



Raising Your Own Beef

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If you have enough pasture or a drylot area, and zoning regulations allow you to do so, there are several advantages to raising your own beef. You can have built-in quality control: if you like lean meat and have enough pasture, you can grow your beef on a grass-only diet; if you want meat comparable to USDA grade *Choice*, you can fatten your animal on grain; or you can select a finish anywhere between lean and fat, depending on your preference for the final product and how much you want to spend producing it. Grass feeding is the least expensive, but usually takes longest; grain feeding is the most expensive.

When you raise your own beef *you* determine how long to age the carcass, whereas the mass-production of today's supermarket beef prohibits the long aging that produces the most tender meat. Whether you slaughter the animal yourself, hire a custom slaughterer, or have a commercial slaughterhouse butcher your animal, you also can select how you want the carcass cut up — whether you want the maximum amount of cuts to be roasts, steaks, hamburger, and so on.

There are, however, some disadvantages that should be considered before you go into home beef production. The animal will probably require daily feeding and watering. This often means recruiting a friend or neighbor to do these chores for you if you are going to be away from home. Calves can get sick and can require veterinary attention. Consider, too, the risk of an unpleasant experience when the time comes to slaughter your animal if you are the sentimental type or have children who may have become attached to the animal. You could have guilt feelings every time you sit down to a dinner featuring your home-grown beef.

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Selecting the animal

It is best to purchase a calf that weighs between 400 and 650 pounds. A lighter animal takes a longer time and more feed to raise. A larger animal costs more to purchase, and you may not be able to take advantage of all of your available pasture which helps make growing your own beef economical.

You should purchase a steer or a heifer, keeping in mind that steers usually gain weight faster than heifers. Although research has shown that bulls might give you the best growth for the amount of feed consumed and produce good-quality meat when slaughtered young, bulls are harder to manage.

Any of the beef breeds, a crossbreed, or even a dairy breed will make a good animal for backyard beef production. Avoid buying calves that have extremely short, deep bodies or those that have very narrow, shallow bodies. These extremes produce a lower percentage of meat. Calves from larger breeds will need to grow to a heavier weight before they will “finish” or fatten.

Although calves are available almost all year, you will probably want to purchase your animal in the spring to make the best use of your pasture. Local auctions or ranches are good places to obtain a calf. The price you can expect to pay will vary, depending on size of the animal and the livestock market at the time you make your purchase.

Avoid purchasing a calf that moves slowly or has dull or rough hair, drooping head, nasal discharge or watery eyes. These signs suggest that the animal is unhealthy. A healthy calf will be alert, eat well and have smooth, glossy hair.

Feeding your calf

How much your animal gains depends on its inherited ability to gain and what you feed it. Daily gains average 2.5 to 3.5 pounds for an animal fed a high-energy ration that contains a lot of grain. Daily gains for an animal fed only grass average from 0.75 to 1.5 pounds, depending on season and size of the animal. An animal on good pasture supplemented with some grain should gain 1.5 to 2.5 pounds a day. This means that the period you will have to feed your calf will range from less than 90 days to more than 200 days, depending on purchase and slaughter weights. The best slaughter weight is from 900 to 1,100 pounds for steers and 850 to 950 pounds for heifers. Animals larger than this can carry excess fat unless they are from a large breed.

Unless you choose to keep your calf in a pen and feed it a high-energy ration — the fastest but most expensive way to produce gains — you should have at least one-half an acre of irrigated pasture or one acre of dryland pasture available for grazing each calf. This is enough land to support one beef animal if you also feed some grain or hay.

If you have dryland pasture (pasture that depends entirely on rainfall for growth), you will get 80 to 120 days of good grazing during the spring when the forage is green and most valuable to your animal. After this period, you will have to supplement the diet with other

feeds to keep the calf gaining weight. Irrigated pasture will give you approximately seven months of good grazing from the spring well into the fall, so it is best to irrigate if you have the water and can do it without excessive cost.

