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Guide to Raising Healthy Beef Cattle

Rhonda Gildersleeve

Statistics from the 2007 Census of Agriculture suggest that an increasing number of rural landowners in Wisconsin are raising beef cattle on their property, and they are doing it for a variety of reasons—to provide their own food, as a hobby, and for additional income. Raising beef cattle can be an enjoyable means of pursuing any of these goals on a small farm.

The decision

If you are thinking about raising beef cattle on a small scale, be sure to consider the key aspects of the operation while planning your enterprise. Here are several questions to help guide you:

- What are your goals?
- What land area and facilities are required to house, feed, and handle beef cattle?
- How much time, labor, and money can you invest in raising cattle?
- Do you have labor available for times when you are away?

- Do you need to generate income from raising beef cattle?
- How will you market your animals?
- How long do you plan to raise beef cattle?
- What are the local zoning restrictions and requirements?

Production system & breed selection

Beef production systems are generally described according to the life stage of the beef production cycle that they focus on:

- **Cow-calf systems** focus on production and sale of beef calves from a herd of beef cows.
- **Seed stock systems** use artificial insemination extensively and produce bulls and heifers for use in cow-calf systems.
- **Stocker systems** typically purchase weaned/lightweight feeder calves from a cow-calf producer and raise them up to the pre-finishing weight phase.
- **Finishing systems** focus on the feeding phase to produce cattle that are ready for market.

Depending on your goals, you may concentrate your efforts on one production system or on a combination of them. For example, you may decide that you enjoy watching young animals grow and therefore choose a cow-calf system. Or you may be interested in purchasing yearling cattle that you can pasture and feed out for your own consumption. Each type of beef production system has some particular husbandry needs; this publication provides a general overview of animal production and care.



As with other livestock species, there are numerous breeds and crossbred options, and you must decide which breed to produce. Your production situation and goals (acreage size, personal use, additional income opportunities, etc.) will help determine which breeds to consider. Other factors you might want to consider include size, temperament, marketing goals, and meat production. Prior to starting your beef enterprise, invest some time in research and talk to experienced producers and breeders to identify which beef production system and breed is right for you. Your county University of Wisconsin-Extension office can often assist you in finding objective sources of information to help you make these choices.

Facilities

Housing

Compared to other livestock, beef cattle generally have minimal housing needs, especially during the grazing season if pastured. However, each animal must have adequate pasture and/or drylot space and protection from wind and precipitation during inclement weather. Different classes of cattle have different pasture acreage needs as well as different space requirements for drylots, feeding, and resting areas when the animals are confined (table 1). Confined animal spaces should be kept clean and dry and, if the animals are housed during inclement weather conditions, the spaces must be well ventilated.

Fencing and handling facilities

Fencing and handling facilities for cattle represent a significant investment, so spend time planning these farmstead and pasture improvements and seek professional advice as needed.

Constructing permanent fencing along property boundaries will keep your animals in. Be sure the fencing is built according to the standards described in Wisconsin's fencing law statutes (Wisconsin Statute 90). Interior fencing can consist of a temporary electric fence, more permanent subdivisions that allow for pasture rotation and movement of animals, or a combination of both. If electric fencing is used, cattle should be trained to it before they are released into a pasture so that they recognize and respect the fence. Consult your electric fence energizer manual for suggestions on training livestock to electric fences.

Well-constructed cattle handling facilities ensure safety for both humans and animals. Beef cattle will occasionally need to be sorted, loaded, and/or restrained for vaccinations, breeding, or other husbandry procedures. Simple handling facilities, consisting of one or more small holding pens with a narrow alley leading to a headgate for restraining cattle, can be integrated into drylot and feeding facilities at the farmstead. For pastures, a small corral can be used to catch cattle if needed. Placing salt, other minerals, feed, or water in the corral on a regular basis allows cattle to become accustomed to the confined space and makes them easier to catch when necessary. For small acreages, a simple lane from the pasture areas to the handling facilities will be sufficient.

Feeding

Aside from the purchase of animals, feed is the largest beef cattle expense (often representing 70% of the production cost) and is an essential part of raising healthy beef cattle. There are several categories of feed: pasture, stored forages (hay, silage, baleage), concentrates (grain), salt and other minerals, and water.

Beef cattle diets are primarily composed of roughages—pasture and stored forages. Most beef cattle spend all or a portion of their time on pastures during the grazing season. Pastures are by far the most economical method of feeding cattle, so it is worth the effort to learn the basics of pasture management. During the primary grazing season, mature beef cows and their calves will require only water, salt, and mineral supplements with adequate pasture. Growing animals such as stocker or finishing cattle may also require grain supplements for extra energy unless the pasture is very high quality. If you are interested in pasture finishing systems, be sure to consider breed differences when selecting your animals since some beef cattle breeds will finish more easily than others without grain supplementation.

Supplementing pasture diets with small amounts of grain or high-quality forages allows you to stretch pasture resources early in the spring and at the end of the grazing season, also providing the opportunity for the animals to transition from stored feeds to pasture and vice versa. Feed beef cattle stored forages whenever adequate pasture is not available—during winter months, drought, and muddy conditions, when animals may need to be pulled off pastures to prevent damage to the pasture.

