The Dirty Truth about Homestead Pigs on Pasture

"Can you write about homestead hogs? I'm really struggling to discern the good from the bad. They're good for tilling soil, but I need to keep their manure out of our garden for several months before planting. Because we're a micro farm, we don't really have many areas that aren't used year round. Also, if they totally tear up an area where their pens are, but we rotate those pens, how long does it take for the ground to recover–do they destroy that wonderful subsoil fungal and microbial layer? I'd love to have fresh bacon, but I'm not sure at what cost it would come in terms of providing pastures for our other farm animals to graze and browse…"

You know what's really hot right now? *(Que the buzzwords…)* Pastured pork. Or better yet, forest-raised pork.

And I think it's awesome. I love that folks are thinking more about the quality of life of the animals who will become the meat we feed our families. I think it is so important to respect the "pigness of the pig." When the vast majority of pigs are being raised in unhealthy and unnatural living conditions, where they can barely move or follow their natural instincts, it's no wonder we are searching for innovative ideas to return to the old ways of raising pigs… you know, the way they were *created* to live.

It doesn't take but one season of raising pigs on pasture to realize just how destructive they can be. (Which goes back to that whole "how they were created" thing.) It took us one season of rotating hogs through our pasture to know that if we were going to keep that up, we wouldn't have much pasture left for the cows at the end of a few more years. The ground was pocked with both shallow and deep depressions. The mud wallows they made spilling their water for pleasure every day created large areas of compaction. Weed seeds took over and grew faster than perennial grasses were re-established.

And let's face it, most homesteaders aren't set up to re-seed pasture grass easily. Many of us don't have and can't afford to buy and store equipment for repairing and replanting pasture. Waiting for the inexpensive, equipment-free alternative (frost seeding) allows invasive weeds to take over and erosion to happen. And we certainly don't have the time or extra pasture to allow it to grow back before allowing other animals to rotate through. For most of us, there simply isn't enough pasture on our mini-farms to sacrifice large portions of it to the damage that pigs are going to do.

Learn how to improve your pasture for free.

*The question is, for those of us on **small** acreage, is raising pigs on pasture part of a sustainable, homestead system? And can you raise them in confinement and still be respectful of how they were created to behave? And still, know that your meat had a better life and made a better product for your family than what you would find in a supermarket?*

leLike free-range chickens, for the small-scale homesteader, pastured pigs may just be better in theory.

When you look at the whole landscape, the big picture of your mini-farm, this amazing resource of fast-growing, inexpensive meat may be doing more harm than good.

Here are 5 things about pastured pigs that aren't true on a small farm.

5 Pastured Pig Myths

You're Going to Save a Ton of Money on Feed

Yes, pigs will eat grass (and some weeds). They love it and it's satisfying knowing that they are getting some diversity in their diet. (Pigs are omnivores after all.) But in the end, the bit of grass we have available on a small scale might not put a dent in the feed bill enough to notice. I imagine that might not be the case if your pasture is sown with a solid legume, but in general, the protein in the feed sack is going to convert to flesh much more efficiently than grass

Certain Breeds Won't Do Damage

As much damage, maybe. But that thing on the end of their nose was made to dig. Some say if you want a breed that won't tear up your pasture get a modern breed (like Yorkshire) because the instinct is being bred out of them. Others say you want to get a heritage breed such as Large Black Hogs or American Guinea Hogs because they won't want to plow.

To some extent, your pigs are going to root. In our experience, we haven't noticed any difference in the amount of damage one breed of pig will do more than another. We've done Yorkshires, Berkshires, Hampshire, Large Blacks, Old Spots, and mixes. All diggers. Seems if you want

them to tear a place up for tilling, they don't do nearly as good of a job as you want them to. If you want them to leave a minimal footprint, then the area is a mess when they're done. Isn't that just how things work?

In the end, I think it's more about *how* you manage them, not where they are paddocked.

You Can Use Them to Till Your Garden

Will pigs tear up your sod? Yes. Will they clean up after your last garden? Yes. Will they leave you with a beautiful workable soil without having to use a rototiller? Maybe.

