



DS Leather Goods

Leather Crafting Tools

A Beginners' Guide by Deyan

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Hello fellow leather crafters!

I am Deyan, the crafter aka the one-man-show behind **DS Leather Goods**.

Back in 2018 when I decided I will give leather crafting a try, one of the things I struggled most with was finding out what tools do I need. Well, I didn't quite figure it out back then and as most of us went and bought a cheap set of tools online. Tools that either didn't quite work as intended or I didn't really need. A lot of essentials were missing in the box. A waste of money.

This short guide intends to help you avoid this mistake and give you a simple overview of the basic tools you need to start with leather crafting.

Happy crafting,
Deyan :)



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Essential Tools & Supplies

Few notes before we dive in:

- The guide assumes you have limited resources to spend on tools
- Looks (of tools) are irrelevant
- There will be no specific brands recommended (almost)
- Carving, tooling, dyeing, molding, and similar advanced techniques as well as hardware used on final products are not considered
- There might be other successful approaches on the topic

If you didn't know how to ride a bike...

...would you buy the bike on the left or the bike on the right?



You get my point. I see too many crafters that are just starting out jumping onto both tools and projects that are simply too much for a novice – and not because of the quality of the final product but because this is the easiest way to get discouraged as a beginner. In photography, the expectation that having an expensive camera and shooting in a studio will get you good photos will only get you disappointment. Same with leather crafting.

Instead:

- Get the **must-have tools** first
- Start with **simple projects**
- Use the **right leather** - thickness & temper wise – for your projects
- **Celebrate** when the product you made works for its intended purpose. A basic cardholder with crooked stitching that holds 3-4 cards beats a perfectly made bifold that is too tight to fit any cards. Looks will come with time and practice.



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Essential Tools & Supplies

Cutting

- **Self-healing cutting mat** – to cut over. You can start with the smaller A4 size but soon you will upgrade to A3 size and in most cases that A3 will be big enough for years to come. If you can spare the difference, go with A3 from the start and save yourself buying a mat twice in a short timeframe. Where: crafts stores.
- **90 degrees ruler/ruler** – to keep things straight & squared. You will be cutting along its edge so a metal one is a must (you may easily cut into a plastic ruler edge). Many crafters use metal ruler with cork backing – to avoid dents and lines onto the leather from pressing the ruler down. I prefer the ones without cork as they sit tight onto the leather, and it is less likely to steer away from the straight line as you cut. Where: crafts stores.
- **Knife** – to cut the leather with. Options are almost endless here: exacto knife, utility knife, box cutter, rotary cutter, Japanese style knife etc. I highly recommend keeping it simple and getting an SDI Ingenuity Zinc Alloy Craft Knife (I know I said no brands, but this one is just great). Why? 9mm Japanese, replaceable blades at 30 degrees that allow precision cutting of curves and that stays sharp for a long time. Also, and very important, blade is much harder and will not bend like the exacto knife blades. For sure don't start with buying expensive Japanese style knives that look cool on Youtube videos. :) Where: crafts stores.
- **Scratch Awl** (optional) – to mark your patterns onto the leather. You can also use it to scratch the leather before gluing pieces together. There are cheap awls that work just as well as the expensive ones. You can even use a sharpened nail if you must. Nevertheless, it is good to have one around the bench. Where: leather tools/supply stores.

Cutting

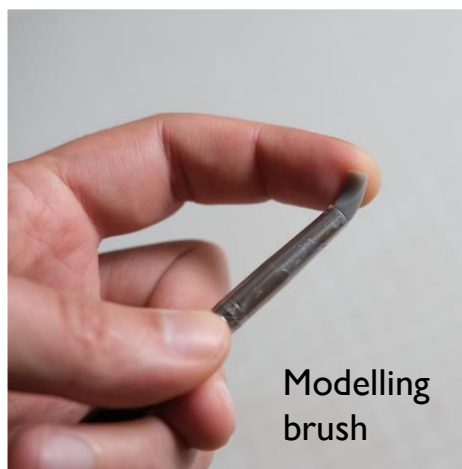


- Self-healing mat
- Ruler
- Knife
- Awl (optional)



Gluing Things Together

- **Glue** – I recommend getting water-based, odorless glue. Besides not being stinky, it will be more forgiving and easier to remove if it ends up where it shouldn't be. :) Where: leather tools/supply stores.
- **Glue applicator** – various options here too – different size spreaders with flexible ends or plastic board-like applicators. By chance I got my hands on a clay modelling brush with a rubber tip and use that a lot too – gives a bit more control and precision when applying the glue. Where: crafts stores.



