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Raising the Backyard Pig in Maine

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Bulletin #1119, Raising the Backyard Pig in Maine

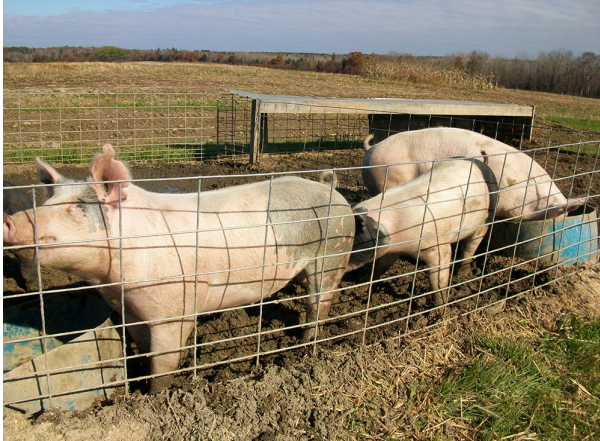
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So you're thinking you might like to try raising your

own bacon or pork chops. This fact sheet provides a general overview of what you need to know to care for a pig. It covers selecting and transporting, feeding, water, shelter, and other considerations. Armed with this knowledge, you can make an informed decision about whether this project is right for you.

Selecting and Transporting Your Pig

Breeding

Crossbred pigs (two- or three-way crosses, not mongrels) are preferable for freezer pigs because they grow 9–17% faster than purebred pigs. The crossbreeding of livestock is called hybrid vigor (or heterosis). Crossbred pigs gain weight more efficiently (by using feed 5–10% more efficiently) and in general, are more vigorous and less susceptible to stress.

Environment

Buy your pig from a reputable producer who provides a first-rate environment for their animals. Don't purchase piglets from a farm with sick pigs. Breeding determines the potential of a pig but environment determines the extent to which that potential is realized. The first 5 weeks of a pig's life affect its growth for the rest of its life. A good start means better, faster growth.

Transportation

Pigs must be confined for the trip home. An enclosed trailer, large dog crate, burlap bag (tied to close the opening), or large, sturdy cardboard box with air holes cut for ventilation can all work. Pigs should be transported home immediately. Don't leave them in confinement while you visit with friends, etc. Never leave them confined on hot days or in the sun.

Feeding

The nutritional requirements of a pig are most exacting until it weighs 75 pounds. In fact, the younger the pig, the less grain is needed to increase body weight, so young pigs weighing less than 75 pounds benefit greatly from a commercially prepared, nutritionally balanced feed of 16% protein fed free-choice (that is, the animal has feed before it at all times). Note: Some breeds, Heritage, in particular, were bred to produce back fat that was used for lard, so these breeds need to be limit fed so they grow slower and don't lay down as much backfat.

The pig's nutritional requirements change as it approaches 100 pounds in weight. The optimal rate of gain occurs if the animal is fed a well-balanced 12–14% protein ration free-choice until slaughtering.

You can calculate a pig's weight without a scale by measuring the heart girth just behind the forelegs and the length of the pig with a tape measure. [How to Calculate Pig Weight Using a Measuring Tape \(PDF\)](#) describes how to do it. Special hog weight measuring tapes can sometimes be purchased at your local farm/feed store.

When pigs are over 100 pounds and quick growth is not necessarily a primary factor, less grain can be fed per day (2 to 2-½ pounds two times a day) if food wastes (not garbage), garden refuse, pasture, etc., are included in their diets. Alternative feeds such as potatoes, dry beans, raw meat, and eggs must be cooked before feeding to swine because they can't digest these foods in a raw state. (Raw eggs can cause a biotin deficiency.)

There are strict federal laws that regulate the use of “food wastes” in the production of any meat that is to be sold.

Size of pig (pounds)	% Protein of grain (see feed bag label)	Grain fed per day (pounds)	Grain fed during stage (pounds)	Grain needed per 1 pound of gain (pounds)
40–75	16	3	60	2
75–125	14	4–5	140	3
125–250	13	6–7	500	4
		Total grain	700	

How much grain will one pig eat?

Water

Pigs should have clean, fresh drinking water available to them at all times. The simplest way to accomplish this is with an automatic nipple waterer that can be purchased for less than \$10. If pigs are kept in the winter, liquid water must be made available to them. In Maine, this means chipping/removing surface ice and/or changing the water more than twice a day unless a bucket or tank heater is used.

Shelter

Contrary to much popular opinion, swine are naturally clean animals and should be provided with clean, dry, draft-free housing, especially when young. Newborn pigs require constant temperatures of 85–90 degrees F. This heat requirement drops off as the pig grows, but a 50-pound pig is still susceptible to cold and especially dampness. It should be kept warm and dry.

Older animals are affected by temperatures above 80 degrees F. Hogs have few sweat glands and need a way to cool off. They do this, if they can, in a wallow or mud-hole. A well-designed hog pen should have provisions for such a wallow, or shade and a sprinkler (misting) system.

At a minimum, the area for each pig should be at least 25 square feet with shelter and feed at one end and water and a dunging area at the other. Small pigs escape through small holes, and once they know it is possible to get out, they keep trying. A board or woven-wire fence works best for small pigs. Larger pigs can be easily contained by a single strand of

electric fence placed 8–10 inches off the ground. Train them to the electric fence first in a secure enclosure. Otherwise, they are likely to go through the fence the first time they encounter it.

Miscellaneous Considerations

Health

If you buy a disease-free, vaccinated, well-started pig (25 pounds and up) and keep it warm, dry, and well-fed, disease should not be a problem. Vaccinate for erysipelas if the producer has not already vaccinated. You can also check with the state veterinarian on current pig disease concerns.

Most people understand the great importance of fully cooked pork products, due to the risk of transmission of parasites like trichinella. There are other organisms that people can get from pig manure, even if it's been well-composted. One of these is the pig ascarid (or roundworm, *Ascaris suum*). For more information, see [Bulletin #1120, Family Health Considerations for Pig Owners: Swine Ascarids](#).

Treat for internal parasites at 14 days after you get the pig and then 30 days after that. Use a dewormer according to package instructions. **Be sure to read and follow the label directions for all drug treatments. It is very important to follow the withdrawal “days to slaughter” recommendations so the meat from your hog will be free from drug residues. Never use a drug that is not labeled for use in swine, and always use the drug exactly as the label indicates. Keep records of the drug used, the ID of the animal(s) treated, the method used, and dates used.**

Most feeder pigs will make it to market weight without any disease issues, but it is important to have contact information for your local livestock veterinarian handy at all times.

Male or Female?

Males tend to grow slightly faster than females. However, it is most important to start out with a healthy, meaty, thrifty-looking pig of either sex. If you purchase a male, make sure it has been castrated (testicles removed) and the wound has healed.

One or More?

Many people think that pigs do better if there are two or more of them. However, one healthy pig that is well cared for will do well on its own, and it is better to care for one well than several poorly. If you plan to raise more than one pig in a group, try to select pigs of the same age and size, and purchase pigs from one source.

How Much Meat from a Pig?

A hog slaughtered at the ideal butchering weight of 250 pounds will provide about 140 pounds of retail cuts of fresh and cured pork. Unless you are going to slaughter and process your pig(s) yourself, you will need to make arrangements with a slaughterhouse well in advance of your desired slaughter date. Most facilities are *very* busy in the fall, so setting up an appointment well in advance will ensure that your pig(s) are processed in a timely manner and don't become "overweight." So when you obtain your pig, call the slaughterhouse to arrange a slaughter date. A 50-pound piglet will reach market weight (250 pounds) in about 100 days.

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