



How to process your own chickens

By Hudson Hill

Raising chickens in your backyard can be a rewarding and educational experience.

Chickens are easy to raise, relatively inexpensive, and, with adequate feed, will take less than three months to have birds ready for consumption.

The challenge for most backyard enthusiasts is how to take a live chicken and process it for freezing. Many resources provide information on caring for chicks, proper feeding, and building facilities. This article has six steps for backyard processing that, when followed, will ensure a quality product to enjoy throughout the year.

Step One - Harvesting

The traditional images of backyard harvesting usually include an ax and a chopping block; however, **do not chop the head off of your chickens!** The hardest part of making a high-quality product is to make sure the chicken is plucked correctly; nobody wants pin feathers left in Sunday dinner. Chopping the head off the way grandpa did or breaking the spinal cord has the effect of "setting" the feathers and makes the plucking process harder. The proper way to harvest the bird with less

stress is to place the bird upside down in a chicken cone or using sturdy rope or twine and cut the neck artery with a very sharp knife. Birds are left in the cone for a few minutes for this process to finish. Making sure the bird is properly secured and cut brings the least amount of stress and puts the highest quality meat into your freezer.

Step Two - Dipping

Prior to being plucked, chickens need to be put into a hot bath. This is called scalding. When done correctly, it makes the job of plucking a breeze. If you have plucked a chicken without scalding, you will be pleasantly amazed how easy birds pluck after a hot bath. The water temperature needs to be between 130 to 170 degrees Fahrenheit. For best results, use a thermometer to monitor the water temperature. Chickens will need to be scalded between 30 seconds to two minutes. You can check feather readiness by pulling wing feathers; when they come out easily, you are ready to pluck. Remember that quality of product is what you are shooting for, so, if the skin is tearing on the chicken, the bath temperature is too hot or the birds are being scalded for too long. If feathers are not coming out easily, the water is not hot enough or the birds are not being scalded long enough. Usually, after a few test birds, getting the feel for when a bird is ready for the plucker is easy.

Step Three - Plucking

The difference between a bird that looks great on the dinner table and one that does not is a bird that has been properly plucked. If birds

have been harvested properly and scalded at the right temperature for the right amount of time, removing feathers is not that hard.

There are three options for the backyard enthusiast: hand plucking, using a tabletop plucker, or a tub-style plucker.

The easiest way to hand pluck is to have the bird hanging upside down and start on the drumsticks and work your way down. If the bird has been harvested and scalded correctly, the feathers on the breast and legs will basically just wipe off.

A tabletop plucker makes removing feathers quicker and easier than hand plucking and only costs around \$200. If using the tabletop plucker, feathers are removed by holding the bird's legs and rolling it across the plucking fingers. Though it takes some practice to perfect this operation, after a few birds you will develop a technique, and birds will be plucked in about a minute.

The deluxe method of plucking for the backyard enthusiast would be a tub-style plucker. These machines are more expensive starting at around \$1,500 and up, but many people would say they are worth it. In most tubs, two or three birds can be put in at a time or even a turkey, and they will be plucked clean in less than a minute.

Step Four - Cleaning

Finding someone with experience to demonstrate the proper method of processing chickens is recommended. At a minimum, you may want to utilize some Internet sources that show the

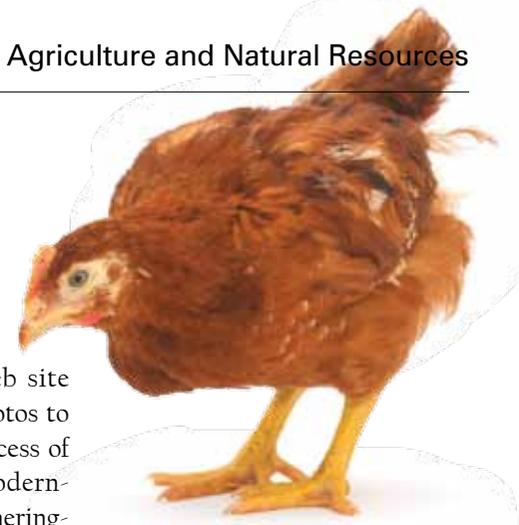
steps. The following Web site has very clear, detailed photos to guide you through the process of evisceration: www.themodernhomestead.us/article/Butchering-Evisceration-2.html.

This is a very important step for quality. Go slow at first and work on the quality that goes into your freezer and, even more importantly, what you take out. Use sharp knives and a sturdy cutting board at your work station. You may also want to consider purchasing specialized equipment like shears and lung pullers that work well and make the job a little easier.

Understanding a little poultry anatomy will help in this step, and there are several things to make sure you remove: the crop, which is the pouch at the top of the chest where the neck and the breast meet, lungs, kidneys, and the gland on the tail. As you finish cleaning birds, use a hand sprayer attached to a hose to clean the bird inside and out and prepare it for the cold water bath.

Step Five - Cooling

The cooling process is a simple and easy way to ensure quality of product with the goal being to cool the meat as quickly as possible. One easy and successful method is to fill a clean plastic barrel or other large container with cold water, and leave the water running slowly while you add processed birds. The birds need to reach a temperature of 40 degrees within two hours. As you begin the bagging step, do some quick quality assurance. After birds have been in cold water, stubborn pinfeathers come out easily.



Step Six - Freezing

Protecting the meat from freezer burn is essential for quality; there are many ways to protect meat within the freezer. All meat loses quality in the freezer, so try to consume the meat within one year.

When putting the birds into the freezer, do not stack them any closer together or deeper than necessary. It may take several days to fully freeze them.

Although most consumers enjoy whole baking chickens, you may want to consider piecing some of your birds for uses other than baking like frying or barbecuing. If putting legs, thighs, and breasts together, vacuum sealing works great. If freezer space is an issue, whole birds take up more space than do pieced and sorted birds.

After following these six steps, you will have a quality product you raised and are able to enjoy throughout the year.

This is what I use: electric auto plucker, two hoses with source and splitter, hand sprayer, string or cones, propane cooker to heat water bath, scalding pot, work table with a cutting board, cold water barrel, knives, lung extractor, scissors, and freezing supplies.

Hudson Hill is a University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service educator based in Afton and serves Lincoln, Sublette, Sweetwater, Teton, and Uinta counties. He can be reached at (307) 885-3132 or hrhill@uwyo.edu.