↑
← You only need one applicator.



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Essential Tools & Supplies

Marking & Punching

- **Punch pad** – to put under the leather when you punch the stitching holes. The goal is your irons not to reach hard surface when you punch the holes, so the irons teeth don't break. I use a hard plastic block with two layers of hard thick natural vegtan leather glued on top of it that I replace once or twice per year when there are more holes than leather left. The community highly recognizes the OKA punch pads however I haven't used one yet. A rubber punch pad is also an option. Where: leather tools/supply stores.
- **Wing divider** – to mark your stitching lines with. This is a good investment as you will ever need just one of those. Get one that has a little measurement scale how much exactly it is open for more consistent results. For the longest time I used a cheap adjustable edge creaser to mark my stitch lines with and it is an ok compromise if you want to fit into a tight budget. Where: leather tools/supply stores.
- **Pricking irons/Stitching chisels** – to make the stitching holes with. What size (distance between holes) and what set of teeth to buy, being the most common questions. Starting with the latter, to this day I only use 5+2 teeth sets. It is probably the cheapest set option and is enough to start with. Size-wise it really depends on what you will be making. For wallets for example majority of crafters will use 3.38mm, 3.85mm or 4mm irons. Later on, and with experience you can go smaller than that. I recommend going with 3.85mm or 4mm as there will be more affordable threads to match those (0.45-0.6mm threads). Where: leather tools/supply stores.
- **Maul/Mallet** - to hit the irons/chisels with. Never hit your irons with metal head hammer as this will eventually ruin them. Hence a maul/mallet is the way to go. I use a recoilless rubber head hammer by crimsonhides that is also very quiet (I know this will be an important factor for the apartment building dwellers like myself 😊). Where: leather tools/supply stores.

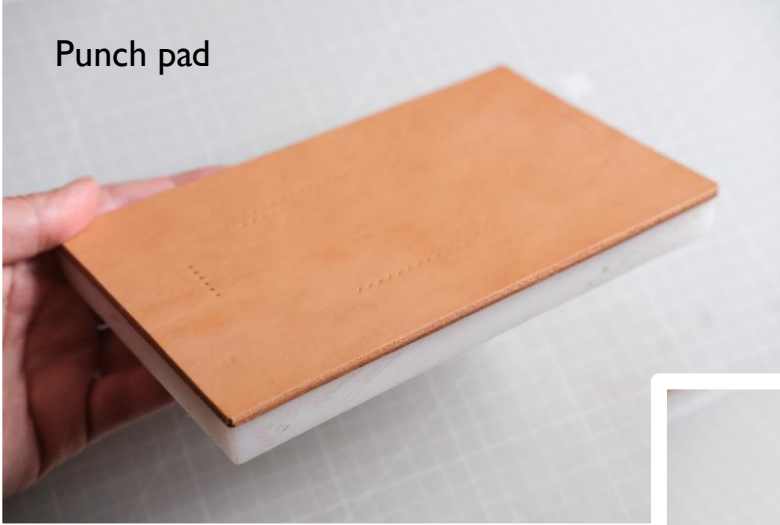


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Essential Tools & Supplies

Marking & Punching

Punch pad



Cheap adjustable creaser that can be used instead of wing divider.



