

If you own pigs, read this thoroughly, research diseases regularly and take all care.

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Pigs, or hogs, depending on where you live, are intelligent animals and easily trained to work in with farming routines.

Unfortunately, they can suffer from several easily transmitted diseases. Because they are gregarious, diseases spread quickly between them. In USA, a new virus disease killed about six million baby pigs in less than a year. This was about 10% of USA pigs, so take all precautions and read on.

There are millions of pigs grazing pastures, which they can damage if they are too confined, so use well spaced shelters as shown here, or the wagon wheel system to rotate them around a shed close to the centre of the area to be grazed.

Pigs also make great pets, can eat kitchen scraps and surplus garden vegetable and will provide home-produced pork or bacon. They also provide manure and reproduce regularly to provide an income from young pigs.

Shelter is important, so they must all be able to fit in the shed,

Don't have pigs anywhere near roads because if they get onto a road and get hit by a car, a large pig can cause considerable damage to the vehicle and possibly the passengers, and you could be liable.

For good production, pigs must be well fed which may mean buying costly balanced diets to supplement grazing.

Pigs can smell, make a lot of noise, and damage pastures. Boars can be dangerous.

Feed

Pigs can do well with other animals because they will eat the manure and do well when having some with pasture. One farmer wrote that pigs sought out the fresh cow pats, and were healthy with no need for mineral supplements when the cattle were getting minerals in the drinking water. The meat tasted great. A study by the University of Missouri found that cow manure was a good source of vitamins and minerals for pigs.

To achieve good growth rates with most animals, pastures must have legumes with the grasses, not just grasses.

Pigs need roots, tubers, nuts and grains, while ruminants don't, but may eat grains. If you are pasture only, you use the shed washings and can dilute ruminant manure in water and pour it over the grain. Avoid the detergent being fed. The pigs will love it and the ruminants will ignore it, and if pastures are correctly fertilised, your cows are healthy and fed Solminix, you will be feeding your pigs the minerals they need.

Some species of acorn contain large amounts of tannins, are very bitter, and potentially irritating if eaten raw. This is particularly true of the acorns of red oaks. Since tannins, interfere with an animal's ability to metabolise protein, creatures must adapt to them. Pigs have a very powerful digestive system with strong digestive juices and can thrive on acorns from oak trees, while horses and cattle may die horrible deaths because they bleed internally. Outdoor pigs can be affected occasionally by young oak leaves or green acorns with signs of abdominal pain and constipation seen two to three days after ingestion. The kidneys may also be affected. There is no treatment so avoid and remove the animals from the sources immediately.

The cost of rearing pigs can be reduced by feeding them surpluses from supermarkets and wastes from some producers and restaurants.

Note that pigs will also eat meat and they have been known to kill young animals such as new born lambs and anything they can catch.



Pastures

Greg Gunthorp from LaGrange, Indiana, USA, has shared some of his knowledge of pigs on pastures. Thank you Greg. He wrote -

My definition of a pastured pork operation is pigs raised on grass, legumes, standing crops such as brassicas, or any other ground cover. Stocking rates are important to maintain pastures. 8 to 10 sows per acre are reasonable sow stocking density in our area. Pigs cannot bloat on pasture, therefore the best pasture would be a mix of legumes. Alfalfa works well. Clovers like Red, Ladino, Kura, and Alsike also work well. Chicory also works well. Rape or kale are an excellent annuals.

Grasses work best for farrowing lots because they keep down the mud. If you are planting pasture for just pigs, stick with mainly legumes. They are a lot easier to manage than grass for an animal that doesn't bloat. High percentage of grass in pasture will require keeping it very short for it to be palatable to pigs. Pigs can rip up pasture because they love eating the roots.

Our pig farm is profitable because we are utilising resources that would otherwise be wasted. The majority of our pasture areas are what wouldn't be used otherwise.

Pigs can be extremely rough on pasture. Why not use un-rung pigs on poor pasture instead of a plough. Then just level and reseed.

Every problem that buildings create could be cured by pasture. I know because I have a partially slatted building that sits empty because I can't afford the death loss in it! Respiratory problems and tail biting are non-existent on a pastured pork operation. These operations exchange feed for building costs! I virtually eliminate building costs and lower feed costs. I've taken the building manufacturers profit and the feed salesmen out of my paycheque.

Grazing corn is excellent feed for finishing pigs.

Fencing

I am using all high tensile wire fencing for our pigs. Woven wire will work, but isn't as convenient or affordable. The same basics for other animals apply to pigs. Nose height of a walking animal with > 2,000 volts will keep a pig in. Sows are probably one of the easiest animals to keep in. Little pigs are a different story. If you have a wire at their nose height they will stay in, but that means 4' from the ground. Therefore you need a high power energiser if you are going to fence in pigs less than 40 pounds with electricity. It will work. I recommend a minimum of a 10 joule fence charger for little pigs.

Market hogs above 40 pounds aren't hard to contain if you keep them from digging dirt on the fence. One polywire on tread-in posts inside the high tensile fence keeps them from digging dirt onto the high tensile fence! Put this wire a little high for the pigs, say at 12" to 16". Low enough to just catch their back. This will keep them off the permanent fences. That little trick right there makes the difference between keeping pigs on pasture and putting up buildings because you get tired of chasing pigs.

