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It's Not Your Grandmother's Apron... But It Can Be!



I presume much like the rest of you reading this, when I first learned to use knives in the kitchen, I learned to cut away from myself to lessen the risk of injury. It was more than a little startling when I first learned the cordwainer's (shoe making) craft to find the opposite was true: Much of the work involves sharpened implements that are directed toward the body. Hoping to keep all my organs and appendages unscathed by the slip of a sharpened tool, I figured a little preventative maintenance was in order. I bought a standard apron made of canvas. But it just wasn't right. In short order, I found shortcomings and pitfalls:

- The neck strap that supports the bib – I found it remarkably uncomfortable.
- The apron strings had to be tied, which meant they also had to be untied. If tied at the back and I sat back, it would dig into my back. If drawn to the front to tie, it got in my way.
- The apron extended to just above the knee – that was cool. But much of the work I do requires me to sit down. That span of fabric across my legs was awkward.
- An apron made of canvas is robust – but it's no protection against a sharpened knife.

I researched several unique styles, then melded them together to create my own apron – an apron that you will find me wearing anytime I am doing leather work. In fact, in the shoe making and accessories classes I teach at Los Angeles Trade Technical College, the first project that every student completes is this apron.

- Made of 3-ounce/1.2mm leather (about the thickness of a dime – two layers of which your Baby Lock sewing machine can manage with little effort), the apron is far from bullet-proof. However, it provides a bit more protection than a regular textile.
- The neck strap and apron strings are continuous and adjustable. The straps cross the back and are supported between the shoulder blades by a “strap keeper.”
- Below the crotch level (referred to as the “fork” in the tailoring trade) the apron is separated into two panels.
- Though I hesitate to say, “one size fits all,” this particular apron fits “most.” Some students shorten the waist. None found it necessary to adjust the size side-to-side – though it can be easily done if needed. (Suggestions for simple alterations follow.)

You'll need some things to start:

- Pattern
- Instructions (Written instructions follow. You'll find an instructional video on [my YouTube site.](#))
- Leather shears and/or rotary cutter and mat
- 1" slot punch, dead hammer (rubber mallet or maul), and thick cutting mat (a cutting board will suffice)
- 1/4" double-sided tape such as Collins Wonder Tape
- Contact cement
- Leather sewing machine needles, Size 90/14 & 100/16 (90/14 should be fine, but in case you are having trouble, 100/16 to be safe. Teflon coating preferred.)
- Teflon (or non-stick) standard presser foot (I prefer a narrow straight stitch Teflon foot)
- Four 1" D-rings
- Leather apron with pockets: 3-4 oz/1.2mm (chrome or veg tan, NO wax finishes), 30" x 50"
- Leather apron without pockets: 3-4 oz/1.2mm (chrome or veg tan, NO wax finishes), 30" x 36"
- Thread, size 100 polyester (You don't need a heavier thread for this project. Standard weight polyester used for garment construction is fine. Madeira makes an exceptionally good polyester.)
- Tailor's chalk (non-wax) and gel pen (gold or silver)



Selecting Leather

Selecting leather for a project is like selecting fabric for a project. Much like selecting fabric for a garment, it's necessary to first determine the type of project you are making. Are you making a bag for a bowling ball, or a strap for a belt? Are you upholstering the interior of a car, or constructing a leather jacket? If you are making a leather jacket, is it for protection – like a motorcycle jacket? Or is it a sports jacket?

Once you determine the project, it's important to identify the characteristics you wish the leather to have. If you are making a belt, you want the leather to be stiff – a 10 oz/4 mm bovine bridle leather may be the perfect choice. If you are making a leather sports jacket, the leather will be softer. In this case, lambskin, often used for garments, would be an excellent choice with a weight of 2 oz/0.8mm.

It's always best practice to purchase leather from a retailer that is knowledgeable and can help direct you to the right type of leather.