Wing divider



Maul



5+2 Pricking Irons



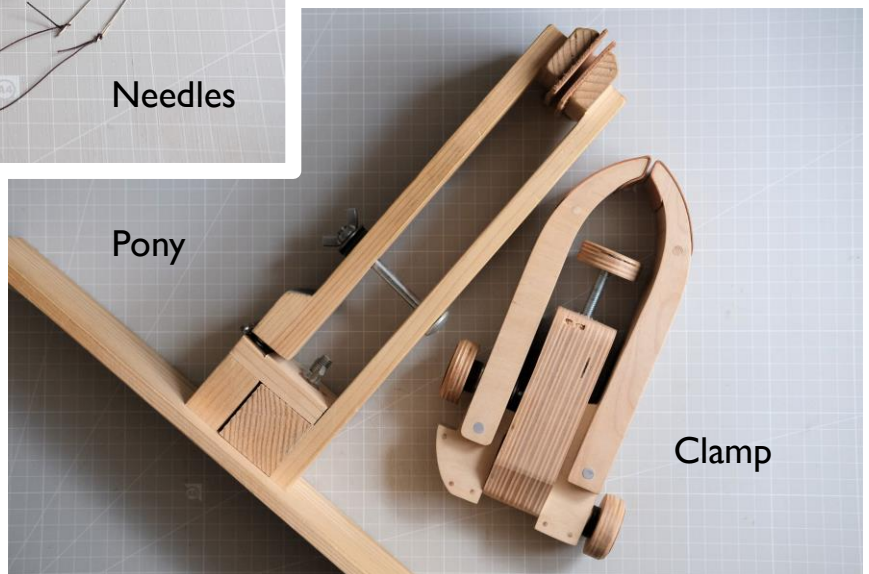
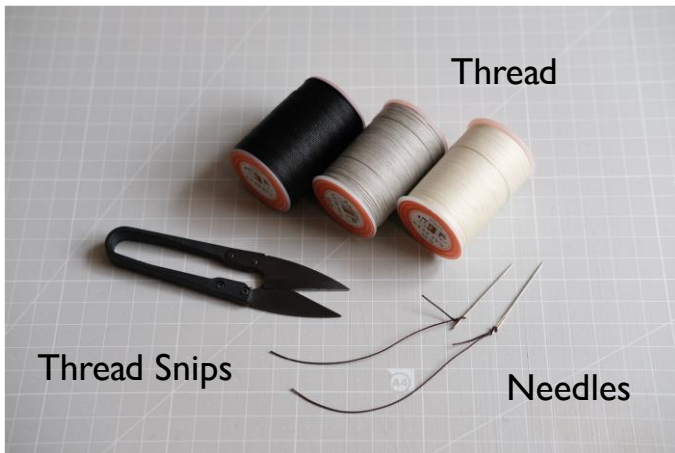
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Essential Tools & Supplies

Stitching

- **Harness Needles** – those are dull/round pointed needles especially for hand stitching leather. Regular sharp point needles cannot be used as they will get caught in/pierce the thread as the second needle goes through the stitching hole. Where: leather tools/supply stores.
- **Thread snips** – to snip thread ends with. Any scissors will be ok too. Where: crafts stores.
- **Thread** – a common beginner mistake I keep seeing is using too thick thread (that usually comes with the junky tool sets). Thread size is important for how easy sewing will be and how your stitching will look like. It has to match the pricking irons size you will be using for best results. With 3.85mm irons I recommend 0.4-0.5mm round thread and with 4mm you can go up to 0.6mm. Since threads can be quite expensive, I suggest getting Galaces round, waxed, polyester thread to begin with. In platforms like AliExpress it is half the price you will see in sites like Amazon & Etsy. Where: leather tools/supply stores.
- **Lighter** – you might get the urge to burn down your first projects, but it is also used to melt the thread ends once you are done with your backstitch. A better solution that most end up using is the battery-operated Thread Zap II. Where: crafts stores.
- **Flat head hammer** – to tap down the stitch line with. This is done to flatten your stitch line and close off the holes once stitching is complete. There are specialty ones, but any such hammer will do (I use an old one from my grandfather). Where: your local hardware store.
- **Stitching pony/clamp** (optional) – I still use the cheap pony I got initially. It is not a must-have, and many crafters sew from the hand (holding the product while stitching). For longer stitch lines it will speed up the process, however. Where: leather tools/supply stores.

