bladed which means they are triangular and cross section and what that means is they're actually slicing the hide. They go through really easy but those slices will tend to stretch out and open up more and more over time, so again, your seams are going to lose their integrity so instead, I cut a really nice narrow tip on my thong and I'm going to try to get that tip to mirror the size and shape of my awl. That way I know the hole is perfectly sized for my thong.

You see in this photo a nice tapered a thong tip mirroring the awl, and then a really nice thing is to dip the tip of that thong in a little bit of white glue and let it setup hard and then it's like you're making your own needle on your piece of thong.

Another thing is I really don't like to use knots with my buckskin. Now knots on thread, they're so small you hardly feel them, but buckskin is probably 100 times thicker than thread, so a knot inside your clothing, you're really going to feel, so rather than using knots, I use locking stitches to start my seams and then I work the ends under my stitches at the end of my thong in order to secure it and I've never really had my ends pull out or lost stitches because of



this so it's a great technique and the hemostat tool is really helpful in order to achieve this.

Now when you're starting to sew along seam with buckskin especially a curved one, it's a really good idea to pin, clamp or somehow to attach your seam together in a couple of places, particularly if you're working one, with curved pieces, or two, with 2 pieces that are different thickness as of hide. As I've mentioned, buckskin is really stretchy and it's really easy as you're sewing a piece to stretch one piece more than the other through the sewing and then sometimes 2 pieces that started out the same size and shape, when you get to the bottom of the seam, you find that you've got a couple of inches left over of one. What that means is if you've kind of warped the piece and maybe moved it so that that piece isn't parallel to your spine anymore and so it can make this kind of twisty seam. Better instead is to pin the pieces together in a couple of places so you make sure that they stay where you put them to start with.

Here's an example of putting together a hood for a jacket, and I've pinned every few inches with just a little piece of thong. I don't find that metal pins work very well in buckskin. It's so tough that they tend to bend, so when I say pin, I actually mean a teeny little piece of buckskin that I tie together and then I can just zip along and sew the seam without worrying about it getting stretched out and twisty.

Now you're going to want to understand the different qualities of different stitches and make informed choices about what you use where, so you can see on this beautiful vest that I've got 3 different stitches working here. What we call a "Running stitch" which is just a straight in, out, in, out, kind of kindergarten style stitch, I've got that along the armholes and the neck hole, and then I've got some fancy design stitches on the back, what we call a "French twist" going along the bottom edge of the yoke and a herring bone up the middle back of the yoke.

The basic rule of thumb is that if you want a stitch that's going to control for stretch, you're going to want to use a stitch that's parallel to your seam edge. If you want to allow for stretch, you're going to use a diagonal stitch, so look here at these 2 tops. The one on the left is put together with the running stitch, so these are going to be more air tight seams and it's going to maintain the shaping more over time. The top on the right is more of a summer wear piece and so it's using what's called a baseball stitch. This is a diagonal stitch and there's a gap between these seams so there's a little bit more air flow coming through and it's going to give and move and stretch with the body a little bit more than the top on the left.

I typically use more parallel stitches because I like my pieces to hold their shape but there's a lot of times where diagonal stitches are really nice especially in warm weather clothing. Once you start putting together your piece, I usually



kind of start from the middle of the body out, so here's an example of the jacket that we started in the making your pattern directly on to buckskin section. This is that yoke that was being cut out and I've pinned together the body sections, the front and back of the shirt, and this is the order in which I'm going to put them together, so I'll first pin the yoke to the front and the back and then I'll do the sides, so the sides down, and then I'll put on the sleeves and then the hood and then whatever cuffs or trim I'm going to add.

As a general rule, starting down the middle of the body first and then working out, and then often there's going to be opportunities for shaping towards the end of the project, so here's an example of some things you can do for shaping. These are darts. A dart is a nice place where you can pull in a garment around curved areas, so they're really typical to use on top of the butt of pants or at the breasts or the armholes of ladies' shirts to draw them in so you don't have a gapping area around the armpit where the shirt has stretched to accommodate breasts. How to do darts is you can just grab a pinch of the material where it's a little gappy and there's a little extra and then you're going to hold it together, as you can see, I'm pinching these 2 together making a little triangle and then you can mark that.

If you're working on your own, you can sometimes use a hemostat to clamp it or even better is working with a friend and having them mark that for you, and then you can actually cut out that little triangle that I'm pinching there and sew the sides back together. That's going to draw in that waistband and make it curve up around the butt or around the breasts or the armholes or whatever it is that you're trying to do shaping, so darts for shaping are kind of a final step and then adding the waistband or your ties or a attachments, buttons, whatever it is, and then you're going to want to be sure to bind their edges because again, buckskin is very stretchy so any cut edge that isn't downed is going to stretch, so I really recommend doing a simple line of running stitch along the edges of armholes, neck holes.

You can use a raw edge that was the natural edge of the hide at the bottom of skirts or pants without a lot of stretch issue, but if you're cutting the edge, then you're going to really want to bind it in order to keep it from stretching on you, so again, just a simple line of running stitch parallel to the edge is your best binding stitch with minimal bulk so it's really comfortable but that does a good job.

There you go. Now you've got a beautiful buckskin garment, what are you going to do with it? A lot of people end up terrified to wash their buckskin clothes. They've put so much effort into them that they're worried about messing it up. The beautiful thing about buckskin is it actually washes really well. Most standard industrial leather doesn't stand up real well to getting wet and dry or to soak or to human sweat. All of these things actually deteriorate standard chemically tanned leather, but buckskin, no problem and it works really well



with it. You can actually put buckskin into a laundry machine but I really prefer not to. The kinds of forces and residues of detergents, I don't feel good about subjecting my buckskin to, but I know people who do.