But not in my experience.

Isn't true to make a blanket statement about a pigs efficacy in creating a friable soil. On our farm, the soil is heavy in clay. Compaction is very easy to do and a heavy, wallowing pig does it well. Leaving soil bare for any length of time and it cracks after a few wet/dry cycles when uncovered.

Ultimately, I think a tiller tills better and gives you a more workable soil. Plus, (and this is a big one) when the soil gets wet after running pigs through the garden, there is a residual odor that lingers. *Even after the winter.* We rotationally grazed pigs through our hoop house area one year, leaving them in one spot just long enough to get all the weeds plowed up, and when working in the soil a year later, I still noticed it smelled a little like "pig mud." Which isn't the most pleasant of the animal manure smells in my opinion.

Good Agricultural Practices advises pig manure not be used even in compost. (Same with dog and cat manure.) Why? Intestinal parasites may survive composting. It's the heat generated in the composting process that destroys pathogens in the manure. For this reason, fresh manure shouldn't be used in a garden for at least 3-4 months before harvesting. That certainly makes quick maturing crops like radishes, lettuces, and other greens a challenge for food safety after letting hogs clean up the garden over the winter.

Ron Becker at Ohio State University says that "animal manures can be used as fertilizer on vegetable gardens; however, manure should be incorporated into the soil during the fall prior to planting crops the following spring. Applying manures during the growing season is not recommended due to the chance of contaminating produce with disease-causing microorganisms. Hog manure is just as safe as any other *if it is composted* or *in the ground for at least six months* prior to harvesting a crop where the edible portion is in contact with the soil." (emphasis mine)

Is it worth it anyway? After all, pig manure is lower in nitrogen than other manures. Cow manure has a nitrogen content of 1.1 percent; Poultry contains 2.8 percent nitrogen; Rabbit manure contains 2 percent. Pig manure? Comes in at a whopping 0.4 percent nitrogen.

You Can Avoid Parasites

From my research, the jury is out on how long it takes to avoid parasites. Some say it can take up to 12 months before returning to the same piece of ground. Others say you're safe in as little as 90 days. Another practice found suggested is to rotate pigs every 12 days as a natural dewormer.

Considering this information, along with what we've learned about using manure in the composting process, it is safe to say that unless you have access to abundant land to make frequent rotations, you may need to look into deworming options.

Rotationally Grazing Pigs Won't Destroy Your Pasture

Just like with myth that certain breeds won't destroy pasture, rotationally grazed pastured pigs will leave damage in their wake. Just about the first thing a pig does after it moves to a new spot is to make itself a wallow to sleep in so at the very least you're going to have to deal with that damage. Quick, frequent rotations would minimize their impact (and as we've seen prevent parasitic infestations). But since we're talking about small-scale homesteads here, you have to consider if you have enough land to devote to that.

It's quite possible that the best option for a small homestead wanting to utilize a form of rotational grazing would be to sacrifice an area of pasture and then next year focus on that area's recovery while sacrificing a new spot for the successive batch of pigs. (Make sure that you

exclude any young trees or shrubs you don't want to have uprooted.) Is it ideal? Maybe not, but we're doing the best we can, wherever we are! During your recovery year, you will need to actively plan the restoration through re-seeding or weeds will take over.

Whether you should pasture your pigs is really only a decision you can make for yourself. Factoring in the quality of your pasture/forage, your landscape, proximity to neighbors, the amount of space you have available to dedicate to this facet of your mini-farm, and more there are many things to consider.

But I do believe that with forethought and wise management, you don't have to rule out raising such an economical source of homestead protein for your family. I believe that you can still respect the way a pig was created without having several acres of woodlot with mature nuts and fruit for them to forage (though wouldn't that be nice?)

Considerations to Make When Creating Your Homestead Pig Habitat

Woodlot, Pasture, or Pen?

The answer is: Any of the above.

