

# THE LEARNING CIRCLE

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## BUYING BUCKSKINS

There has been a renewed interest in using buckskin for traditional dance clothing, especially women's dresses. This has caused a lot of questions about how to go about planning the purchase of enough skins for a dress project.

There are a number of things to keep in mind when planning and buying materials made of deer hides.

Though you usually can buy commercially tanned hides all year round, it is good to keep in mind that this is really a seasonal product. All commercially processed deer skins come from the annual fall harvest of deer across the nation. Even though modern processing allows the tanneries to store raw hides for long periods of time and hides are available all year long, experience shows that the largest and best hides are mostly available during the first half of the year. So if the project you have in mind needs the larger, better hides, plan to buy before June of each year.

Color is also a factor. Pure white hides are becoming harder to get. They have increased in price, and often are only available in the spring. We understand that the chemicals used to make white tanned hides are more difficult and expensive to handle under Government standards, so many tanneries have stopped making that product.

For the colored hides, experience also has shown that if you need to have your hides match in color, like buying beads, you should buy them all from the same dye lot. We see a great variation in colors between shipments which is noticeable when you put the hides together. So if color match is important to you, plan to buy enough hide for the project at the same time and match them the best you can. There are some tanneries that will custom dye your hides darker to match better, but this is an extra cost.

How much should I buy? is the big question. Unlike buying cloth goods, hides do not come in a uniform shape or uniform surface condition. How they turn out depends on how they were skinned out, where the bullet holes were, how well they were properly cared for in salting and refrigeration, and finally processed through chemicals and machines. In short, no two skins are ever alike.

Commercially processed hides sold on the market are measured and marked by the "square foot". They measure the irregular distance around the hide and calculate the square footage similar to how you would measure the square footage contained in a circle. However, because of the highly irregular shape of the hide, it is important to remember that a 10 square foot hide never will have a rectangular useable area that equals 10 square feet (for example, 2 feet by 5 feet). So for planning purposes, it is impossible to accurately determine if a hide will serve your needs by knowing it's square foot area.

Knowing the square footage does help you in a relative way. We use the following as a guide:

Small Hide	8 Sq. Ft.
Medium Hide	9-10 Sq. Ft.
Large Hide	11-12 Sq. Ft.
Extra Large	13 + Sq. Ft.

The medium size hides, particularly the 10's are the average size most commonly available. The large hides are usually harder to get later in the year. There are only a very few extra large hides in a run of tannery hides.

The best way to determine if a set of hides are suitable for your project is to make a paper or cloth pattern first, and lay them out on the skins to be sure there is enough dimension for all of the major pieces. If you need a rule of thumb, here is one from our experience. For a women's size 10-12 dress, we try to get two large hides for the skirt, two medium hides for the top, and one small hide

for extra fringe or arm pieces if needed. If leggings are needed also, add another 10 square foot hide.

Holes and irregular shape are the reason for having to have that many hides. Unless you are very fortunate, you will find yourself planning around small holes or surface blemishes. You may have to actually sew in a small patch, or extend the top or skirt. By making a pattern of your major pieces, you can best plan to place small holes where they won't show or can be covered by your beadwork or fringe.

The dress plan shown here illustrates how planning can be used to solve problems of irregular hides and blemishes.