My recommendation however is handwashing your buckskin in just a 5-gallon bucket warm water. Now if your buckskin is really dirty or really greasy, then soap is really helpful, but the thing to know about soap is it does leech out the smoke color of your buckskin, so the more often you wash your buckskins with soap, the quicker they're going to become really light in color, like the pants I'm wearing in this photo, so I avoid using soap unless my stuff is really greasy. I just use warm water and a lot of scrubbing, but I don't hesitate to use soap if they are greasy. I just make sure it's a natural soap. What you don't want to use is a laundry detergent or a dishwashing detergent or anything that's like a phosphate detergent kind of soap because these have the quality of really stripping oils and they'll strip the oils from the hide as well as making them turn lighter faster.

I like a natural soap like Dr. Bronner's or other style of liquid Castile soap or you can grate up a natural fat and lye based soap into the water and use that, and then I just scrub the garment back and forth between my hands or you can use a scrub brush. It's good to let it soak for a while and do several rinses of water and get those suckers nice and clean.

It is important too to wash your clothing with some regularity because if they get really, really dirty with the grit and grime ground into them, that can actually grind up the fibers and wear them out faster, so there's a practical as well as aesthetic reason to keep your clothes relatively clean.

Now with your buckskin clothing, again it's really stretchy and you want to be conscious of how you dry it because if you hang it to dry, then its own weight is going to be so heavy that it's actually going to pull it down to make it longer and narrower than it started out, so sometimes this can be a good technique if you actually want to reshape your clothes a little bit. Say you've got shorts that have become too short and a little too wide over time. You might want to hang them so they get long and skinny, but if you want them to stay relatively similar in size, then you're going to want to not hang them under a lot of weight, so what I do is I wash them, I wring them out well, and then I'm going to lay them out on a sheet or something in dappled sun, so you don't want to dry your buckskin stuff really fast or really hot.

What you don't want to do is say leave them in a back of a car in direct sun where they're just going to bake and be dry really fast but they're going to turn really hard, so just like if you hang clothes on a line versus on a drier, those clothes will end up a lot stiffer, buckskin will do the same thing but then some. Because it's so bulky and thick compared to fabrics, it's going to be more dramatic in the way it would stiffen when drying, so what I like to do is to lay



them somewhere where they're not going to dry super-fast and then I go and I just kind of give them a gentle stretch every so often as they dry. This keeps them nice and soft and supple and makes sure that they're going to dry in a nice shape, so that's what I'm doing here with this hoodie.

That is a quick overview of the world of buckskin. I'm so excited to share this with you. I really hope that you'll catch the bug for buckskin and go on to create some fabulous creations of yourself. Have more resources for learning at my website buckskinrevolution.com. I've got a blog there where I answer folks' questions, a lot more photos and inspiration and a photo gallery and it's also a place where you can order my book which is in the works. It is not currently finished in printed form but you can order all of the chapters that are currently done which I believe is 20 out of 24 chapters at this point, so almost the whole book is available in that form, and then I will send out new chapters as they're written. That's available on the website and also I wanted to turn you on to some good resources for the tanning of hides.

There are a lot of good books out there about turning deer hide into leather. Buckskin: The Ancient Art of Braintanning by Steven Edholm and Tamara Wilder is an excellent, very comprehensive book. Deer Skins Into Buckskins is the book that I mentioned earlier that has specific guides for bucking hides and making sure that you've got the correct alkalinity, and Leather by [inaudible 01:00:07] is a nice overview of a lot of different styles of natural tanning from around the world, so all excellent resources, and I invite you to sign up on my mailing list to stay advised to the progress of the book and classes and events where you can dive in and learn more about buckskin. Thank you so much for joining me today and please be a part of the ongoing buckskin revolution.

Marjory: There you go. Now if you've got a hunter in your family or if you're a hunter yourself, now you know what to do with those hides. I'll tell you what. Also, the next Mother Earth News Fairs that I attend, and I'm going to be attending a lot of them in 2017 around the country, I will bring a brain tanned hide for you to feel, so if you come to one of that Mother Earth's News Fairs, come look for me and I'll have a hide, you can feel the material yourself. If you want to get in touch with Woniya, definitely click on that button to the right there, that will get you setup with her website. She's got the book that she's writing and find out more information about where you can purchase hides that are already tanned or those other books you referenced on learning how to tan your own hides.

Woniya's right, it is a bit of work. I've done it a few times but it's definitely a skill worth learning, so you can connect with Woniya on the right there. Now also I want to let you know, I have a presentation at the summit, I'm not sure what day it's coming up but if you're interested in attending a primitive skills gathering, I show you just what it's like so that way you'll know how to prepare for it, so look for that here at the Mother Earth News Homesteading Summit Online, and also if you purchase the package, one of the bonus presentations



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we include with that is Woniya and this is one of my favorite presentations of all time where she's talking about how she lives without refrigeration. I was so excited when I saw that presentation.

I was so excited, I went to my family and I said, "Let's do this, let's do this," and my family looked at me and said, "Mom, you have totally lost it. We love the refrigerator," so I didn't win that one but you know, someday.

Okay. This is Marjory Wildcraft and I'll catch you at another presentation at the Mother Earth News Online Homesteading Summit.

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