

Keeping Your Own Pigs

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Many people in rural areas like to keep a few 'backyard pigs' for their own use. It is just as important in such a case as in a commercial system to know what your pigs require in terms of housing, feed and management.

Pigs under nutritional or environmental stress, such as temperature and draughts, will not grow or reproduce as well as pigs that enjoy good feed and management. In addition, stressed pigs will be more susceptible to disease.



The success of any pig-raising venture will depend on the number of pigs turned off per sow per year, the growth rate and feed conversion efficiency of the pigs and the quality of the carcass produced. All of these factors must be considered, along with the price of feed and the price paid for pigs to be slaughtered. Good records enable a pig farmer to find which animals are performing the best and to identify areas of inefficiency.

The information included here can apply to a semi-intensive or extensive (open-range) system.

BREEDS

It is important to begin a pig raising enterprise with the correct breeds. Many people try to raise feral pigs for the table, but they are unsuitable for the following reasons:

- (a) They descend from stock bred for fat, not meat, so the carcass is usually unacceptably fat at slaughter.
- (b) They produce fewer piglets per litter than domestic breeds.
- (c) They have poorer feed conversion ability than domestic breeds - more feed is required for the same weight gain.

Most good domestic breeds are suitable for the Northern Territory, such as Large white, Landrace and Tamworth.

FEED

Pigs require a balanced diet of energy, protein, vitamins and minerals for maximum growth and production. Commercial pig mixes, although relatively expensive, are designed to meet the pig's nutritional requirements at all stages of its growth.

(a) Pig mixes

It is possible to make your own pig mix on the farm, Some examples of diets are given below. When making a pig mix, all grains must be well cracked and the feed mixed thoroughly.

Vitamin and mineral premixes should be stored under refrigeration to prevent the breakdown of vitamins.

Some examples of pig diets:

Creep/weaner diet

Maize or wheat	76.0%	
Skim milk powder	12.0%	
Soybean meal	6.0%	Ad lib from 10 days until replaced
Calcium and protein supplement	6.0%	by grower diet (10-12 weeks)
Salt	0.2%	
Premix	*	

Grower-Finisher Diet

Sorghum	79.0%	
Soybean meal	10.0%	
Calcium and protein supplement	7.0%	Ad lib from weaning to 12 weeks.
Sunflower or peanut meal	4.0%	From 13 weeks to slaughter
Salt	0.25%	0.9 kg/day increasing to 1.8 kg/day.
Premix	*	

Breeder Diet

Sorghum	80.0%	
Sunflower meal	10.0%	
Calcium and protein supplement	10.0%	Adults 2.0-3.0 kg/day. More for
Salt	0.25%	lactating sows (see Requirements)
Premix	*	

*Use as directed by the manufacturer.

NOTE - Percentages are by weight.

(b) Pasture feeding

A good, well-fertilised pasture may be used to replace approximately 1 kg of pig mix per day. However, the cost of fencing, fertiliser, irrigation and establishment of the pasture must be taken into account and compared with the cost of pig mix to ascertain if there are any real savings.

Dry sows, boars and finishing growers will make the best use of pastures, as young pigs may not be able to physically eat enough to satisfy their growth requirements. Pasture can also benefit pigs by providing exercise, extra vitamins and minerals, plus sunshine and fresh air.

Plenty of shade must be provided as pigs are susceptible to sunburn.

Parasite eggs will build up in the pasture over time and the resulting parasite burden will have a marked effect on the pigs. Rotational grazing and a low stocking rate will reduce the chance of a pig becoming infected with parasites. Nose rings will prevent the pigs from rooting up the pasture.

(c) Other feed sources

To reduce the cost of pig feed, it is possible to use some alternative feeds, such as silage or sweet potatoes. However, as the pig has a simple digestive system (similar to humans) it cannot utilise large amounts of forage.

Alternative feeds should be used as a supplement to a good pig mix. It must be remembered that alternative feeds are not concentrated and contain high levels of water and fibre. For instance, 4 kg of fresh sweet potatoes have an equivalent energy to 1 kg of pig mix.

It is illegal to feed swill to pigs. Swill is any waste feed that has been in contact with substances of animal origin, including human food scraps.

FEED REQUIREMENTS OF PIGS

(a) The lactating sow

The requirements of a lactating sow depend on the condition of the sow at farrowing, the number of piglets in the litter and the length of lactation. Allow each sow 2.7-3.6 kg/day of pig mix, plus 0.25 kg extra for each piglet. If pasture or root crops are used as a supplement, allow at least 2 kg of pig mix per day and as much pasture or sweet potatoes as she will eat.

For a couple of days each side of farrowing, one third of a sow's ration should be replaced with bran to prevent constipation.

Keep an eye on the sow. If she appears to lose too much condition during lactation, give extra pig mix. Each successive pregnancy should result in a net increase in weight for the sow.

(b) The young pig

The digestive system of a young pig is designed to metabolise milk, not grain or fibrous meals. At weaning, the pig is required to make a fast adjustment from milk to dry feed. If the pig has not been accustomed to dry feed, the change of diet can lead to scouring. A sow's milk output reaches a peak at the third to fourth week of lactation and then declines. After this time, the piglet will require extra feed to make up for the decrease in available milk. It is at this time that the piglet can make good use of creep (weaner) feed as a supplement to the sow's milk.

