

# **Bringing Home the Bacon, by Raising Your Own Pigs**

*By Vernon Mayrose, James Foster, and Betty Drenkhahn*

Raising a few pigs can be interesting, fun, and a learning experience. It may also provide some income on a small scale for families who live on a few acres.

Pigs are very intelligent and can even become pets. However, they grow fast. Most pigs grow from about 3 pounds at birth to market weight at 225 pounds in about 6 months. It takes some 10 months from the time the sow conceives until her pigs reach market weight.

Pigs can be sold alive at a livestock market or perhaps processed into pork for home use at a local livestock slaughtering facility. The most important products from hogs are hams, roasts, chops, bacon, and sausage.

Before acquiring pigs, get additional information from your county agricultural agent, and check on local regulations about keeping animals.

The best ways of getting started raising pigs are: (a) buy a bred sow or gilt and produce a litter of pigs, then sell the litter as weaned pigs or grow them to market weight; (b) buy weaned pigs (feeder pigs) and feed them to market weight.

Although there are several breeds to choose from, it's best for the small operator to select crossbred animals. Crossbred sows are usually better mothers than purebreds. They farrow more pigs and faster growing pigs. They are more vigorous, and there is less death loss. They may also be lower in initial cost than purebreds.

The quickest way to produce a litter is to buy a bred gilt, or an older sow that has produced one or more litters. Select sows or gilts that have 12 to 14 well-spaced teats without deformity. Try to obtain breeding females that are themselves

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from litters of eight or more pigs. They should have structurally sound feet and legs. Select pigs that walk free and easy.

The pregnancy or gestation period is about 114 days. Usually 8 to 12 pigs weighing about 2-1/2 to 3-1/2 pounds each are farrowed. A gilt, a young sow in her first pregnancy, usually has fewer baby pigs than older sows that have produced one or more litters.

On the average, producers lose about 25 per cent of live pigs farrowed before they are weaned. With certain diseases, losses may reach almost 100 percent. Mortality from weaning to market is usually less than 3 percent.

If you're raising only a few litters, it will probably not pay to buy a boar. Buy bred females or make arrangements with another swine producer to have females bred.

Another method of mating is by artificial insemination (A. I.). This is desirable for disease control but should be used only if good technical help is available, such as an A.I. technician or a producer who has had experience with A.I.

When buying feeder pigs, select pigs from a reliable source where pigs are raised under sanitary conditions. Pigs should be healthy, weaned, and started on feed. Buy pigs of uniform age and size that weigh between 35 and 60 pounds. Choose females or castrated males (barrows).

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## Shelter, Equipment

Pigs require shelter that is dry and free of drafts. The place where they will be kept should be completely ready before you bring them home. You will need an appropriate building, a shady place in summer, a good hog-tight fence, a self feeder or feed trough, and a waterer.

A simple house can be used for swine if it keeps out drafts, snow, and rain, provides shade in hot weather, and has a dry floor.

The hog shelter may be all or part of an existing older building or a small individual house. The simplest would be an A-frame that has a watertight roof which forms two sides of the building, and a rear wall. The front of such a house is usually open but can be fitted with a door. If your house is movable, face it away from the wind and don't place it where water puddles.

Keep the inside of the house dry, clean, and well-bedded with straw, peanut hulls, or wood shavings. Remove the bedding when it gets wet and dirty, and spread it on a field or pasture. To avoid complaints from neighbors about unpleasant odors, do not locate hog houses or haul manure within 500 feet of your neighbors.

In hot weather, hogs need protection from sun and heat. Hog houses should be made so they can be opened for good ventilation. Keep hogs out of airtight structures in hot weather. Trees give good shade; however, livestock should be fenced away from valuable trees.

Another method of providing shade is to place four posts in the ground, connect them at the top with a framework of poles, lumber, or wire fence, and cover with material such as straw that provides shade. The shading materials should be about 4 feet above ground.

Hog lots must be fenced hog-tight. For larger lots of several acres, woven-wire fencing (32 inches high), with a strand of barbed wire at the bottom of the fencing or just above the ground, works well. For smaller lots, temporary or permanent board fence (1 x 6 inch boards) or wire panels (about 35 inches high) will be easier to construct. Attach the boards or panels to steel or wood posts. Electrical fencing is satisfactory once pigs are trained to it.

Hogs can be fed in a trough, pan, or self feeder. Make the trough long enough so all hogs can eat at one time. If a self feeder is used, provide a feeder hole for each four to five hogs.

Hogs should have plenty of clean water at all times. A 35-pound pig drinks about a half gallon per day; a 225-pound hog,

about 1 to 1-1/2 gallons; and a brood sow suckling a litter, about 5 gallons. You can use a heavy trough or pan that pigs cannot upset, a homemade waterer made from a steel drum, or an automatic or nipple waterer connected to a water line.

## **Feed Needs**

Feed is the biggest expense in raising hogs, about 70 to 75 percent of the total cost of production. Swine need a balanced ration or diet each day. The complete ration, which can be purchased from a feed supplier, should contain energy, protein, vitamins, and minerals.