Stitching





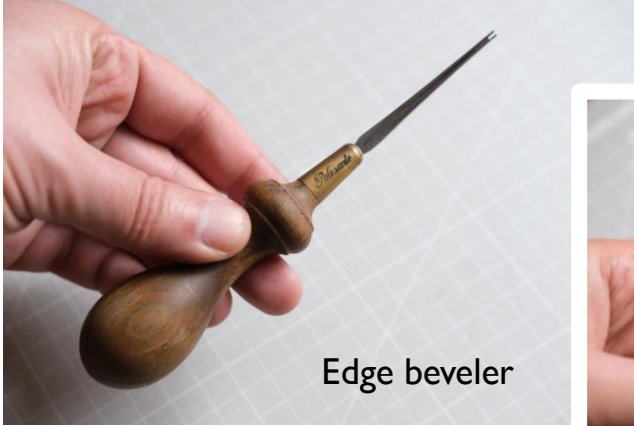
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Essential Tools & Supplies

Edge finishing & final touches

- **Sandpaper** – to sand down and flatten edges. These come in paper size sheets and can be found in any hardware store. I suggest getting 3-4 grits to begin with 280, 500, 1000 (you can add 1500 to those). Look for waterproof ones.
- **Edge beveler** – to round the edges by cutting away the corners of Π-shaped edge making it a ∩-shaped edge. This is an essential must-have tool and an early investment into a quality one will pay off earlier. They come in sizes #0, #1 etc. that will indicate how much of the edge is taken off – the lower the number the less leather is removed. Sizes can vary from manufacturer to manufacturer (brand A #1 may not equal to brand B #1). Where: leather tools/supply stores.
- **Burnishing agent** – to apply to your edge before burnishing it with slicker/canvas. This can be water, gum tragacanth, saddle soap, Tokonole, bees wax etc. Friction will settle the agent into the leather fibers and smooth the edge for a sealed, shiny finish. There is a lot more to edge finishing techniques, but you need to (or will sooner or later) get Tokonole so you might as well do it right away. :) Where: leather tools/supply stores.
- **Burnisher/Slicker** – to slick/burnish edges with. Comes in various wooden profiles and is usually cheap enough. Eventually I removed this one from my edge finishing routine and I use canvas/cloth for better results. Where: leather tools/supply stores.
- **Edge burnishing canvas/cloth** – can be used as no-cost alternative to the slicker above. There are panels offered by leather tools/supply stores or you can ‘retire’ a canvas/cloth tote bag and cut it into squares as I do.
- **Bone folder** – used for folds and creases but also to open card slots where glue might have gone beyond the stitch line on the inside of the pocket.

Edge finishing & final touches



Leather

I highly recommend buying panels of various vegetable tanned leathers (and thicknesses) when you are starting out. Yes, price per square foot is a bit higher on panels vs getting let's say half a shoulder of the same leather but it can be even more costly to find out that you don't like the giant piece of leather you got. Or that it is simply not the right thickness for the projects you want to make. For sure it will be just one thickness which does not work for designs that require thinner and thicker leathers combined. Here are couple of rough estimate uses per thickness that will give you an idea what to look for based on the projects you have in mind:

- **1-1.4mm** (2.5-3.5oz) – wallet interior parts (1.4mm-3.5oz is on the thick side and will work with designs that do not have many layers of leather stacked on top of each other).
- **1.4-1.8mm** (3.5-4.5oz) – wallet exteriors, pouches.
- **2-3mm** (5-7.5oz) – purses, straps.
- **3.2-3.6mm** (8-9oz) – belts, dog collars, sheaths
- **3.6+ mm** (9+ oz) – specialty items that you better not start with

Make sure to take note of the leather temper too when you shop. Some leathers might be too soft even when on the thick side which will not be ok for certain projects and vice versa. Leather patterns will usually mention what temper and thickness is recommended – soft, medium, stiff – and if they mention thickness only then they can be made with all tempers.



* You don't need a thickness gauge. It is shown above for illustration purposes only.



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One Page List

Here is the full list:

- 1. Self healing cutting mat**
- 2. 90 degrees ruler**
- 3. Knife**
- 4. Scratch Awl (optional)**
- 5. Glue**
- 6. Glue applicator**
- 7. Punch pad**
- 8. Wing divider**
- 9. Pricking irons/Stitching chisels**
- 10. Maul/Mallet**
- 11. Harness Needles**
- 12. Thread snips**
- 13. Thread**
- 14. Lighter**
- 15. Flat head hammer**
- 16. Stitching pony/clamp (optional)**
- 17. Sandpaper**
- 18. Edge beveler**
- 19. Burnishing agent**
- 20. Burnisher/Slicker**
- 21. Edge burnishing canvas/cloth**
- 22. Bone folder**
- 23. Leather**
- 24. Enthusiasm!**

See them all on the next photo page...



