



## Background Of The Soft Crab (Beautiful Swimmer)

Anyone who has ever eaten soft crabs will agree that they are a true delicacy. Those who have not been so fortunate may initially feel apprehensive because one eats just about the entire crab, including legs.

What exactly is a soft crab? It is a blue crab that has just molted or backed out of its hard shell. The blue crab is better known to scientists as *Callinectes sapidus*. "Callinectes" is Greek for "beautiful swimmer" and "sapidus" in Latin means "tasty or savory".



Photo Courtesy of Handy International

The blue crab is commonly found on both the East Coast and Gulf Coast of the United States from Massachusetts to Texas. Most gourmands agree that the tastiest crabs come from the Chesapeake Bay.

Blue crabs emerge from their winter hibernation around the end of April as soon as it begins to get warm and immediately begin feeding. In order to have room to grow, blue crabs must shed their hard outer shells. Blue crabs molt as many as 23 times during their natural 3-year life span.

Watermen catch blue crabs in crab pots. They can determine just how much time will pass before a crab starts to molt by noticing a color change on one of its swim fins. A

white sign indicates 2 weeks or less, a pink sign within a week, and a red sign less than 2 days. It is very difficult to distinguish the color changes and only skilled watermen can see them clearly.

Crabs will molt every 3-5 days when they are small and every 20-50 days when they are larger. Crabs near molting are brought to shore and placed in floats that contain the same bay water from which they came. The floats are checked every 3 hours, and any crabs that have molted are removed. If they are left in the water, their shells will harden again within 2 days.

Soft crabs are very clean because they stop eating about 3 days before they molt. Thus their digestive systems will have been totally cleaned out.

The season for soft crabs usually runs from mid May to late September. As with all fresh seafood, fresh soft crabs are extremely perishable. They are air freighted fresh throughout the country when in season. Fresh crabs should be kept at a temperature of 50° F and have a shelf life of 3 days. Fresh crabs must be dressed before cooking.

Chilled dressed soft crabs have already been cleaned and should be kept at a temperature of 32° F. At this temperature, the shelf life of chilled dressed soft crabs is 5 days.

Frozen crabs are available year round and will keep for more than 2 years. After thawing, the crabs should be kept at 32° F for no longer than 2 days. Frozen soft crabs are already dressed and, once thawed, are ready to cook.