

So You Want To Buy a Half a Hog

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Early in the pandemic, back in April and May, when it seemed that everyone was hoarding everything, meat became tricky to find for a while as supply chains scrambled to adjust to the new reality. Which then caused a lot of folks to start looking at trying to buy a half a hog, or a quarter of beef often going straight to the livestock producer to try to make arrangements. I know it was happening because I was getting the phone calls. While this is something that a lot of people, especially farm families, have done for years, it is something that needs to be planned for well in advance.

The first thing to be considered is where are you going to put the processed meat? A locker plant (or processing plant or butcher shop) does have some freezer space and cold storage but not enough for everyone to have a "locker". Once they call you and say it's ready, you need to go get it and you need someplace to put it.

A half a hog is going to yield 60 to 70 pounds of final product. A standard upright home refrigerator/freezer could probably hold that much if it was empty. On average figure that 2.25 cubic feet of upright freezer space will hold about 50 pounds of meat. A quarter of a beef is another story though. A quarter of a beef usually results in 140 to 150 pounds of final product. That will require a dedicated freezer, either an upright freezer or a chest freezer. If you have a chest freezer you'll need about 4.5 cubic feet of space or 5.5 cubic feet in an upright freezer. The other challenge at times this year is finding a freezer. Appliances in general have often been in short supply and freezers were impossible to buy for several months.

Once you have your storage taken care of you can start working on acquiring the meat to fill that freezer. You can probably work through a locker plant (butcher) or you can band together with others to go directly to the producer to buy that market hog or steer. But again, make sure that you have a space for it to be processed. Many retail locker plants are already booked up well into 2021 and a few clear into 2022 already. That is over a year out! Talk to the locker plant first before you hand over money for the animal. You really do have to start at the end and work your way back to the animal. Remember, these retail locker plants have a limited capacity of how many animals they can slaughter. They have to have a USDA inspector there at the time of slaughter and there simply aren't enough inspectors to have one at every locker plant every day. Some smaller plants may only be able to slaughter one or two days a week.

If you have all of these items together then you can buy the animal. But once the animal is bought, you are still going to have to pay for the processing costs. Which is why it's sometimes better to work directly with the locker plant because then they have taken all of that into account already.

The other thing you need to know is what you are going to get when you buy that half hog or quarter of beef. You aren't getting all T-bones or rib eye steaks. I do have a couple of charts that you can pickup at the Extension Office that talk about what cuts of pork or beef you can expect and how much. The other thing to keep in mind is the cash that you'll need to have because the whole bill is due at once unlike when you buy meat as you need it.

The desire to lay in a supply of meat is real and understandable. Many people got scared last spring and hopefully everyone has learned a few things since then so mass hoarding won't happen again. But if you decide to go forward with buying a quantity of meat remember to start at the end (the freezer in your house) and work your way step by step back to the live animal!