Your hands-on guide to raising and caring for beef cattle

From *Raising Beef Cattle For Dummies* by Scott Royer, Nikki Royer

Beef cattle are amazing, hardy creatures that can convert otherwise unusable plants into high-quality beef for people. You can raise a few head of cattle to stock your own freezer with wholesome steaks, roasts, and other cuts of meat, or you can start your own beef cattle business and sell the butchered meat to customers. No matter what your end goal is, your beef cattle depend on you to look out for their well-being, so you must know how to tend to their needs, including properly choosing, feeding, and caring for them.

**Selecting Healthy Beef Cattle and Bringing Them Home Safely**

When raising beef cattle, you want to start off on the right hoof by selecting healthy animals and by making their transition to their new home as smooth as possible. Consider these pointers when getting started on your bovine adventure:

- **Prepare your facilities before bringing home your first beef cattle.** Your cattle need grazing areas with a good perimeter fence (either six-strand high-tensile or, at minimum, a 4-foot high woven wire), a strong pen or corral, a shelter, and clean loafing and eating areas.

- **Purchase only healthy animals.** Your beef cattle should be alert without being wild. Their eyes should be bright, clear, and free of discharge. Their breathing should be smooth and regular, and they shouldn’t be coughing. The animal’s body should be full and rounded, not shrunken or hollowed out. They should be able to move with a free and easy stride.

- **Avoid buying cattle with mucus coming from the nose or that have swollen legs or joints.** These symptoms may indicate illness or even an infection, which can be passed to other cattle and, in some cases, humans.

- **Prepare your trailer for hauling cattle.** Clean the inside of the trailer to reduce the chance of disease transmission. Make sure it has a skid resistant floor to help keep cattle from slipping, and adjust the ventilation on the sides of the trailer so it’s appropriate for the weather conditions.

- **Load and unload the cattle in a quiet and patient manner.** Being transported is stressful for cattle, but you can minimize their distress by being calm and taking your time. Although movie cowboys do a lot of whooping or hollering around their herds, such loud noises scare the animals and make them harder to load on the trailer the next time.

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Selecting Healthy Beef Cattle and Bringing Them Home Safely, continued...

- **House your new arrivals in a small, secure holding lot and look them over for injuries.** Limiting the size of the pen for your new cattle reduces nervous pacing and decreases the opportunity to escape. Make sure the pen is stocked with good-quality grass hay and plenty of clean water. After you unload all the cattle, check for any injuries that may have occurred during transport.

- **Keep your new cattle separate from the rest of your animals so they have no fence line contact.** This quarantining procedure helps reduce the spread of disease through air, direct contact, feed, water, equipment, or traffic. Beef cattle may need to be isolated from 21 to 120 days depending on which diseases are of concern in your area. Your vet can help with specific recommendations.

**Feeding and Watering Your Beef Cattle**

One of the main things you can do to keep your beef cattle healthy and content is to properly take care of their dietary needs. Here are some tips for tending to all four of your bovine's stomachs:

- **When adding or removing feeds from your animal's diet, gradually make the change over a week or so.** An abrupt switch in feedstuffs can harm the helpful bacteria in the digestive tract and cause an unsafe change in a bovine's digestive juice pH.

- **Be prepared for big appetites.** Beef cattle can consume up to 3 percent of their body weight a day in dry feed.

- **Provide your beef cattle with forage to keep their digestive systems functioning correctly.** You can meet your animal's forage requirements by letting them graze pasture or feeding them dried, harvested hay.

- **Use concentrates to supplement forages as needed.** Supplements are particularly useful during times of drought, to help market cattle put on fat, or to meet the nutritional needs of a lactating and ovulating young cow. Concentrates like the grains of corn, oats, wheat, and barley are good sources of energy for your cattle. Soybean and cottonseed meal supply both energy and protein.

- **Add minerals and vitamins to your beef cattle’s diet to keep them healthy and productive.** You can mix these nutrients with the other feed you provide your cattle, or you can serve it up in a free-choice feeder for animals on pasture.

- **Always make sure your beef cattle have access to a clean, fresh, and plentiful supply of water.** Beef cattle drink a lot. During a hot summer day, for example, a mother cow with a nursing calf can consume nearly 18 gallons of water.

- **Provide only wholesome feedstuffs.** Don’t feed your beef cattle any grain or hay that's musty, moldy, or soiled by animal feces.
Keeping Your Beef Cattle Healthy

Sure, you can provide your beef cattle with medical care when it gets sick or hurt, but preventing disease and injury in the first place is even better. Practice the following measures to keep niggling beef cattle concerns from morphing into big problems:

- **Provide a stress-free environment for your animals.** Stress makes any living creature more susceptible to disease, and beef cattle are no exception. So take the time to always interact with your cattle in a calm and low-stress fashion.

- **Monitor your animal’s feed consumption.** Decreased appetite is an early sign of sickness. Healthy cattle come up to the feed trough at every meal to eat. Healthy beef cattle on pasture have full and rounded stomachs.

- **Keep an eye out for changes in vital signs.** For mature cattle, the normal temperature range is 100.4–103.1 degrees Fahrenheit, the pulse is 40–80 beats per minute, and the respiration rate at rest is 10–30 breaths per minute.

- **Create a vaccination schedule for your cattle and follow it.** Implement an immunization schedule for respiratory and clostridial diseases. If you have breeding animals, you also want to have a reproductive vaccination program. Many fairly priced and highly effective vaccines are on the market.

- Be sure to read and follow all label directions when giving shots.

- **Develop a good working relationship with your veterinarian.** Your vet can be a great adviser as you strive to keep your herd of beef cattle in tip-top shape.

About the Authors

Nikki and Scott Royer, graduates of the Purdue University School of Agriculture, raise cattle on their diversified family farm in Indiana. In addition to raising the calves from their own cow herd, the Royers also purchase and finish feeder cattle from other producers.