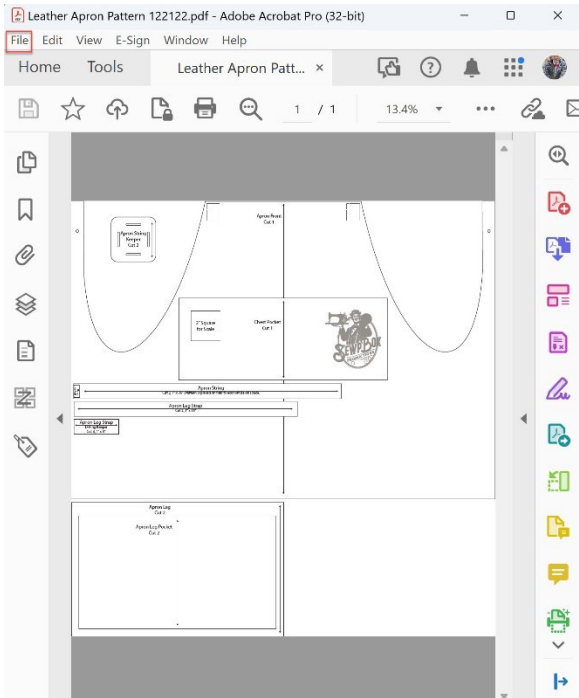
For this project:

- Pick a bovine leather, either vegetable or chrome-tanned, that is about the thickness of a dime. That equates to approximately 3 oz or 1.2mm.
- Avoid leathers that are stiff. The leather doesn't need to be "garment soft", but it should be reasonably supple.
- Avoid leathers that feel waxy. The wax finish makes it challenging to assemble the pieces. (Double-sided tape used to join the pieces to one another temporarily before sewing does not adhere well to the waxy finish.)
- Purchase a skin that is large enough to accommodate the pattern pieces.

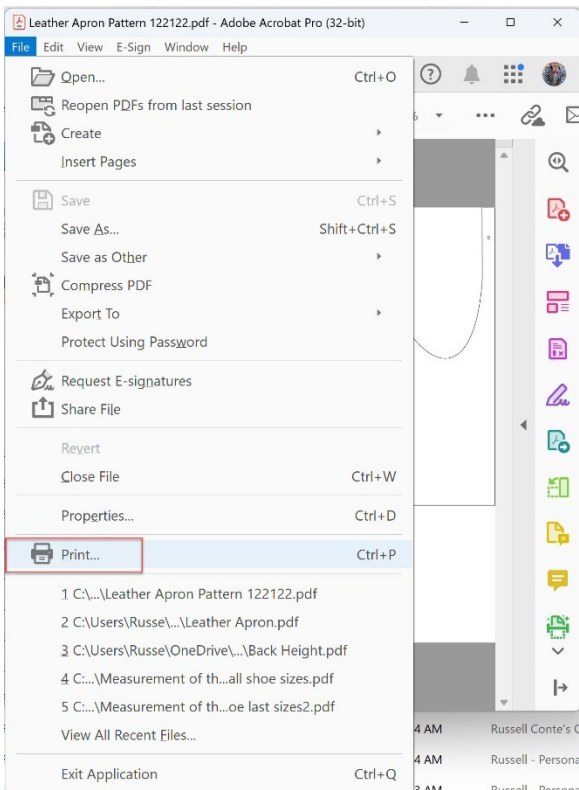
Pattern Preparation

The accompanying pattern is a pdf that can be printed full size or tile printed. If tile printing:

Select **File**.

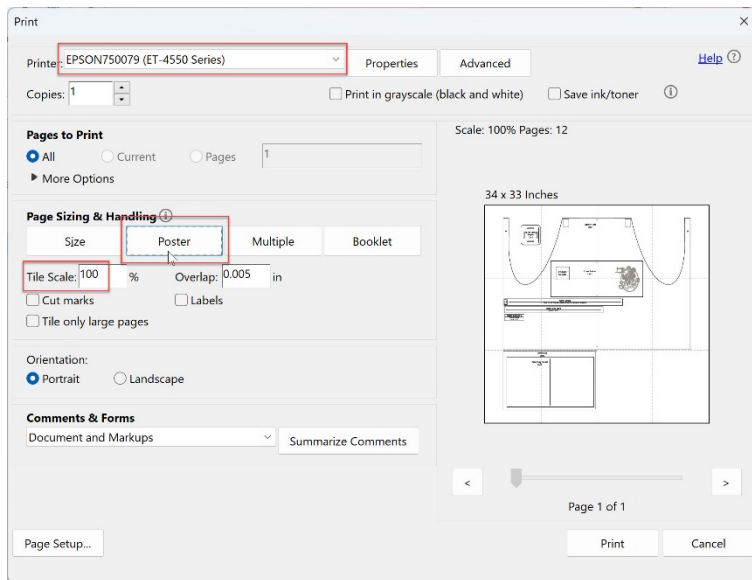


From the next screen, select **Print**.



