

Work Clothes: Work Hard, Feel Great

Choosing the right work clothes keeps you comfortable and safe around the farm.

Oscar H. Will III | September/October 2009



Rosies overalls, Yellowstone gloves and an Old Country Road sun hat make a fashion statement while being useful and comfortable.

Hank Will



Farm fashion isn't so much about style as it is about comfort and safety. Sure, those windproof shirts and finely stitched cowboy boots look sharp enough to wear into town, but there's plenty of function built into their form. And no matter the popularity of overalls in suburban shopping malls and on kindergarten playgrounds, their roots are steeped in a rich history that's all about work. Work clothing now enjoys considerable attention in the fashion industry, because folks are always on the lookout for long-lasting and comfortable duds. But make no mistake, fashion jeans are typically made to look like you worked in them, while work jeans will serve you for months before becoming your soft old friends.

Work wear comes in an unfathomable number of styles and materials. Some are designed with specific tasks in mind, and others are of more general utility. When choosing any pair of coveralls, pants, gloves or boots, first think about the various tasks you want to safely accomplish around your place. If you plan to do a lot of stonework or steelwork, you want boots with a hard-cap (steel or plastic) toe box. If you'll be spraying toxic insecticides, you want a pair of disposable coveralls, hood and respirator. Read on for a few tips on what to wear when.

Keep a sharp mind

Headwear is often overlooked when putting together an outdoor wardrobe, but since that's where the human nerve center is located, you should give it some consideration. Hats protect your head from injury and help keep you warm or cool at the same time. If you work in the sun in any season, choose a baseball-style cap or full-brimmed cowboy or Aussie-style hat. The ball cap protects your eyes and much of your face from the ravages of bright sunshine, but it will leave your ears and neck exposed. The wide-brimmed Stetson and Aussie hats are designed to protect your entire head and neck from the sun. For hot weather, choose hats made from ripstop nylon or woven mesh and straw. For cold weather, heavy cotton, wool, felt and leather help keep in the heat. For even more wintertime comfort, choose hats with built-in earflaps.

If the work involves an opportunity to take a blow to the head, either by walking into low-hanging obstacles or by getting objects dropped on you, consider a hard hat. This type of headwear uses an impact-resistant shell or core and a suspension system to dampen the blow from small branches falling on your head while trimming trees, for example. Hardhats come in many different styles, including a nice-looking cowboy hat.

When the work involves time in the saddle of an ATV or on the seat of a UTV, a helmet might be the headgear of choice. You'll want one certified by the U.S. Department of Transportation, often called DOT certified. Manufacturers hate it when you operate an ATV without a helmet – you'll hate it, too, the day you hit that new groundhog hole in the east pasture, get bucked over the handlebars and land on your head.

Keep your thumbs opposed

Since farm, ranch and land maintenance work invariably makes heavy use of your hands, it is important to protect them, too. Selecting the right pair of gloves for the right job makes the work safer and protects hands from all manner of injury. A pair of good-fitting full-grain leather gloves is the

hallmark of farm and ranch work, but not all leathers are created equally. For fencing (especially barbed wire), choose elk hide or deerskin because the sharp wire points will be less likely to penetrate and cut the gloves. For other abrasive chores, bison, bovine and goat leather also work well.

Full body armor

If you get tired of tucking in your shirt all day, or your pants just won't stay up no matter how tightly you cinch your belt, consider wearing a pair of overalls or coveralls. These garments come in a number of different fabrics like canvas, cotton duck, denim, twill and nylon taffeta. They also come in heavily insulated outerwear versions. Lighter weight denim or twill overalls and coveralls are perfect for working in the shop and outdoors during moderate weather. Insulated versions are great for added wintertime protection. Some makers, like Rosies, make special women's overalls that include knee pockets for removable pads and zippers that convert them into short-legged overalls.

Coveralls protect your legs, torso and arms (short sleeves are available), while overalls protect your legs and torso. They also keep everyday clothing from getting dirty, stained and damaged when worn as outer garments. Choose heavily insulated taffeta or cotton coveralls when your work calls you outdoors on sub-zero nights. Choose fire-resistant fabrics if welding a broken implement is on your schedule. In any case, when using overalls and coveralls, pay special attention to rotating PTO shafts, drill presses and other machines that reach out and grab relatively loose-fitting clothing.

