More than 447,000 hunters in Alabama head to the woods each year in hopes of harvesting a white-tailed deer. While some hunters are more successful than others, Alabama’s abundant deer population results in a statewide average harvest of about 1.6 deer per hunter. Whether chasing after that big buck you caught on a game camera earlier in the season or simply hoping to harvest the first legal deer that comes by, the end result is the same—a freezer full of nutritious, healthy venison.

Rather than taking harvested deer to a commercial processor, many hunters choose to butcher their deer at home or at their hunting camp. If you know how and have the time, butchering a deer can be a rewarding experience. Not only will you have a greater appreciation of the process, but you will also be able to control how specific cuts of meat are made and how they are packaged, labeled, and frozen. However, when all edible portions of meat are removed, it is important to remember one final step—the proper disposal of the carcass, entrails (guts), and hide.

This last step is an often overlooked aspect of deer hunting. While most hunters will take care to properly dispose of their deer carcasses, some unscrupulous ones will dump them into a nearby stream, along a road, or in some other area easily visible to those passing by. Doing so creates several problems including issues of human health and safety, environmental contamination, a food resource for unwanted animals, such as coyotes and vultures, and more importantly, a poor image of hunting by those who do not participate in the sport.

Figure 1. Deer are found throughout Alabama—in both rural and urban areas of the state.

Figure 2. The hunt doesn’t end here. Proper disposal of the carcass after butchering is an important final step of hunting.

Alabama’s abundant deer population results in a statewide average harvest of 1.6 deer per hunter.
Don’t Dump Carcasses into Waterways

Carcasses that are thrown into streams or rivers may introduce pathogens—disease-causing organisms and bacteria—directly into these and nearby waters. This is of extreme concern if downstream uses are a source for drinking water, recreation, irrigation, livestock watering, or anything else that increases contact between people and animals and the contaminated water. Remember that what happens upstream affects all those downstream.

Don’t Dump Carcasses Along Roadways

Dumping deer carcasses along Alabama roadways or other publicly owned property is illegal, and those caught doing so face stiff fines. But more importantly, dumping carcasses along roadways is not only visually unappealing and a health risk but also tarnishes the image of hunters and hunting. Keep in mind that most Alabamians (more than 80 percent) do not hunt, but they generally approve of hunting if it is conducted in a responsible and ethical manner. No one, including hunters, enjoys driving by a decaying deer carcass. Perception is reality, and discarding deer carcasses along roadways creates a lasting, negative impression of hunters and hunting in the eyes of the majority of Alabamians who are nonhunters.

Proper Disposal Techniques

Although a common technique is to dispose of deer carcasses by simply discarding them in a secluded location in the woods and letting Mother Nature take its course in decomposing the remains, care should be taken to ensure that these areas are well away from waterways and flood prone areas. Hunters have several other options to consider.

Burying

Burying is the most convenient means for disposal of deer carcasses, entrails, and hides. Disposal pits should be located at least 200 feet from water courses, wetlands, or flood prone areas and preferably in areas with nonporous soils, such as clay. Additionally, the disposal pit should be located at least 500 feet from human dwellings, such as residences or hunting camps, and preferably in a convenient but less traveled area of the property. Too frequently, hunters make the mistake of placing their disposal pit close to their skinning/butchering sheds. While convenient, you only make this mistake once. No one enjoys the smell of decaying animals. Also consider prevailing wind direction and the location of residences of adjacent landowners.
The size and depth of disposal pits will depend on the anticipated number of deer that will be harvested and subsequently disposed of during the hunting season. A good rule of thumb is to dig the disposal pit deep enough so that 12 inches or more of soil can be placed over the pit to cover the carcasses at the end of the hunting season. DO NOT dispose of other trash in disposal pits intended for deer carcasses.

**Landfills and Garbage Service**

Landfills and city or county curbside garbage disposal services are other options for properly disposing of deer carcasses. While these services may be convenient, you should contact them in advance to determine if they accept animal carcasses and how to best prepare carcasses for disposal. Not all landfills are licensed to accept animal carcasses, so check in advance. Likewise, you may encounter city or county ordinances regarding the disposal of animal carcasses.

**Composting**

Composting is a simple and easy way to naturally break down (decompose) deer carcasses. Similar to burying, compost bins should be located at least 200 feet from water courses, wetlands, or flood prone areas and more than 500 feet from human dwellings. If constructed and maintained properly, deer carcass composting can be an effective means to minimize water pollution and protect public health. Be sure to construct compost bins on nonporous soils to prevent or minimize leaching of blood and other fluids. Use a concrete or asphalt pad as the foundation of a compost bin. Check online for resources describing various techniques for properly composting animal carcasses. They may be called “amendments to aid decomposition.”

*Figure 6. A simple yet effective compost bin for disposing of deer carcasses.*

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Remember that hunting is a privilege, not a right. And it is the final responsibility of every hunter to follow through after the hunt. Properly disposing of your deer carcass and other remains is good for the environment, human health and safety, and the image of hunting.