

## The 'Coles Notes' Version of the COG Livestock Workshop

### ***Organic Pastured Pork: A Primer to Adding Breeding Stock to Your Farm***

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Our farm started with very lean, extremely rocky soil on very over grown pastures. Nothing grew well in any garden until we added animal manure.

We added pigs into our rotation early on, as they are so proficient in helping clear land, and they give you bacon and pork chops when they are done. We added dairy cows next to help feed the pigs and reduce the grain inputs, which are expensive.

We could easily source organic dairy cows, but organic weaners were almost impossible to source so we began breeding our own.

Before adding breeding stock to your farm, here are some points to consider:

- If you cannot handle failure, do not get breeding stock,
- If you are squeamish or stressed at the thought of animals birthing, do not get breeding stock,
- If you cannot bear the idea of a piglet dying, do not get breeding stock,
- If you don't know what you would do with 20 or more weaner pigs every year, don't get breeding stock,
- If you can handle all those things, and you want control over your genetics, better influence over the health of your herd, more access to weaner pigs, and to raise certified organic pork, then do consider breeding stock,
- Breeding stock means keeping animals year round,
- Breeding stock means more housing, more fences, and it means more management.
  
- Do you need really breeding stock, or are weaners better suited to your farm? If you really don't like to get outside much in the winter, then you may be better with an all-in, all-out system like weaners. If you have no need of more than half a dozen pigs each year, then weaners might be a better option.
  
- What will you feed your pigs? Can you afford to feed pigs year round? There are lots of people that complain about the cost of weaners, and the cost of feed. If you can't afford the \$50 - \$150 price tag for a weaner pig, then you really need to decide if you can afford keeping breeding stock.
  
- How will you get water to your pigs year round if they are far from any farm buildings? For those farmers that do not keep animals over winter and that roll up their garden hoses each fall, you need to know if you can get water to your stock every day.
  
- Where will your pigs live? Do you have enough land to keep pigs year round? Whether they are on pasture or clearing land, you need to be able to move pigs regularly to prevent parasite overload. Depending on how your land is set up, you may have to make some

major changes to add pigs into the mix. If all your land is wide open and used for cropping only, you will need to add fencing, housing, and shade.

- What type of housing will you use? If you have existing barns or buildings, you might be able to repurpose them. Just remember that if your pigs sleep indoors in one location all the time, the land outside that location is going to get over worked and muddy.
- How will you move your pigs to pasture or to market? If you have never owned livestock, transport is often overlooked. You need to consider how you will move your pigs to the butcher, and how you will move them on the farm. Moving on the farm often requires only your wits, but a trailer is needed for any movement off the farm.

Consider raising weaners for at least a year or two before going to breeding stock, and better yet, to keep some weaners over the winter months. Better to find out you hate keeping pigs in the winter with weaners than with breeding stock. Keeping any animals over the winter is challenging, and pigs are no exception.

Experience is not necessarily needed to raise pigs or breeding stock, but if you have no experience, find yourself a farmer who is willing to mentor you, and do your research first. Mistakes you make will be at the animals expense.

Some hog farmers say that only 5 – 10 percent of pigs are actually worth breeding. There are only about 5% of pigs that would make excellent breeding stock, and have long breeding careers, and that there is probably about another 20 percent of pigs that would make only average or mediocre stock. So, out of 100 pigs, there are only 25 or less that should ever be bred, the rest belong in the freezer.

If you buy young, unproven weaner pigs as potential breeding stock, you can go by their lineage, but it is no guarantee of quality. A piglet that looked as though it had potential at 8 weeks of age, may have none by the time it is of breeding age. The advantage to buying young stock is it's small and easy to handle, and the pig will know you well, and trust you.

If you have the opportunity to purchase proven breeding stock that is no longer in it's prime, that can be a great starting point. A sow in her prime should be having at least 2 litters a year, with at least 14 piglets. Perhaps she's now only having 8 piglets with each litter, which may be a perfect starting point for you. The disadvantage to those with no large livestock handling experience is breeding age hogs are BIG!!!

A fully-grown sow often weighs about 600- 800 pounds. A boar can easily be upwards of 900 pounds depending on breed. That can be an intimidating start for some folks. However, if you get your pigs from a reputable farmer, you can be sure that they have good temperament.