Corn is the standard grain (the energy source) for hogs, but barley, wheat, grain sorghum (milo), and oats also can be fed. The protein, vitamins, and minerals are provided with a complete protein supplement available from a feed supplier.

The grain and protein supplement can be ground and mixed together as a complete feed, or the corn and supplement can be fed separately after the pigs weigh about 75 pounds.

Another way is to buy the protein such as soybean meal, a mineral premix, and a vitamin premix separately, and then mix these with the grain source.

Whichever method you use, be sure the ration has the correct amounts of nutrients for the age of the pig being fed. Follow the mixing directions and any regulations on the feed tag. Get more information on feed sources from your county agricultural agent.

You can lower feed costs by providing a good environment and selecting animals that gain fast and efficiently. It will require 3-1/2 to 3-3/4 pounds of feed to produce a pound of live pork. Therefore, a hog fed a complete ration will need about 650 to 700 pounds of feed to grow from weaning weight (40 pounds) to market weight at 225 pounds.

To estimate potential profits, compare your total feed cost to the expected market price for live hogs. Besides feed costs, take into account any other production costs such as buildings and equipment, utilities, veterinary expenses, and bedding.

Feed can be supplied in a self-feeder where hogs will have access to it at all times. Or pigs can be hand fed all they will consume in about 30 minutes twice a day.

Hogs do well on pasture. About a fifth of an acre of good pasture is recommended for a sow and litter or for three to five growing pigs. Alfalfa and ladino clover are considered the best pasture. However, red clover, alsike, white clover, and lespedeza also make good pastures for hogs.

Rye, oats, wheat, cattail millet, rape, soybeans, crimson clover, and cowpeas can be used for temporary pasture.

Feed the same ration on pasture except for pregnant sows, which will require up to 30 percent less feed depending on the pasture quality. Hog rings may be used in the noses of sows and older pigs (over 40 pounds) to prevent them from rooting and destroying pasture.

## Sow and Litter

During gestation, feed about 4 (summer) to 6 (winter) pounds of complete ration each day. Do not let sows and gilts get too fat. During gestation, gilts should be fed so they will gain about 75 pounds, and sows about 30 pounds.

A sow will farrow around 112 to 115 days after she is bred. On the 109th day of gestation or about five days before she farrows, move her into a cleaned and disinfected farrowing house or pen.

If a farrowing crate is not used, install guard rails, if possible, to prevent the sow from lying on her pigs.

Place a layer of bedding in the house or pen. Use straw, peanut hulls, or wood shavings. Remove wet bedding and manure daily to keep the pen dry.

If weather permits, wash the sow with soap and warm water before moving her into the farrowing facility. Be sure to

Pigs grow fast. This pig weighs about 50 pounds at 10 weeks of age.



Thomas DeFco

wash her teats. Washing removes worm eggs and other organisms that infest baby pigs.

To prevent constipation in sows, add wheat bran or other bulky ingredients to the ration at a level of 15 percent, or feed the regular diet containing a tablespoon of Epsom salt or Glauber salt.

For 24 hours after farrowing, give the sow water but little or no feed. On the second day, start feeding about 3 pounds of feed and increase the ration each day. She should be on full feed, about 10 to 12 pounds, when the pigs are a week old. As soon as she is on full feed, the sow may be self-fed.

Normal, healthy sows and gilts usually farrow without trouble. Farrowing normally takes 2 to 5 hours. If possible, be on hand to help. Remove immediately any membranes that cover the head of newborn pigs to prevent suffocation. If a newborn pig appears lifeless, breathing can sometimes be started by rubbing or slapping its sides.

## **Newborn Pigs**

If pigs are piling or shivering and have rough hair coats they are probably cold. When possible, use supplemental heat lamps or hovers to prevent chilling. Make sure sows or pigs cannot reach the lamp or cord. Do not hang the heat source by its cord; hang it securely. Make sure it is impossible for the lamp to touch bedding or other flammable material.

After delivery, paint the navel cords, if still wet, with a tincture of iodine (U.S.P. 2 percent solution). Clip off the tips of the eight tusklike needle teeth of the pigs.

If pigs do not have access to clean soil, they will need an iron injection or iron orally during the first three days to prevent baby pig anemia. Once pigs start eating, the ration will provide enough iron.

Pigs can be weaned between 4 and 8 weeks of age. Male pigs that are not to be sold for breeding purposes should be castrated any time between birth and 4 weeks of age.

At weaning, reduce the sow ration to about 4 or 5 pounds per day. The sow will come into heat, and then she may be rebred 3 to 6 days after pigs are weaned.

Internal parasite control begins with deworming the sow before farrowing. Deworm young pigs before 7 to 8 weeks of age. Also control external parasites, lice and mange. Follow all directions and heed all precautions on labels of products used.

For information on swine health and vaccinations, check with a veterinarian or your county agricultural agent.