Even when your calf is on irrigated pasture, some supplemental feeding of a high-energy ration is usually desirable before slaughter to improve the quality of the meat. The meat of an animal finished on grass with no hay or grain will have a slightly different flavor, and the fat will be yellow (a factor which does not affect quality).

There are two major categories of feed: concentrates (grains) and roughages (pasture, hay, silage). For an animal to grow normally and to gain weight efficiently, the amount that it eats in one day must contain enough energy and protein for body maintenance, growth, and weight gain. Normally, when a well-balanced ration is fed, the only necessary supplement is salt and can be added by placing a salt block in the pasture or by providing salt in a pan or trough.

When feeding a calf in drylot (no pasture), the ration should contain both a concentrate and a roughage. Generally, a calf will eat from 2.5 to 3 percent of its body weight in feed daily. For top performance, about 70 to 80 percent of this feed should be a concentrate mix and the remainder a good quality roughage. A 600-pound calf will eat 15 to 18 pounds of feed a day. This means it should have at least 11 pounds of concentrate mix and four pounds of hay for maximum gains in drylot. On good pasture, concentrate mix can be reduced 50 to 70 percent, but more concentrates produce faster gains.

There are many commercial concentrate mixes available from local feed stores. Some are high in protein for use during the first part of the feeding period. Others are high in energy for use during the last part of the feeding period. You can also make your own concentrate mixes if the ingredients are available. The following are examples of homemade mixes for different feeding situations:

CONCENTRATE MIXES

For feeding with good alfalfa hay in drylot	
Ground or rolled grain	75 lb
Dried molasses beet pulp	20 lb
Cottonseed meal (with excellent alfalfa hay, cottonseed meal may be dropped)	5 lb
For feeding with oat or other grain hay in drylot	
Ground or rolled grain	70 lb
Dried molasses beet pulp	15 lb
Cottonseed meal	10 lb
Alfalfa meal	5 lb
For feeding with irrigated or spring dryland pasture	
Ground or rolled grain	80 lb
Dried molasses beet pulp	20 lb

Barley, corn, milo and wheat are the most common grains used in these mixes, but other ingredients can be substituted, depending on availability. With the exception of wheat, which shouldn't make up more than half of the grain portion of the ration, these grains can be used alone or in any combination. Grains should be ground, rolled, or cracked to improve digestibility. If dried molasses beet pulp is not available, it can be replaced with equal amounts of grain or other by-product feeds.

Introduce your calf to concentrate feeds gradually. Feed approximately 1 to 1½ pounds the first day. Gradually increase this amount every couple of days. If the calf stops eating or has very loose bowel movements, cut back on the concentrate. Calves will overeat and can founder or become very sick when they have free access to concentrate mixtures.

There are some basic points you should remember when feeding your calf:

- Feed twice a day at regular times.
- Don't change feeds rapidly. If it is necessary to change grain or hay, mix some of the new feeds with the old and gradually increase the amount of new feeds over several days until the changeover is complete.
- Have water and salt available at all times.
- Keep water and feeding troughs clean.

Again, the exact feeding program selected will depend on quantity and quality of the grass you have available, how long you want to keep the calf before slaughter, and the way you like your meat.

Slaughter

Unless you have the skill, equipment and facilities you will need someone to slaughter your animal for you. In many areas there are professionals who will come to your place to do custom slaughtering, or you can take your animal to a slaughterhouse. A few large packing plants also provide slaughtering service for individual animals. Check the classified ads of local newspapers or the yellow pages of your phone book for the availability of these services in your area. It will cost you around \$20 or \$25 for the slaughtering. Add another 18 to 20 cents a pound if you want your meat cut and wrapped for the freezer. Expect to get approximately 45 to 50 percent of the live weight of your animal back in the form of usable cuts for the dinner table. Be sure to contact the slaughter plant *and* the processing plant *before* you deliver the calf or the carcass.

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