From the **Print** screen, select the following options:

- **Printer** (select your printer)
- **Page Sizing & Handling** (select “Poster” and “Tile Scale” of 100%. You can also adjust the overlap. I leave this at the default.)



Once printed, tape the pattern pieces together, then cut out the pattern pieces. (The pattern for the straps, chest and leg pockets are simple rectangles. The chest pocket is also a rectangle and shown in its position on the bib. This was simply to reduce paper waste. If you prefer, instead of cutting out the rectangles, transfer the measurements directly to the reverse side of the leather.)

Place the pattern pieces on the reverse (wrong side of the leather). Trace around the perimeter of the pattern pieces with tailor’s chalk – a Sharpie or gel pen may also be used – then cut out the pattern pieces.

Prepare for Sewing

Thread the sewing machine as you normally would. Be sure to replace the sewing machine needle with a leather needle, either size 90 or 100. And use a decent quality polyester thread intended for sewing (not for embroidery), like Madeira’s Aerofil polyester thread.

Like textiles, the thicker the leather, the longer the stitch length. Like other sewing projects, make sure to retain a piece of the leather so that you can test stitches on the sample – not on the finished project. (Leather doesn’t heel – once needled, the needle penetrations don’t go away. It’s important to be thoughtful about the sewing process.) For this project, I like a stitch length that is about 2.75 to 3 mm in length. Start with this and see how it performs for you. You may opt to lengthen or to shorten the stitch length based on your results and particular aesthetic. However, be careful not to shorten your stitch so much that the perforations weaken the leather at the stitch.

If you look closely at my apron in the photo below, you’ll notice that I riveted all the stress points on the pocket and apron. This is really neat if you have the equipment to do this. As an alternate, it is an excellent choice to run parallel rows of stitching about ¼” apart wherever you are stitching. This provides more support to any place where there might be stress on the seams (like the corners of pockets.)



Alternate Textiles and Pattern Adjustments

This apron can also be completed using a woven textile. If using a woven textile, you will need to finish the edges in some fashion – either by binding the edges or adding additional folding allowances for the edges and the hems. For the straps, instead of leather, use webbing.

To adjust the length of the apron, simply shorten or lengthen the apron where it joins the apron legs. The apron legs may also be lengthened or shortened as needed. If adding pockets to the apron legs, make sure to adjust the size of the pockets accordingly.

To narrow or widen the apron, remove, or add to the pattern at the center vertically. Be sure to adjust the width of the pockets and apron legs to accommodate any adjustments to the body of the apron.

Construction

(If not applying pockets, skip to step 7.)

1. Using double-sided tape, tape the reverse sides and bottom of the apron leg pockets.



2. Remove the protective backing and place the pocket as shown.



3. Stitch the pocket to the apron leg at the sides and bottom. Feel free to add more pockets by adding additional rows of vertical stitching. (If you place a piece of the double-sided tape where you would like to create the pocket separations, it provides a great guide.)



4. Using double-sided tape, tape the reverse sides and bottom of the apron bib pocket.

5. Remove the protective backing and place the pocket, centered on the bib as shown.



6. Apply stitching to the bib pocket, duplicating the technique used for the leg pocket.
7. Across the top of the apron legs, apply the double-sided tape. Remove the protective layer. To the bottom edge of the apron, align the taped edge of the apron legs so they sit 1/2" up and under the apron.



8. Run two rows of parallel stitching, the first $\frac{1}{16}$ " from the edge of the apron, and the second $\frac{1}{4}$ " away from the first. Backstitch at both ends. (Or box the ends.)