Breeding stock can be potentially sourced from many places. You can find pigs in newspaper classifieds, kijiji, the sales barn, Google, breed associations, and by word of mouth. Some of these are good places to find pigs, some are not.

Wherever you purchase your pigs, it is always a good idea to go and see the stock before you buy. It's very easy to fill in details about pigs based on pictures you see online. You also cannot accurately judge size or temperament with a photo.

Be sure to ask about performance of the line. How frequent were litters born, about litter sizes, were the piglets hardy, were the mothers cautious, ask about heat cycles, ask what they have been fed.

If you can find pigs that are in your geographic area that are being raised in a manner similar to what you plan, those pigs should do well. The further you go from where you live, the greater the chance those pigs may not initially fare well on your farm.

You want to be sure that you are getting pigs with good temperament. Pigs that are pushy, overly dominant with you, or in anyway aggressive should not be considered for breeding stock.

When you are inspecting the stock, you want to make sure males have two testicles, and females and males have at no less than 7 teats on each side.

Look at the body length on potential pigs. The longer the pig, the longer the digestive tract, which is important when you want to be raising your pigs on pasture, or even if you are just using them to clear land. Long pigs also mean more bacon.

Hog Housing: Pigs don't need fancy housing. There are many options for housing your hogs. What you want to create is something that will stop the draft, something that will stop the rain/snow or whatever else falls from the sky, and provides shade in the summer.

The things you want to keep in mind are whatever style you build, it's nice to have openings that face to the south in the winter and to the east in the summer. It should be on slightly higher ground than the surrounding area, so water doesn't pool in it during wet seasons.

For permanent housing in any area, we opt for large three sided run-in shelters that can be used for pigs, or cows.

We've noticed that our boars can be given all sorts of housing options, but will often choose to make a burrow in a round bale. Seems that they don't care about the rain or snow. They like round bales.

We have tried using all manner of housing for pigs on our farm, but most important to consider is bedding. If you don't have a good and plentiful source of bedding for your pigs over the winter, you need to put off breeding stock. Bedding can be hay, straw, or other bedding material.

What ever you use for bedding, if you are raising certified organic meat, the bedding you use must be approved for certified organic use.

If you are able to move your pigs frequently, then you will need to decide if you are going to build portable or moveable housing, or permanent housing in each pasture area.

Our winter housing is permanent, and heavy duty compared to our summer housing which is often steel roof suspended from trees.

Build what ever shelters you want in the winter, just be sure they can stand up to the weather in your area; snow load, and have space for the bedding to build up.

For example, a low slung hog house design that might be popular in the southern states for winter housing may not make sense here where the snow will burry it, and there will be no room for bedding to build up.

On our farm, our permanent winter housing is in what we call our 'winter paddocks'. We used to keep our hogs in the woods for the winter, which was certainly idyllic, but because of our farm layout, not terrible practical.

Winters with extra deep snow meant getting food and bedding to the pigs in the woods was difficult. We were able to use our tractor, but just barely. It also meant getting the trailer backed up to the pigs' area was also very challenging when we had to take pigs into the abattoir during the winter months.

So, when you plan where you will over-winter your pigs, assume the snow will be deep enough that moving the pigs from one area to another will not be practical in the winter, and consider how you will get food, water, and bedding to them every day.

In the winter areas we have now, there are ample shelters and spaces for all the pigs to sleep, and the whole area is fenced with not only electric fence but also page wire fence. The reason for this is electric fence can be problematic in the winter months.

Frozen soil reduces the flow of the current, and ice can build up on the wires and insulators and stop the current from flowing. Your pigs may respect the fence for a while if it is not carrying a charge, but eventually, they will step out of bounds. You need to inspect your fences regularly in the winter for snow cover, fallen branches and other problems.

For this reason, we've gone to permanent winter areas. The boundary is fenced with page wire, with electric running inside of it. Where we can, we run three lines of electric around the inside of the winter areas. Not because our pigs need three lines to stay in, but because the snow starts to burry them. Designed properly, you can detach the lower lines as the snow level increases and buries them.

