

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

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Pigs, or hogs, depending on where you live, are intelligent animals and easily trained to graze 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 read on and take all precautions.

There are millions of pigs grazing pastures, which they can damage if they are too confined, so use well spaced shelters as shown here in USA, 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 vegetables and will provide home-produced pork or bacon. They also provide manure and reproduce regularly so can provide income from selling 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.

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



Feeds

Pigs can do well with other animals because they will eat their manure and do well when having some with pasture. One farmer wrote that pigs sought out the fresh animal pats, and were healthy with no need for mineral supplements when the cattle were getting good minerals (Solminix) in the drinking water. Their meat tastes nice. 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 other animals on pastures they must have legumes. For good production, pigs must be well fed which may mean buying costly balanced diets to supplement the grazing. The pigs will love it and most ruminants will ignore it, and if pastures are correctly fertilised, your cows are healthy and fed Solminix through the drinking water, 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 off red oaks. Since tannins, interfere with an animal's ability to metabolise protein, creatures must adapt to them. Pigs have strong digestive juices and a very powerful digestive system so can thrive on acorns from oak trees, while horses and cattle may die horrible deaths because they bleed internally. Outdoor pigs can be adversely affected occasionally by young oak leaves or green acorns causing abdominal pain and constipation seen two to three days after ingestion. Kidneys may be affected. There is no treatment so avoid them and if affected remove animals immediately.

The cost of rearing pigs can be reduced by feeding them surpluses from supermarkets and restaurant wastes. Stocking rates are important to maintain pastures. 8 to 10 sows per acre is a reasonable stocking density. Pigs don't bloat on pasture, therefore the best pasture would be a mix of legumes. Alfalfa works well. Chicory, rape and kale are an good annuals.

Grasses work best for farrowing 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. Grass requires keeping short for it to be palatable to pigs. Pigs can rip up pasture because

they like eating the roots. Grazing corn is a good feed for finishing pigs.

Fencing

Both electrified high tensile wire and woven fencing 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 inches from the ground. Therefore you need a high power energiser if you are going to fence in pigs less than 15 kg with electricity. The first place pigs start digging is along the fence. I don't know why, but I don't have to dig dirt off high tensile electrified fences anymore.

Sows are the best to start on grazing. Sows feed demands can easily be reduced by 50 to 75% on good pastures. 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 the less they dig.

Gilts

Gilts will require more feed than sows on pasture if you want them to grow. Purchased gilts will require normal feed levels because they take a couple of months to adapt to pasture. Results will be disastrous with breeding age gilts never exposed to pasture that are expected to forage for their food. If you buy gilts don't replace feed for pasture too quickly. Replacement boars will also have this problem.

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.

On our mixed farm in South Africa we fitted 'farrowing rails' to stop piglets being squashed by sows. They were 4 cm galvanised pipe 9 inches from the floor and from the walls.

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.

Hints

- In hot weather sows prefer to farrow in the coolest spot in the paddock.
- Try to place huts so sows and litters don't have to walk past another litter to feed or water.

The lowest stress castration for the pigs and owner is to do 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.

Diseases

Foot & Mouth Disease

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

Post Weaning Multi-systemic Wasting Syndrome (PMWS)

This 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, infected faeces and possibly birds and rodents spread the it.

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. It 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>