Generally, pigs are managed the same way whether in a pasture or a woodlot. In my personal experience, they do the least amount of damage to a woodlot. They'll still wallow but they don't seem to root as much. Perhaps because they generally can stay cooler in the trees. If we had a lot of buried nuts that might not be the case, but on our homestead, pigs damage the earth less in the woods.

Either way, we manage them the same by determining the total area we can devote to raising pigs (about a ½ acre), dividing it in half and then using half one year, half the next. The unused half is restored during its off-year. The area we use is a mix of pasture and woods. We have chosen to not run the pigs through the cow's pasture to minimize damage and need for recovery. We also want to be sure that the cows have enough forage, especially in the event of a dry year.

Even though we're not rotating through the overall area, we do occasionally move their food and water trough (and cover it with hay) to reduce odor and flys in the wet area where feed has been sitting. Our hogs only begin to produce a noticeably unpleasant odor in the final weeks prior to butchering. (When they're larger…. and what they are leaving behind is larger.) I think that's a *benefit* since it helps break the bond made over the last half a year.

Even if you don't have enough room to devote in that way, you can still raise them in a pen and keep them healthy. You can keep their area cleaned and mucked out, replacing their bedding, remembering that they will only pick a spot to do their business to a certain point. When it piles up, they are going to pick a new place until they will do their business wherever.

Another route would be to use a Deep Litter System by continually piling on fresh straw or hay. It keeps the pen clean, encourages instincts, and makes a built-in composting system. The deeper the better so the urine gets absorbed by the litter and doesn't run off into the ground. They'll root around, making for an automatic compost turner that also generates heat, keeping them warm in cold weather. The downside to a Deep Litter System would be the logistics of cleaning it out all once next year. That could be a lot of material to handle at one go instead of a bit here and there, especially if you don't have a tractor.

In either pen-situation, making sure the pigs have adequate space to move, not wallowing in their own filth, and using hay or straw as a way to allow them "root" and follow that natural instinct is a key starting point to creating your pig habitat. Consider raising this year's hogs in one spot and don't put hogs in that same spot again for at least a year. Even if you're raising them in a pen, it should be a doable scheme for a lot of folks and if not then implement a natural worming protocol.

Open Air

As with any living creature, we all do best when we have some open air. Animals living and wallowing in their own filth are an invitation to disease and since we're trying to raise healthy meat to feed our healthy families getting open air circulating is part of that goal.

Shade

But even though we want our pigs to get some fresh air, they also need shade. Pigs, especially light colored ones can get sunburn which is painful, decreases their quality of life, and can slow their growth if they lose their appetite. If you don't have trees for shade, provide a shelter they can run into during the heat of the day. Maybe even keep a few bales of hay or straw for them to bury themselves under. (Which could also discourage rooting in the soil since they'll root around the hay instead.)

Consider the Breed

Modern breeds have been bred to reduce natural, active instincts. If you raise them in a stricter confinement, choosing a "pink" breed like Yorkshire may be a better fit. (Unless you're raising them for the love of bacon.) We have a more active, heritage breed on our farm this year and we're seeing that the inactivity from being in the barn instead of the usual ¼ acre plot has them growing fat fast. And by fat I mean I expect that to be literal fat under there, not flesh. (If last year's meat from the same breed was any indication of how these pigs are filling out.)

Learn more about choosing a pig breed for your homestead.

Raise More One

Your pig is going to be so much happier and less trouble for you if you raise two. They are social creatures and will be quieter, more content, and less apt to escape if they have company.

Fencing

We train our pigs to respect a hot-wire fence. We have more strands when they are first learning what electric fence, then reduce it down to 1-2 strands. It doesn't take long for them to learn to respect the fence. A few encounters and they know to keep back. Most of the time if we have a pig getting out, it's because they were hungry or thirsty.

You can use hog paneling if you won't be rotating them or sectioning off a larger piece of ground. That's not to say that they won't necessarily escape from a pen. Amazingly, we've had fairly well-grown pigs jump over that fence (and tear a gash in their belly in the process!)