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Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service • Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources

Buying A Bucket Calf

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The 4-H Bucket Calf Project is designed to introduce youth 7 to 12 years old to beef and dairy 4-H projects. By allowing younger children the experience of working with a smaller, less intimidating size of animal, they become comfortable with beef and dairy cattle as they grow. This is designed to be a short-term project with calves purchased in May and finalized with showing at the local county fair.

A bucket calf is an orphan or newborn calf purchased when they are 1 to 10 days old. The calves may be male or female, beef or dairy. The calves are started on a bottle (or bucket) and nipple.

Calves should be purchased between May 1 and May 30 of the current year. Counties can tag the calves at the end of May or the first of June to verify ownership. This may be done at a central location or tags may be given to club project leaders who tag the calves for participants.

Frequently Asked Questions

What breed of calf should I get? Do I buy a male or female?

Breed and sex of the calf are of no importance in judging this project. But, you may want to consider long-term goals for each calf. Some questions you must answer are: Will I sell my calf after I show it at the county fair? Do I want to keep it and show it at future shows? Do I want to show beef (steers or heifers) or dairy (heifer)? Does my family have the resources (time and money) for a year around project?

How much does a newborn to week-old calf cost?

Prices vary depending on demand, health, breed, and location. Typically dairy breeds are more available and, therefore less expensive. Prices will vary from \$50 all the way up to \$500 in extreme situations. An average price should be \$150 unless there are other price factors. A good calf at a sale barn in May, could cost \$300.

Where do I get a newborn calf?

Calves may be purchased off the farm from dairy or beef producers. Quite often, dairy producers will be able to tell you when they will have calves available. Dairies usually do not like to keep male calves, so they may be less expensive. Also, livestock auctions sell newborn to week-old calves. Do not wait until the last week or day to try and find a calf. Start making contacts well in advance. Contact your Extension Educator for more ideas.

What is the most important thing to know when buying a calf?

Make sure the calf has had colostrum after being born. Colostrum is the first milk produced by cows at calving time. It is essential to the well-being of the newborn calf because colostrum contains antibodies, which are things that prevent certain diseases. Unless the calf receives 2 quarts of colostrum within the first few hours after being born, the calf will likely become sick and may die. At the time the calf is separated from its dam, an injection of vitamins A, D, and E is recommended. The recommended amounts are: 500,000 I.U. of A; 75,000 I.U. of D; and 50 I.U. of E. These vitamins will help give the newborn calf a good start in life. Read the 4-H publication No. 136 [Keeping Your Calf Healthy](#) and OSU Fact Sheet F-3358 [Disease protection of Baby Calves](#) for more information.

How much space does a calf require?

Newborn calves can get sick real easy. Therefore, it is important to provide a clean environment for the newborn calf. Calves should be housed separately in a clean, draft-free, dry environment to help keep it healthy. Good calf housing provides conditions that are comfortable for the calf and minimizes stress. A calf hutch and a small pen should only take up an 8x8 foot space. See the 4-H publication No. 137, "Bucket Calf Housing."

What do I feed and how do I feed it?

You will start your calf on milk replacer, which may be purchased at most farm supply stores. Either a nipple bottle or bucket can be used for feeding milk replacer. After 6 weeks or so you will wean your calf off of the milk and feed a calf starter ration along with good quality hay. For more information read 4-H publication No. 135, "Feeding A Bucket Calf."

What equipment do I need?

You will need a calf hutch and pen, calf bottle and nipple, halter, brush, water bucket, and feed bucket.

Will my calf need shots or medicine?

Newborn calves can get sick real easy. Learn the signs of a sick calf and get to know your local veterinarian. It is highly recommended that at the appropriate age your calf be vaccinated against IBR, BVD, Lepto, and Blackleg. Keep records of all medications given. Learn more about diseases and how to keep your calf healthy by reading the 4-H publication No. 136, "Keeping Your Calf Healthy."

What if I have more than one calf to feed?

House the calves in separate pens. This makes it easier to feed and prevents disease transmission. Identify each calf with an ear tag or neck strap with a name or number on it.

What other activities are involved?

Record keeping and awards: bucket calf exhibitors are encouraged to fill out a "Bucket Calf Record" (4-H Lit. No 140). One easy way to do this is to write on a calendar or in a diary, what you do each day with your calf. Then when you fill out your record form all the information you need is right there. Four-H members are recognized at the annual county achievement program for record books. Contact your Extension Educator or local leader for more information on records and awards.

Reference

Adapted from the Kansas Dairy Leaders Notebook.

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