Table 1. Space requirements for beef cattle, per animal

	Pasture (acres)	Drylot pen space (ft ²)	Bunk feeding space (in)	Bedded resting space (ft ²)
Cow with calf	1.0–3.0	350–800	24–30	40–50
Weaned calf/stocker	0.5–1.5	300–600	18–22	20–25
Yearling/finishing	1.0–2.0	400–800	22–26	30–35

If you have enough land, you can grow stored forages at home, or you can purchase them from farmers and bring them to the farmstead. Many livestock owners purchase their winter's forage supply during the growing season, when prices are most reasonable, and store the forages in a barn, shed, silo, or other storage facility on their own property. Others contract with a neighboring farmer to harvest and store the feed and deliver it as needed. In either case, store forages properly to maintain nutrient quality and prevent spoilage. High-quality forages have few weeds, a soft and leafy texture, and a good smell. If needed, samples can be submitted for testing to determine the digestibility and protein, energy, and mineral content. Your UW-Extension county office can assist you with resources that provide more detailed information and guidelines for feeding various classes of beef cattle.

Salt, minerals, and a clean water supply are essential to beef cattle health and should be readily available at all times. Cattle may drink 10–25 gallons of water or more daily, depending on body size and air temperatures. Purchase mineral supplements with the primary forage sources in mind and adjust them slightly for the season and stage of animal production as needed.

Sources of beef cattle

Beef cattle are commonly sold through public livestock auctions or by private transactions between producers. If you are inexperienced with purchasing livestock, find a knowledgeable friend or a professional buyer who can advise you. Also, taking the time to research and visit auction markets and/or beef producers before purchasing from them can provide you with valuable information that will help you avoid making bad purchase decisions.

At livestock auctions, sellers bring their animals to a central location so that numerous buyers can bid on them. Although auctions may offer a large selection of animals, they may provide only limited background information regarding animal husbandry and health unless it is provided by the seller or certified by an independent agency as part of the sale. Also, cattle that have been living in relative isolation on their home farm come into contact with other livestock at auctions and are exposed to stress and pathogens that may compromise their health.

Breed associations, local newspapers, and the Internet are readily available sources of contact information for purchasing cattle through private transaction. Since biosecurity and health of purchased livestock are very important, private sales have the advantage of allowing you the opportunity to make personal contact with sellers, question them on their production methods, and observe their livestock care firsthand. It may cost more to buy beef cattle privately from a recognized breeder or producer, but you are also buying that individual's good business reputation and sound production and health protocols.

Animal health & biosecurity

After purchasing healthy animals from a reputable source, your job as a livestock owner is to properly feed, house, and care for your cattle. Here are some strategies to consider:

- Develop a relationship with your local veterinarian to ensure that your animals receive proper vaccinations and other appropriate health care procedures as needed.
- Keep livestock equipment, feeding areas, and housing clean and comfortable.
- Develop an area to safely keep new additions or sick animals quarantined from the rest of the herd.
- Develop facilities that enable you to provide safe and efficient handling of animals for health procedures.



Regulations

Keeping livestock

There are many state and local regulations and ordinances that govern livestock production in Wisconsin. Many townships and counties have zoning regulations that limit the number and size of livestock that can be kept on small acreage parcels, so it is important to know the requirements of your local jurisdiction before keeping livestock.

Wisconsin statutes also require that all premises with livestock register with the state Department of Agriculture, Trade, & Consumer Protection (WI DATCP). Premises registration does not require individual animal identification, and the information you provide is used only for locating or tracking susceptible animals in the case of an animal disease outbreak. You can register your premises online at the Wisconsin Livestock Identification Consortium (WLIC) website: www.wiid.org. Printed registration information is available at your county UW-Extension office.



Bringing cattle into Wisconsin

In general, cattle entering Wisconsin must have several pieces of documentation:

- Official identification
- Certificates of veterinary inspection (health certificates)
- Proof of meeting brucellosis, tuberculosis, and vesicular stomatitis entry requirements and/or import permits (if coming from states with current animal movement restrictions due to disease quarantines in that state)

Contact the Animal Health division at WI DATCP at 608-224-4872 for more information on cattle health requirements and the necessary permits for animal movements into the state.

Sale of meat products

If you plan to market meat directly to consumers, additional regulations and licenses may apply to your business. For more information, contact WI DATCP Food Safety division at 608-224-4700.

Additional resources

University of Wisconsin Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems
www.cias.wisc.edu

University of Wisconsin-Extension Animal Sciences—beef page
www.uwex.edu/ces/animalscience/beef/index.cfm

University of Wisconsin-Extension Publications—Animals and Small Farms sections
learningstore.uwex.edu/Farming-C3.aspx

Wisconsin Cattlemen's Association and Wisconsin Beef Improvement Association
www.wisconsinbeef.com



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All beef cattle photos by Bill Halfman.

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