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One Page Photo



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Tools You Won't Really Need

Five years later, I have not found any viable use of these tools that usually are included in various beginner tool sets offered online. Again, there might be specific scenarios for those later on but for sure you don't need them when you are starting out:

- **Curved needles** – hmm...
- **Stitching trace wheel** – to mark “dots” in your stitch line that will be then pierced individually with a stitching awl.
- **Shaver skiver** – simply doesn't work in my experience.
- **Groover** – to cut out a line in the grain side of leather where your stitch line will sink in. This one will make sense with knife sheaths for example however I wouldn't recommend jumping into such projects from the beginning. :)
- **Cutting dies** – I strongly suggest cutting by hand at least for a few years before ordering expensive cutting dies. Cutting is a key skill to acquire and your development as a crafter will suffer from bypassing it too soon. :)



The Mistake That Costs The Most

Hear me out on this one because it is the costliest mistake, I have done more than once. Here is a real-life example from my experience:

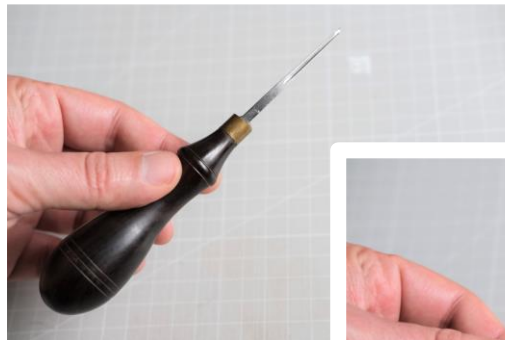
You are few months into the craft, and you love it. It is something you want to continue doing and to get better at. You want to improve the quality of products you create... and you realize that the no-brand edge beveler you got is not always up to par and you want to upgrade to a better one.

The mistake I made is that I spent money on another no-brand beveler that was mid-range priced. Not very expensive but not cheap either. It was better than the first one but essentially did not prove over time. I then ended up buying a well-known, highly praised by the community brand beveler that I should have bought in the first place when I decided to upgrade.

In conclusion, skip those mid-range priced, no-brand (or not widely known and recognized by crafters anyway) tools. Wait a bit longer if needed before you upgrade but upgrade once and have a tool that you will use for years and that will pay off the investment much quicker (because it works better, every time, and it saves you time).



← Cheap crap



← Expensive crap



Real quality beveler →



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What To Invest In Next

When the time for upgrades comes, I suggest investing in the high-quality tools that will make the most difference in your workflow and quality of results. Alternatively, if your budget allows go for those right away and skip upgrading all together. In that order:

- **Quality pricking irons**
- **Quality edge beveler**

Then couple of tools that you might not have yet:

- **Quality French skiver** – to thin down leather with.
- **Quality edge creaser** – to create creased lines along the edges (between the stitch line and the edge) for aesthetic purposes. Those can be manual edge creasers or electric ones. This is only if you like the looks of creased edges, and they are part of your work. I very rarely crease for example while it may be a must in other crafters' products.

Couple of key investments that would not fall under the tools category, that make big difference:

- **Dedicated workplace/desk** – not having to unpack and pack your tools every time you want to make something improves the crafting experience significantly and allows you to work on smaller portions of your project and not having to complete it all in one sitting. I have an Ikea table and a chair in the corner in our living room.
- **Your very own maker's mark stamp** – this is a brand identification topic and comes with you being proud to 'sign' your leather works that you offer to the world.





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Closing Words

Thank you for reading that far! Leather tools, leathers and what to get where can be overwhelming and costly in the beginning and I hope this short guide will assist you in navigating through the topic with more confidence.

If you found it helpful, please consider supporting me by purchasing some of my patterns on:

WWW.ETSY.COM/SHOP/DSLEATHERGOODS

For more tips & tricks, crafting tutorials and useful links join my crafters only community on:

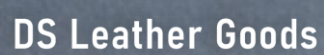
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Happy crafting,
Deyan :)

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