A good creep feed has high energy, low fibre and usually contains dried milk products. It should be introduced to the piglets from about two weeks of age. They can be encouraged to eat the creep feed by sprinkling the feed on the floor. Tallow, molasses, sugar or cornflakes can be used as appetisers. Fresh feed should be offered daily.

The use of creep feed reduces the demand on the sow and allows a higher growth rate in piglets. Heavier piglets are easier to wean and suffer less at weaning. At weaning, the piglets should remain on creep feed as the grower ration is gradually introduced.

(c) The grower

The grower should be given as much feed as it can eat until 12 weeks of age. This encourages fast growth at a time when the pig lays down lean meat faster than fat. After 12 weeks, the feed should be restricted to prevent the carcass from being spoiled with too much fat. If feeding only pig mix, it is recommended to feed 0.9 kg/pig/day increasing to 1.8 kg/pig/day at slaughter. The finishing stage can make best use of pasture and root crops.

(d) Dry sows and boars

Boars and dry sows should be fed at a rate of 1.8-2.3 kg/day. There is no advantage to be gained by increasing feed towards the end of pregnancy in dry sows. Pasture, silage, or root crops can be used to advantage as long as the pigs are given 1 kg of pig mix per day.

WATER

Cool, fresh water should be available for drinking as well as for cleaning. Waterers should be placed so that water does not run over the pen floor.

As a rule of thumb, 20 litres of water is needed per pig per day.

GROWTH RATES

It is always advisable to check the growth rates of pigs, as a slow growth rate indicates that pigs are either not getting enough to eat, or are not utilising their feed efficiently. The following table can be used as a guide for growth rate.

Age (weeks)	Weight (kg live-weight)
4	5
8	13
14	29
20	52
26	82
28	100

MATING MANAGEMENT OF THE SOW AND THE BOAR

Controlled-mating allows you greater influence over your pigs and enables breeding records to be kept. If group mating is practised, a boar may favour one sow and neglect the others; this will require more returns to service than in controlled mating.

The sow has a 21-day oestrus cycle (range 18-22) and a gestation period (pregnancy) lasting an average of 114 days. You should aim for at least two litters/sow/year and eight piglets weaned/litter. This can be achieved by weaning at eight weeks and mating the sow as soon as she comes in heat. This should occur three to seven days after weaning. A sow is usually kept for six litters, but any sow repeatedly giving small litters should be culled.

Gilts (maiden sows) should be mated at seven to eight months of age, or about 125 kg live-weight. This will correspond to the second oestrus (heat) and will give the best litter size.

It is important for you to be able to pick up the signs of heat easily. Gilts should be introduced to, or run with, a boar for 15 to 30 minutes daily from the time that they are six months old. The presence of a boar both stimulates oestrus and makes the detection of it much easier.

As oestrus approaches, the sow will show interest in the boar and try to mount other sows. The vulva becomes swollen and a mucous discharge is present. There may be an increase in the frequency of urination.

At oestrus, the sow will stand rigidly when pressure is applied to her back and may have a characteristic upright ear carriage. This occurs when the vulva is less red and swollen. Although signs of oestrus may persist for three to four days, the sow will only allow mounting by the boar for two to three days.

The sow should be mated at the first sign of true oestrus. If she is mated again 12 hours later, the chance of a large litter will be increased.

The sow should be checked for signs of oestrus from 18-22 days after mating. If she shows signs of oestrus, she is not pregnant and must be mated again.

Mating should take place in the coolest part of the day, that is, early morning or evening. As a boar will work best in a familiar environment, it is advisable to take the sow to the boar's pen for mating. The floor of the mating pen should not be slippery, or the sow may not be able to take the boar's weight for the duration of the mating.

A boar can start serving sows at eight months of age. Large piggeries use one boar to service 15 sows. However, in a small piggery, if all sows come in heat together, a boar may not be able to manage more than 10 sows. A boar should have a maximum working life of two years.

MANAGEMENT

(a) The sow

Approximately one week before farrowing, the sow should be wormed, scrubbed down with soapy water to remove any worm eggs and put in a clean dry farrowing stall. As farrowing approaches, the sow gets heavy and slow, and the udder enlarges. On the day before farrowing, milk can be drawn from the teats.

It is recommended that weaning occurs at around six to eight weeks. At this stage, the piglets should be in good condition and the sow should be mated again so as to produce two litters per year. Piglets may be weaned as early as four weeks, but this requires much more skill on the part of the manager.

After weaning, the sow should be housed near a boar to stimulate oestrus.

(b) The piglets

The piglets should have a warm, dry creep area, protected from the sow. It is not necessary to provide artificial heating for piglets in the Top End, but it is important to keep out rain and draughts. In most parts of Australia, artificial heating is necessary.

Piglets possess only a few days' supply of iron at birth. The sow's milk does not contain adequate iron as normally the iron is obtained from the soil. If piglets do not have access to soil, they become anaemic. Supplementary iron may be administered by injection, or orally within the first two days of life.

(c) Weaning

At weaning, piglets suffer from a change of diet, removal of the sow and their new surroundings. Worming and erysipelas vaccinations are also often carried out. (Erysipelas is an infectious disease of pigs, which causes reddening of the skin).

All of these factors lead to stress in piglets. So to minimise prolonged stress, it is advisable to carry out these operations together.

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