

From Ronda's Front Porch to Yours

Ronda White

Packaging and Storing Wild Game at Home

Game meat can provide a nutritious, tasty and sometimes less expensive alternative to the traditional meat products sold in grocery stores. Nevertheless, you need to handle and store game meat properly to keep it from spoiling or allowing the growth of disease-causing organisms (pathogens) that can cause foodborne illness.

Game meat is defined as the meat of any animal that is hunted for food or sport instead of being raised on a farm. Examples include: deer, elk, wild hogs, and game birds, such as quail, pheasants, or turkeys.

To keep your game meat safe to eat, field dress the carcass with the right equipment and under the proper conditions. Although the techniques for field dressing vary by the type of game animal, some important basic tools are common to all: rubber gloves, sanitized knives, coolers that are sanitized and insulated, also large enough to contain both meat and ice from potable water, and a plan for transporting the carcass from the field into an insulated cooler or another cold-storage unit as quickly as possible.

To enable the meat to cool more quickly, trim large muscle cuts into small pieces, and package them individually before moving them to a refrigerator or freezer. Do not package, chill, or freeze large cuts of meat, because they require more energy and time to cool and completely freeze than smaller cuts of meat. Freezing smaller cuts also helps maintain the overall meat quality longer by minimizing exposure to air and re-sealing, which can result in off-odors. Maximize the airflow in the cooler to make sure the meat adequately cools. After the carcass has been properly field dressed, quartered, and cooled to below 40° F, it is ready to be packaged for storage in the freezer.

Freezing is the easiest way preserve wild game. Freeze meat at 0° F, or below, as quickly as possible to reduce or inactivate pathogen growth and other chemical changes that can affect its quality. Done properly, freezing causes little to no loss in the nutrient content of wild game meats.

By following basic guidelines for freezing, you can help ensure a safe, high-quality product. Use packaging material such as butcher/freezer paper, flexible freezer bags, or a vacuum sealer and compatible packaging for small cuts of meat. All of these materials work well if used correctly.

If you use a vacuum sealer, follow the manufacturer recommendations for selection of packaging materials and vacuum conditions. Do not try to vacuum-seal using films or packaging materials not recommended by the manufacturer — because the heat sealer may not be rated to melt the plastic enough to create a strong, airtight seal.

Vacuum-sealing meat also helps prevent potential freezer burn and spoilage. When using freezer bags, it's important to press each package to expel as much air as possible before closing it. For paper packages, follow the steps below and label them with the date and wild game contents. Packaging and Storing Wild Game at Home.

Step 1: Wrap the meat in plastic cling wrap.

Step 2: Place the wrapped meat in the center of freezer paper.

Step 3: Bring the opposite sides of the paper together and fold down the edges about 1 inch deep.

Step 4: While folding down the edges, push out the air.

Step 5: Fold the ends tightly to form a V.

Step 6: Flip the package so that the seam is down, and then fold the ends over each other.

Step 7: Seal the edges with freezer tape.

Step 8: Label the package with its contents and the date.

Visit our YouTube page for a step-by-step video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oChAoQ21b3A>.

Keep your freezer in a cool, dry, ventilated place. Never put it in direct sun or next to a stove or water heater, which makes it difficult for the freezer to remain at 0° F or lower.

Also, be sure the freezer sits level, and avoid overloading it. Overloading can slow down the freezing rate and could reduce the meat quality.

Instead of stacking the packages in one area of the freezer, spread them out to allow air circulate among the packages more easily, which helps the product freeze faster.

For best quality, the U.S. Department of Agriculture recommends consuming frozen wild game within 8 months to a year. If you store meats in the refrigerator, keep them at 40° F or below, and eat or freeze them within two or three days. Use an appliance thermometer to make sure that your refrigerator stays at the proper temperatures.

To keep the meats from contaminating other foods in the refrigerator, store them separately from other foods.

To learn more about wild game processing and how to cook wild game, The Scurry County Extension Office is hosting a Hunt for Dinner Tonight Cooking School on November 30 at the 37th Street Church of Christ. Doors open at 5:30 for shopping and the program is from 6:00-7:30 p.m.

Local vendors include Pampered Chef, Scentsy, Doterra, Jewelry by Cindy, Stampin' Up and Lularoe. Door prizes will be awarded throughout the night to include gift certificates for wild game processing, Texas Tech seasonings, a floral arrangement and many other items.

Cost is \$20 which includes a wild game recipe booklet and feature recipe samples. This event is sponsored by the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Offices in Scurry, Borden, Mitchel, Lynn, Gaines and Crosby counties, Klempke's Sausage Haus, Jackson Bros Meat Locker, Blossum Bucket and Red Raider Meats.

To register for the program contact the Scurry County Extension Office at 573-5423 by November 20.

Source: Rebecca Dittmar, M.Ed, RS, Program Specialist, Food Protection Management Program, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, College Station, Texas.

Educational programs of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service are open to all people without regard to race, color, sex, disability, religion, age, or national origin. The Texas A&M University System, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the County Commissioners Courts of Texas Cooperating