Fencing in the summer often only requires one line, but it must be tight, and pack a good punch or pigs will ignore it. Breeding stock and mature pigs tend to be very good about respecting the electric fence. Younger pigs can often be problematic.

In the spring, the ice and snow begin to melt and our winter pig area gets muddy. We turn to bedding to help with this. Dropping junk hay anywhere it gets waterlogged prevents a boot-sucking bog, keeps the pigs happy, and is also a great way to re-seed after the pigs have been moved to a new area.

Having permanent fence with electric running inside of it means we can also use the winter areas for farrowing.

What do you need to know for farrowing? In a perfect world, not much. A healthy female pig with good instincts shouldn't need your help at all. In fact, you should leave your pig alone. A pig that is interfered with during farrowing is an unhappy pig. If you insist on watching, get yourself a remote camera.

Now, in fairness, there are some pigs out there that really don't care if you are there to watch, but until you are sure that's the kind of pig you have, and you are sure that's the kind of relationship you have with her, just walk away.

Pigs tend to like privacy when they farrow, so most times we put our sows or gilts into their own private, luxury accommodations where they can build a nest in a shelter, have their own private yard, and need not share their meals.

A sow or gilt that is stressed by what she feels is a threat to her litter will become very excitable, and this is VERY dangerous to piglets. The last thing a new litter of piglets needs is a sow stomping around her nest recklessly.

Grown pigs are huge. But their little babies are very tiny. They grow fast, but they crush very easily in the first few days. We've found that the number of pigs you have 12 -24 hours after the birth is the number you will get to take to the butcher. The ones that don't make it in the first day, were not fast enough to learn the mothers cues to get out of the way when she tells them to, or they weren't thrifty.

A good gilt or sow should farrow with ease, and without complication. She should have large litters of healthy, active piglets. She should be cautious in her nest to as not to step on or lay on her young.

Keep yourself calm around your sow, and prevent stressful things from happening to her. For example, no building repairs on her house if she has just farrowed a day prior. No letting new people or new pets or new livestock in the area. It's not worth losing piglets over. Keep your sows happy, and you will be happy that you get to keep all the piglets.

This will sound very harsh to some, but if your sow or gilt can't farrow on her own, she should never have been allowed to bred in the first place, and she should never be allowed to have another litter. If your gilt or sow is a careless or inattentive mother, she needs to be culled, not tried again.

The best pigs are the ones that you feed, water, and provide bedding to, and one morning you go out to her nest and find a perfect pile of pretty piglets. You continue to give feed, water, and bedding, and a season later you've got pigs ready for the abattoir!

This is an over simplification, but there are too many stories of famers who are out there trying to milk their sows to see if there is milk, famers who have brought litters inside to bottle feed because they didn't see the mother lick off the babies like a cow would (that's because they are not cows!) and do all manner of other stupid, interfering things. The more you interfere, the more you upset the natural balance of things. You can't be out there feeling stressed and upset. Pigs are very sensitive, and they will pick up on your stress, and assume that there is something wrong, which then leads to something going wrong.

If things go well with the farrowing, you can expect your sow or gilt to be a bit hormonal afterwards. Again, leave her alone. Put out her meals and water, and let her be. This mama bear attitude can last anywhere from a few hours to a few days. It will pass before you know it, and the next thing you know she'll be throwing her big babies around because they want to nurse and she doesn't want them to.

Anywhere from 14 to 30 days after birth, piglets will start to look for food beyond what their mother provides. They will begin rooting in soil or bedding within hours of being born, but they won't actually begin eating other foods for a few weeks. This is the start of the weaning process.

When it's time to fully wean, separate the piglets from the mother. That is to say make sure they CANNOT get to their mother and vice versa. In the span of a day or so, the sow will begin to have heat cycles again, and not be concerned with her babies any longer. After a week or two of separation, you can put them all together again, or weaners are ready to be sold at that point.

This is a brief overview of my presentation for EcoFarm Day. Please excuse any typos! For those that would like more information about raising breeding stock, and other topics like preventative pig health care, farrowing, culling, etc., we offer pastured pig workshops on our farm, and we also have a newly published book on the topic, [Farrow to Finish: Pigs on your organic farm](#), which is available on our website, [www.funnyduckfarms.com](http://www.funnyduckfarms.com) and on Amazon.