Core coverings

Shirts, aprons, vests and jackets all have a place in your working wardrobe and all offer you seasonal comfort and some level of protection. In general, if you are working around spinning shafts and other moving parts, choose outer garments that are not extremely loose – especially in the sleeves. Heavy denim or canvas shirts make excellent choices when fencing, operating chainsaws, working with hay, brush and other prickly materials. Even in summer, a lightweight canvas or twill shirt will do wonders to protect your arms from the sun and from the rash that invariably results when handling straw bales. If your work is less physical – like shredding crop residue or brush with an open-station tractor – choose a lightweight cotton or synthetic long-sleeve shirt. It will keep you cool and offer some sun protection.

When the temperatures are a little too cool for just a shirt, you can use a vest to take the edge off. Vests made from heavy cotton, synthetics or leather protect you from the chill and from the random encounter with thorn-armored hedge trees. Likewise, an apron tied over a shirt or jacket will give your torso and possibly your legs some protection from welding sparks (leather or other fire-resistant material), animal hooves, shop grease and the like.

Your working outerwear collection ought to include at least one denim, canvas, cotton duck or taffeta jacket or coat. This garment is your first line of defense from cold-weather encounters with sharp, hard, dirty and/or abrasive objects. You might combine the coat with a pair of insulated overalls for full body comfort and protection. Use caution when wearing bulky clothing around those spinning shafts and other pieces of moving equipment that can reach out and grab you when you least expect it.

Last legs

Leg-specific work clothes include jeans, pants, shorts and chaps. As with overalls and shirts, you want to choose fabrics and styles for the type of work. Traditional blue jeans, so-called cargo or carpenter jeans, and logger jeans are all quite comfortable and offer significant protection. Choose heavy canvas logger jeans with double-layered thighs and knees if you are likely to encounter quite a bit of abrasion on the job. Some work jeans are also equipped with pockets on the legs for knee pads, which are a must for weeding the garden and other ground or roof work. Carpenter jeans have a mess of pockets for various tools like hammers, wire cutters and pliers. Duluth Trading Co.'s heavy, canvas Firehose Work Pants make a perfect partner for stretching barbed wire because they can take the abrasion, have excellent tear resistance and pockets aplenty for tools, staples and the like. For everyday operations, nothing beats a pair of nicely broken-in blue jeans. For cold weather work, look for flannel lined pants; for hot weather work, consider a pair of shorts in the same heavy duty fabrics.

Extreme conditions require extreme solutions, and in today's world, chaps are pretty extreme. When the workday draws you into the woods with a chainsaw in tow, you definitely want to don a pair of chainsaw chaps. They protect your clothing from abrasion, but more importantly, they prevent you from cutting your leg off should you have an unfortunate encounter with the cutter bar. Choose thigh-protecting leather chaps for a day of punching cows and working calves.

Solid foundation

A workday around the farm is no place for sneakers and flip-flops. When your outdoor effort is even a bit strenuous, you need a pair of boots. Boots come in a number of different materials and styles – for most operations, leather or a combination of leather and synthetic material will serve you well. Unless the synthetic breathes, avoid boots built with 100-percent synthetic material; the only exception is when you're working in mud, manure or other wet conditions. Look for boot soles that suit your purpose. If you plan to spend long days in the saddle, choose from scores of pull-on and lace-up styles that - stay put in the stirrups, give you good footing on the ground, and give your instep and ankles plenty of support. If you work in manure, you want acid-resistant soles. In low-traction conditions, heavily lugged soles are a good option. When purchasing boots, ask whether they can be resoled and/or rebuilt. A pair of custom-made White's Farmer Ranchers might set you back \$350, but they can be totally rebuilt every couple of years for around a third of that.

Steel-toe boots are a must if you routinely work in close quarters with animals that might step on your feet, or in places where you're likely to drop heavy objects such as steel pipe or wooden fence posts on your toes. Folks tend to relegate boots with a crush-resistant toe box to steel-mill workers and machinists, but there are plenty of toe crushing opportunities on the farm.

Work clotheshorse Hank Will is partial to canvas, cotton and cowboy boots, even when editing GRIT Magazine.

[Hank Will](#) raises hair sheep, heritage cattle and many varieties of open-pollinated corn with his wife, Karen, on their rural Osage County, Kansas farm. His home life is a perfect complement to his professional life as editor in chief at GRIT and Capper's Farmer magazines. Connect with him on [Google+](#).