9. Place two D-rings on each of the four apron leg D-ring keepers and sew in place.



10. Retrieve the leg straps and weave through the D-rings as shown below.



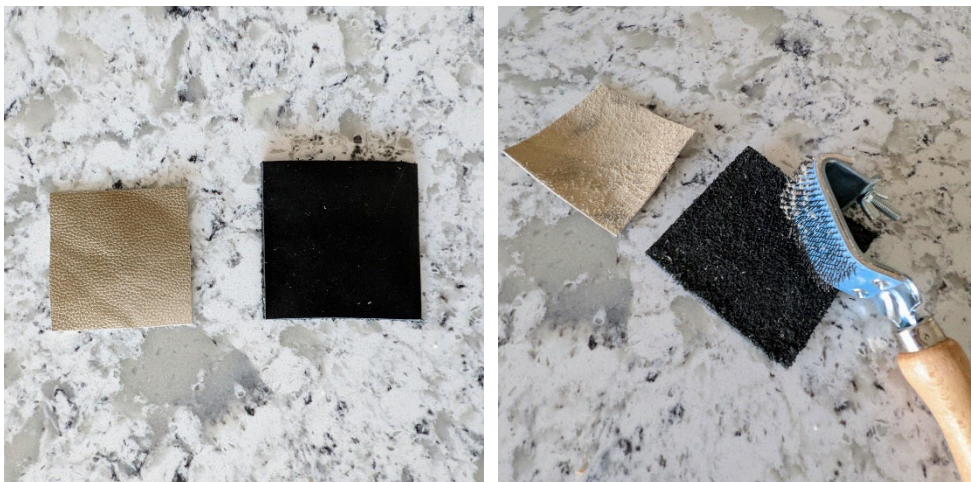
11. Place two D-rings on each of the two apron strap keepers and sew in place.



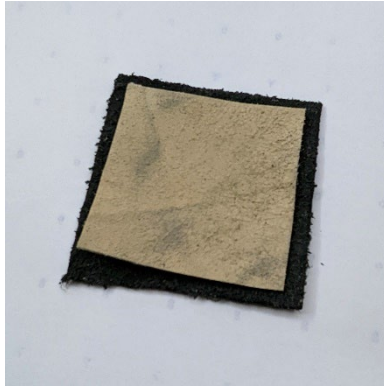
12. Measure down 1 1/2" from the upper edge of the bib. Place a piece of the double-sided tape centered to the reverse side of the strap, and place the strap as shown at the upper edge of the apron bib. Sew in place.



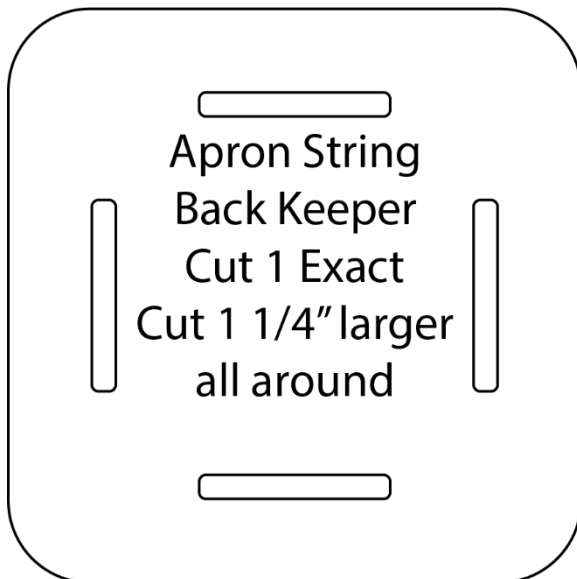
13. To create the apron string back keeper, cut the pattern piece for the face of the keeper. Cut another piece of leather for the back of the keeper 1/4" larger all around. (This makes it easier to place the two pieces together after gluing. Rough the back sides of the two pieces so they adhere more successfully once glued.



14. Following the manufacturer's instructions, apply contact cement to the reverse side of both pieces of leather. Once dry to the touch, join the two pieces of leather together and hammer lightly. Trim the edges of the larger piece so they match the smaller piece.



15. Following the diagram below, use a slot punch to open the slots in the apron string back keeper. (Note that the photograph shows the slots in the corners vs the sides as the pattern shows. Either way works. Done as the photograph shows, the keeper will rest on the back as a square. Done as the placement in the illustration shows, the keeper will rest on the back in the shape of a diamond.



16. Following the path below, weave the right apron string tail through the upper right slot of the apron string back keeper, then through the bottom left slot. Weave the left apron string tail through the upper left slot of the apron string back keeper, then through the bottom right slot.



17. Once the apron strings are woven through the apron string back keeper, weave the tails of the apron strings through the D-rings as was done for the leg strap keepers. Pass the tail of the right apron string through the D-rings on the left side. Pass the tail of the left apron string through the D-rings on the right side.



Final notes.

It didn't occur to me that this apron might also be useful in the kitchen. But a dear friend asked if I would make one for him to use in the kitchen. Having had abdominal surgery, he lost much of the feeling in his abdominal area. This made cooking in the kitchen more precarious because of the potential exposure to extremes of heat or cold. He has made great use of it. And cleanup is a snap!