



Let's get some pigs!

Kim Brook says its time to get started

Photos: Lillie Watts,
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Summer is a popular time to introduce livestock to your smallholding and with it being the year of the pig what better way to celebrate. It's a wonderful time of the year to bring on a couple of weaners.

I have kept and bred pigs for over 14 years and every day is a joy! But there are a few rules before you start. First and foremost regardless whether you are keeping a couple of pigs as pets or bringing on a couple of weaners for the freezer you must:

Obtain a County Parish Holding (CPH) number for the land on which you will be keeping them. This is done by informing the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) that you're keeping pigs, within 30 days of pigs arriving on your land. APHA will provide you a herd mark that you will have to use to identify pigs from your holding. Herd marks are 1 or 2 letters followed by 4 digits, eg A1234 or XY9876. Contact 03000 200 301. For Wales 0300 303 8268. For Scotland please contact your local Field Services Office. Or visit their website on: www.gov.uk/guidance/pig-keepers-register-your-holding-and-animals

Then once all that is done, the boring but important stuff, you can then decide which breed you would like to keep and it's not easy it's like a box of chocolates (someone once said!). We all have our favourites and our reasons are varied

from "I run a B&B and would like some little piggies in the garden so the guests can see them" to "I am looking for a couple of good meat pigs to fatten over summer and to dig up the ground at the same time". But please do not embark on breeding straightaway, consider owning a couple of weaners to bring on for meat so you can experience the challenges that face you, perhaps have some in Summer and Winter so you may experience the challenges that come with each season which will in turn give you an idea of how/what

infra-structure needs to be in place should you embark on breeding, as pigs can live up to 16 years of age. So the planning and experience you gain from your weaners will put you in good stead for when the time comes should you decide to become a pedigree pig breeder. Weaners are normally 8 weeks old and will have been wormed, do ask the breeder about their vaccination/worming programmes and please remember when you purchase meat pigs from a breeder they are meat pigs and not for breeding.





used in their dunging area. Other than that Straw is the primary bedding.

Water vessels come in all shapes and sizes. There are automatic nipple drinkers that are attached to the wall or cemented to a structure outside, therefore eliminating the risk of the pigs wasting the water as they would if it was in a bucket or trough. But regardless which method is used you should be able to inspect the equipment and ensure that fresh clean water is supplied daily. If you offer your pigs water in a bucket try and ensure that the bucket is a shallow wide bucket, which will enable them to drink easily. In summer a fully grown sow will go through at least 28 litres of water in a day (and more when lactating) and two weaners will consume 14 litres a day. In summer a wallow is vital as this will keep them cool in the summer months and also splashing around is their way of protecting themselves from the sun and parasites and those pesky horseflies! Your drinkers should be inspected at least once a day to check they have no defects. Pigs are very strong and can easily chew through plastic pipes, push over unstable feeders or drinkers, lift gates off their hinges and so forth. So ensure all your equipment is secured firmly.

Feeding is something where you will find opinions vary. But please remember the amount you offer should also relate to the breed of pig, the size and age of the pig compared to the amount of grass that is available and other wild food such as acorns.

But as a general rule of thumb feed piglets approximately 1lb of pig pellets per day for every month of their age.

Therefore;

2lb of pig pellets at two months

3lb at three months

4lb at four months →

Two good websites to start off with is the Rare Breed Survival Trust (RBST) and the British Pig Association (BPA). There are 14 different breeds to choose from! Take a look around these sites, read the descriptions and make your choice. Then go and visit a couple of breeders to see the pigs in their environments, talk to the breeder see how they keep them and take ideas away with you. You will find that us pig breeders can talk pig for hours so be warned! On one particular occasion, a couple came to visit my pigs and I and after showing them around and answering all their questions I later recommended that they go on a pig course run by a friend of mine, Gillian Dixon at South Yeo Farm East, only to find that at the said pig course there were two other couples, that had also been to see me, and they all agreed that I made their brains hurt! They were being complimentary I was assuringly told!

So we then come to housing, what about water, feed, bedding and space. These are the foundations of keeping happy, healthy and emotionally balanced pigs. When you have chosen your weaners always choose a minimum of two as pigs are gregarious animals and like all animals, we don't like being on our own.

