

How And When To Butcher Chickens – Mother Earth News

Sheryl Campbell — Read time: 4 minutes

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Here's a step-by-step process on how and when
to butcher chickens to ensure you're eating
healthy meat.**



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Improve your health by eating naturally raised chickens. Their meat has more [heart-healthy yellow omega-3 fat](#) and less saturated fat than poultry from the store, and you can ensure that they are eating a natural diet of insects, greens, and seeds.

It's as simple as raising and butchering broiler chickens in your own backyard. Once you master a few basics, you'll spend 11 easy weeks a year raising them and one day having a butchering party with friends. You can successfully raise broilers outside in the Mid-Atlantic from May-October.

Choose Your Breed

Freedom Ranger Chickens make the best home broiler flock since they are active birds that reach their peak weight of 5-6 pounds in 10-11 weeks. They grow well in free range and fenced pasture environments, foraging for food during daytime hours. Other broiler breeds that grow more quickly tend to be unable to walk around after a few weeks as they get too heavy, too fast.



Choose Your Numbers

Determine how many dressed broilers you can stuff into your freezer and how much space you can devote to raising them. We have typically limited ourselves to 30 birds who forage on 2500 square feet of pasture. We could easily raise twice that number in this space without harming the pasture. Or we could raise two batches of 30 with a short break in between.

Choose Your Environment

You want to balance safety and health for the chickens. We use a 50x50 foot fenced pasture with a three sided shed which is the night [coop for the chickens](#). Wood-framed door panels covered in chicken wire keep chicks in at night while keeping predators out. They are encased with wooden lathes and cross bars so that raccoons can't break in. A heat lamp hanging from the rafters over an enclosed section of the shed serves as an early brooder for the baby chicks.

The chicks stay in the brooder area for about three weeks and then begin foraging on pasture.



Choose Your Feeding Program

The [chickens are let out on pasture](#) to forage for bugs and vegetation during the day, then put away safely at night. We provide free access to organic, non-GMO feed at night to ensure a balanced diet. Water is available at all times in the shed and also out on pasture.

Choose Your Butchering Day

We always share the costs with friends and then hold a group butchering party where everyone takes home a portion of meat. Over the years each person has begun to specialize in handling a couple of the jobs for the day.



Sharing hard work with friends

Choose Your Butchering Set-Up

No matter how you set up your work area, the steps are similar. Here's how we set up our work stations and the steps we take at each one:

Station One

- A board with a hole in the center set on stacked cement blocks at both ends
- A killing cone made of chimney flashing runs through the hole creating a funnel
- Live chickens are placed upside down in the cone with their heads sticking out the bottom
- A trash can lined with plastic sits below
- Using one hand to stretch out the neck, you cut the carotid artery with a scalpel letting the blood drain out fully



Station Two

- A large kettle of water heated to 150 degrees over an outdoor camp stove
- Scald the dead birds in the kettle for 30 seconds, plunging them up and down by the feet to quickly heat and loosen feathers

Station Three

- A clothesline slung between two trees
- Two small loops are attached to the line with slip knots
- A large barrel sits below
- Slip each of the chicken's legs into a slip knot and quickly pull off all the feathers into the barrel



Plucking station for backyard chicken butchering

Station Four

- A 6 foot folding table, a hose with sprayer attached, poultry sheers, a scalpel, and small propane torch
- The head and feet are cut off here, as well as the small oil gland at the base of the tail
- The vent is tied with string or a rubber band to keep excrement from contacting the meat
- The torch is used to singe off the pin feathers



Station Five

- is indoors at the eviscerating table
- Large coolers hold ice-water baths, and we have stacks of two-gallon freezer bags
- Using our hands we reach in and remove all the organs from the rear of the chicken

- The chicken is washed in cold water and dried
- We then put them into freezer bags by holding the full bag under water up to the zip line so as to squeeze all the air out of it before zipping it up with the chicken inside
- The bagged birds cool off in the ice-water bath for several hours



Eviscerating before cooling

Station Six

- First they go into the large refrigerator where the cooled birds are placed in their bags for 24-48 hours to make the meat tender
- Then they go into the chest freezer where they will keep well for at least 6 months



At the end of the butchering day

That's all there is to it. Eleven weeks of just checking on the chicks twice a day to make sure they are healthy and to replenish their food and water. Followed by one very full day of processing made fun by sharing it with friends. Go out and find a few friends, set up your growing area, and raise a few broilers of your own. We hope you have fun on butchering day and thoroughly enjoy the healthful meat you'll raise.

[Sheryl Campbell](#) is an heirloom gardener, shepherd, and edible flower educator who owns Bouquet Banquet in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley.

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