



MEAT PRODUCTION AND PROCESSING

In Washington State, meat processing can be done by USDA-certified meat processing plants, a custom meat processing plant, or a mobile processing operation. There are currently no state-certified processing facilities. It can be difficult for someone new to raising their own food to find a processing facility and custom plants are often booked with long-term customers and little room for more animals, especially on short notice.

Before you buy and raise a steer, hog, lamb, or goat to finished market weight, be certain you know where you will have it processed. If you do not have a processing plan in place, do not purchase your first animal.

It takes significant training to learn how to kill an animal humanely and efficiently. Inexperienced people attempting this at home can compromise animal welfare, human safety, and food safety.

Life Cycles

How long does each species take to reach market readiness or maturity? How long are they pregnant? How many are born at one time? How fast do they grow? How long do they live? Investigate the answers to these questions for the species that interests you to prevent surprises and disappointment. If having meat for your family within a month is your goal, chickens or rabbits will meet your needs much more than will cattle.



Meat Yields

How much meat will you get from a 1200-pound steer, a 280-pound hog, 140-pound lamb, a 120-pound goat, an 8-pound chicken, or a 5-pound rabbit? First-time animal owners are often shocked to learn how much cut-and-wrapped meat a live animal will produce after inedible parts (head and feet, skin, blood, intestines, etc.) are removed. Research this ahead of time for each species so you can calculate your final cost per pound of meat and prepare adequate freezer space for storage.

Processing

How will you convert a live animal into meat for your family? How and where will it be killed and who will do it? Who will break the carcass down into recognizable cuts of meat suitable for family meals? What will you do with the inedible parts of the carcass?

Meat Regulations

Only meat processed through USDA-certified processing plants can be sold on an individual cut basis and sold interstate. This information is not relevant to you if you are only raising meat for your own family. Meat processed at custom plants will be cut and wrapped into individual cuts labeled for the person buying and owning an eighth, quarter, half, or whole live animal before it was killed. These cuts cannot be sold, traded, bartered, or given away to anyone else.

More information is available from the [WSDA Handbook for Small and Direct Marketing Farms](#), the Green Book. One helpful resource is the Green Book's fact sheet on "[Selling Beef, Pork, Lamb, Goat and Other Meat.](#)" [PDF]



There are separate fees for killing and cutting and wrapping meat. These fees can be significant and should be considered in advance, along with the expected pounds and types of packaged meat. Pigs, for example, are not 100 percent bacon.

Finish

A meat animal is “finished” when it has met its genetic potential for growth and added some degree of fat cover. Animals first grow their skeleton, then fill out their muscles. Any additional weight gain is fat either under the skin (sheep, hogs, and steers) or in the abdomen (goats). Some degree of fat cover indicates the animal has completed all muscular development and is “finished.” Lack of finish usually means the animal is akin to a green tomato—it hasn’t reached its full potential for food quality and quantity.

Rate of Gain

How fast do animals grow? Rate of gain depends on species, breed, genetics, health, nutrition, weather, and activity level. Cattle “pushed” with diets high in grain content can gain up to 5 pounds a day. Cattle raised exclusively on hay or grass will gain more slowly and take longer to finish. A lifelong rate of gain should average at least 1.5 pounds per day for best carcass quality. Typical rates of gains for goats, sheep, and pigs are 0.25 to 0.40, 0.3 to 0.75, and 0.8 to 1.7 pounds per day, respectively, depending on the above factors.