The first place pigs start digging is along the fence. I don't know why, but I don't have to dig dirt off my high tensile anymore. If they do get anything on the polywire it doesn't carry enough electricity to even slow my New Zealand fence charger down. A \$650 fence charger is a bargain in my opinion for just the peace of mind that I am not going to have to chase pigs. Besides that only pays for about four pig spaces in a confinement building!

Sows are the best place to start on grazing. Sows feed demands can easily be reduced by 50 to 75% by good pasture. With enough rings sows can be kept from rooting. I haven't been able to stop little pigs from digging but the better the pasture generally, the less the digging.

Gilts

Gilts will require more feed than sows on pasture if you want them to gain. Purchased gilts will require normal feed levels because a hog takes a couple of months to adapt to high fibre diets. Results will be disastrous with breeding age gilts never exposed to fibre that are expected to forage for their food. This could explain varied research results from pasture experiments! If you buy replacement gilts don't replace feed for pasture for a while. Monitor animal condition and weight gain very closely! Get them on some fibre as soon as possible. Replacement boars will also have this problem. I've seen my own gilts that have had good grazing from when they were born, gain good weight on less than 2 kg of concentrates, while the confinement reared boars in the pen didn't.

Farrowing

Sows can be allowed to farrow for 10 to 14 days in the same pen if the weather is cool enough to keep the little pigs from running all over the place. When it is hot, four days of farrowing or less in the same pen may be necessary.

To get optimum performance from gilts, keep farrowing intervals in pens very short, sometimes only two days.

[On our mixed farm in South Africa we fitted 'farrowing rails' to stop piglets being squashed by sows. They were 1.5 inch galvanised pipe 9 inches from the floor and from the walls. VJ.]

One hot tape that will later be taken down, can be used to temporarily separate older litters from younger litters. Try to keep groups that are together to be within one month of each other. Make sure little pigs are on creep feed before taking tapes down between pens.

My baby pigs never get injections. I couldn't catch them if I wanted to! Medication on pasture operations is a waste of good money.

I suggest putting quite a few extra huts until you understand where a sow would prefer to farrow. The majority of sows that farrow out in the open is because of management errors!

Hints

- Sows don't like to farrow close to an older litter.
- Sows definitely won't farrow where an older litter was farrowed.
- In hot weather sows prefer to farrow in the coolest spot in the paddock.
- Try to place huts so sow and litter don't have to walk by another litter to get feed or water.

Southern USA producers would have to be more concerned about heat. Pigs can take any kind of temperatures if shelter, shade and wading ponds are available.

The lowest stress castration for the pigs and owner is to get the boars when they are one day old. The sow is still slow enough that she won't tear you apart and the pigs are not easily caught after they are 24 hours old.

The lowest stress weaning practice for pigs is to take the sows out and leave the piglets.

Just for the skeptical people: this is a whole system just like other grazing operations. Leave out one component and the others come crashing down. Some, but not all of these components include genetics, farrowing season, forage availability, good bedding source, fencing, water quality and system, and open mind. This whole system approach can't be over emphasised.

End.

Greg can be contacted for advice through his email address: hey4hogs@kuntrynet.com

Diseases

Foot & Mouth Disease

Pigs are very susceptible to this. See 'Animal Health'.

Post Weaning Multi-systemic Wasting Syndrome (PMWS)

PMWS is a progressive pig disease with a high fatality rate which results from the wasting of pigs from 6 weeks of age onwards. It was discovered in the North Island of New Zealand in 2003 and the South Island, in 2006. It is also of considerable concern in many countries particularly Canada, the US and Europe. When PMWS first strikes a pig farm, it can prove fatal to up to 40% of the weaners.

Symptoms include weight loss, rough hair, pale skin and jaundice, enlarged lymph nodes and incoordination. In some cases the young pigs will also suffer from diarrhoea and respiratory distress.

It is believed that high stocking densities, infected faeces and possibly birds and rodents contribute to the disease.

Antibacterial medication is generally ineffective unless given preventively before an outbreak occurs however, pigs have been reported to respond well to injections of corticosteroids (2mg/kg) with improved growth rates and reduced mortalities.

Porcine Epidemic Diarrhoea or Reproductive & Respiratory Syndrome

This virus disease is new in USA, possibly from China. 8,000 pigs died between August and March 2007 in North Carolina from this disease on one farm alone with others affected on surrounding farms. The disease weakens the animal's resistance.

It is an airborne virus that is now prevalent in 80% of the USA herds. It causes very poor reproductive performance, abortions, and weak and stillborn pigs. The best defence is to not bring in replacement animals unless essential.

Swine fever

This causes lesions and convulsions. In young animals it can cause death within 15 days. The disease has spread across much of Asia, Central and South America, and parts of Europe and Africa. It was believed to have been eradicated in the UK by 1966 but an outbreak was reported in 2000. Swine fever was eradicated in the USA by 1978. Other regions believed to be free of swine fever include Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and Scandinavia.

For a comprehensive list of pig diseases including symptoms, diagnoses and treatments see - <http://www.thepigsite.com/pighealth>

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