Housing will come in all forms, shapes and sizes, you may have to start from scratch, or be lucky enough to already have an outbuilding, you may have to modify an existing building/ field shelter. Second-hand pig arks are always worth looking out for, perhaps there is a farm auction happening

nearby. Then there is the farmer down the road who may have an old pig ark lying in a hedge who will let you have it for a song and all that is needed is a few bits of wood and filling of holes to patch it up. But if you are feeling flush there are lots of pig ark manufacturers out there. A good size pig ark whether for weaners (to bring on for the freezer) or a forever home would be 8 x 6 with a floor. Having a floor keeps the pigs warm, off the ground and in winter is an added bonus as it helps with keeping the straw clean and dry and makes it easier to clean out.

For bedding, good, clean straw is to be used as using any other material such as hay can be dusty and can get damp creating spores that will result in your pigs having a respiratory problem. When inside, wood chippings can be





Then after four months 4lb a day should be sufficient, although you may find they can take 5lb a day at five months without putting on too much fat. Weaners should ideally be given food with fairly high protein levels (18%) so look out for a good grower/finisher feed. Younger pigs need a diet high in amino acids so that they can grow proportionately more muscle tissue; this is provided with more lysine in feed for younger pigs. After three months you can put the youngsters onto the adult feed that will have lower levels of protein. Adding rolled barley by cutting back on the concentrates (pig pellets) is also practiced this has helped the meat not to become too fatty in certain breeds of pigs. But whatever you decide please take advice from the breeder as different breeds vary with feed and some, if fattening, finish quicker than others.

In addition to the concentrates you can offer your pig other foodstuffs like, grass, fruit, vegetables and fodder beat. It is illegal to feed food scraps and kitchen waste to pigs due to a devastating disease outbreak that we all witnessed in 2001. It was in the 1990s that the use of "pig bins", where used to place uneaten food from schools and canteens across the UK and which was then fed to our pigs, but a prompt stop came to this as it all changed when the foot-and-mouth crisis hit in 2001. It was reported that

the outbreak had started on a farm where pigs had been illegally fed unprocessed restaurant waste, which led to a nationwide ban on using waste from homes and catering outlets as animal feed. Most pressing is the outbreak of African Swine Fever (ASF). To give a little insight, ASF is currently widespread in sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe and the Caucasus and the Italian island of Sardinia. With the increased circulation of ASF, there is growing global concern that the virus will spread further into other countries. We need to be vigilant. It is NOT in the UK thankfully and that is due to our ever-increasing awareness of not to feed food waste from the kitchen.

DO NOT FEED the leaves from fodder beet as this contains oxalic acid and large quantities should be avoided, as it is a gastric irritant. As are green potatoes, which should be avoided. Parsnips should be avoided, as they are associated with skin lesions in and around the mouth. It has been mentioned that parsnips are a cause of poor pregnancy and associated with abortion. Cow parsley should also be avoided as well as onions, leeks and peppers. And we all know that Ragwort is poisonous.

What size of land can I keep my pigs on?

Most of you will already have a designated area of land for your weaners to grow on. There is no limitation. The bigger the better but of course don't expect two weaners to make a sizeable dent on land you wish them to clear if that is your primary purpose and it exceeds a football field. With regards to the "welfare of livestock" recommendations, it is stipulated one hectare (2.47 acres) can take twenty-

five sows as long as the ground is good land with suitable drainage. This equates to five sows on half an acre. I, for example, have half an acre, which I have halved. This paddock I have then put into quarters and each quarter I have halved again. Making each section approximately 12mtrs x 23mtrs (36ft x 70ft). You can have two to three pigs in this size area. Or 6 – 7 weaners for fattening. However, do rotate your fields from time to time to allow the ground to rest and not suffer contamination as your paddock can suffer from pig sick.

The bigger the space, the happier the pigs and the happier they are. Therefore, enjoying an all round outcome!

Do remember in the summer months, pigs will appreciate some shade and a nice wallow. Your shade can come in many shapes and forms from old bed sheets, to parasols even old wind sails have been used! Keeping pigs in a wooded area is also a suitable environment, where it is cool, shaded and with trees to rub against.

There is a Pig Display at Mid Devon Show, Saturday 27 July and North Devon Show on Wednesday 7 August. A wonderful opportunity to see 12 different breeds and speak to the breeders. On 2/3 August is the Oxford Sandy and Black Pig Group Show and Sale. This is taking place at Voyce Pullin at Cirencester. Show starts at 13:00hrs. For further details of the show please visit the Group's website.

Kim and her team run the successful Oxford Sandy and Black Pig Group. You can find out more by joining them on Facebook, visiting their website for stock for sale or finding breeders in your area at

www.oxfordsandyblackpiggroup.org or following them on twitter. **SH**

