

Raising Small Groups of Pigs

Beginners in personal meat production and homesteading may be interested in raising swine.



When done correctly, you can put pork in your freezer at a lower cost than what you would pay in the grocery store, and possibly even make some money when you have extra pigs to sell. When raising your own pigs, you control the feed and additives, so you know exactly what they were fed. You also have the satisfaction of producing your own meat.

Those interested in raising pigs for meat production should ask a few questions before moving forward:

- How much meat do I need?
- Do I have the space?
- How do I feed them?
- How are am I going to address illnesses?

This article will get you started on evaluating what you need to raise a small group of pigs for meat.

How much meat do I need?

Are you looking just to fill your freezer? Or for some extra income as well? To determine how much meat you need, first determine how much pork you eat in a year. Because most people eat pork as related to special occasions, it might help to first know the cuts available from a whole hog.

Whole cuts (generally, 2 of each whole cut per pig)

Loin and Ribs	Ham	Shoulder	Belly	Miscellaneous
	Whole hams			Liver, heart, stomach, casings Feet
Chops	Sliced hams		Pork	Jowls Ears
Roasts	hams	Roasts	Belly	(generally a dog treat)
Rack of ribs	(deli or carved)	Pulled Pork	pieces Bacon	Pork rind (skin)

Ground pork and trimmings (created from trim and whole cuts, amount per pig is determined at processing)

- Scrapple
- Souse
- Sausages

Generally speaking, these are all the cuts of meat available from the pig at harvest. From these cuts, what do you and your family eat in a year? If you are looking for more whole cuts in your freezer, you may need to raise more than one hog, as whole cuts are limited to the number of whole muscles available in the pig. If you eat 2 hams per year, then 1 hog can produce 2 hams. However, if you eat 4 whole hams, or 2 whole hams and lots of carved ham, you need to raise at least 2 pigs to get enough hams for your freezer.

If you are looking to sell meat, raising more than one pig is highly beneficial, as the cost of care for those pigs can be spread out over more pigs, lowering the amount of money invested in each pig, and increasing possible profits per pig sold.

Understanding cuts of pork is critical knowledge for determining what you want from your small herd of pigs. To learn more about the versatility of pork and to help you determine how many pigs you will need in your herd, start at the [Pork Cuts page on the National Pork Board website](#).

After you have determined how much and what kind of pork you want, you can determine how many pigs you need, and if you have the space to raise those pigs.



PennState Extension

Do I have the space?

Determining if you have the space to raise pigs, or if you can create a space to raise pigs, can depend on when you plan to harvest your pork.

Raising pigs in a small herd can maximize environmental resources if it occurs seasonally. Pigs grow best in moderate temperatures, around 70°F, and can tolerate cooler temperatures as they gain weight and age. To maximize optimal weather conditions, it is recommended to raise small herds of swine seasonally, starting your project in the spring. If you are to start raising 50 lb. pigs in May, they are likely to reach an appropriate market size (between 250-280 lbs.) by November, depending on health, environmental temperature, available nutrition, and natural growth rate of the breed.

If you want to raise pigs year-round, a source of heat and a source of cooling may be necessary depending on the age and size of your pigs. Pigs under 50 lbs. need assistance keeping warm, whereas pigs over 150 lbs. need help keeping cool if temperatures exceed 70°F for a few days. Generally speaking, heavier pigs (150 lbs.+) that are cool, 50°-70°F, will eat more feed, while pigs that are too warm, over 70°F will eat less feed. To better understand how temperature impacts pigs and how to manage environmental temperature, visit these pages for more information:

- [Keeping Pigs Cool in Summer Heat](#)
- [Environmental Management of Young Pigs During Cool Weather](#)

Generally, pigs require minimal space. Depending on whether you chose to house pigs inside or outside may determine the amount of space needed per pig. For growing pigs, it is recommended that you plan for around 8 square feet of space per pig. While this may seem like a small amount of space, pigs are not terribly active animals. Rather, their behaviors of choice are sleeping, eating, and rooting; they leave the running to horses. More space should be utilized, however, if you are unable to provide your pigs with indoor shelter. This is less for the pigs, and more for spreading manure and managing pasture. Pigs are destructive because of their rooting behaviors. Plan for pigs that are outdoors to rip up soils and create large holes and muddy areas. Managing pastures for high traffic will help you manage the damage that pigs can cause to the landscape.

To determine how much space you may need outside for swine, review these resources to understand your nutrient management needs and proper pasture management:

- [Writing a Manure Management Plan for Pennsylvania Farmers and Property Owners](#)
- [Have a Horse or Steer in Your Backyard? You Need a Manure Management Plan](#)
- [Managing for Nutrient and Soil Retention in Pastured Lands](#)
- [Walking Pastures – Important Step in Pasture Management](#)

- [Pasture Management by the Seasons](#)

Whether you house your pigs predominantly inside or outside, all pigs do require some form of shelter. The shelter need not be extensive. In fact, a three-sided shelter, open on the fourth side is sufficient for pigs with access to pasture. The overall size will depend on the number of pigs you plan to raise, your ability to work in the housing, and the extent of ventilation needed to manage the facility. Naturally ventilated shelters for pasture can have a low roof with manual openings for airflow, however indoor facilities may need an attic and fans to facilitate ventilation. The goal of the shelter is to provide relief from the weather; shelter is also the primary tool for temperature management for pigs. Consult the references for temperature provided before for more information on temperature management for pigs.

Other considerations for swine housing should be their natural behaviors for rooting and cleanliness.

Pigs are natural excavators and will try to dig out of any pen. Many folks have found it useful to put one strand of electric wire inside the pen at ground level to keep the pigs from digging under the fence. Do not put the electric wire across the pen entrance. The pigs will remember it and will be reluctant to go out the gate when it's time to go to the butcher.

Pigs are naturally clean animals. Pigs learn to defecate near water supplies. This behavior is key to keeping feed clean and bedding dry. Placing waterers away from feeding areas give pigs dry areas to sleep and centralizes manure and urine away from feeders and bedded areas. Creating pens that are rectangular, rather than square or circular, can help maximize distance between bedding and drinking areas.

How Do I Feed Them?

While management of water can teach pigs to utilize a space, restricting feed and water is not a useful tool in pig production. To grow efficiently, pigs need access to feed and water 24 hours a day. This is usually accomplished with a self-feeder which can be purchased at the feed store, or you can build one yourself. The goal of the self-feeder is to allow pigs free choice to eat as much as they want in a day. Access to feed throughout the day improves gain of pigs as compared to those that are limit fed, or fed a specific amount of feed, 1 or 2 times daily.

Diets for meat pigs are very specific for growth performance. Most nutritionists develop pig diets for maximizing growth and minimizing feed intake. When raising pigs, feed will be the most expensive input that cannot be avoided. While you may have heard of people selling 'grass-fed' pork, pigs require more energy and protein to grow than grass alone can provide. It is imperative to offer your pigs a nutritionally balanced diet for their needs.

High protein, particularly high lysine content, and energy is very important for growing pigs. Unless you already have access to grain to mix your own feed, purchasing premixed rations is the recommended way to go for a small group of pigs. Current research in swine nutrition suggests phase

feeding of pigs, by changing amino acid and energy content as the pig grows. Younger pigs need much more protein, and specific amino acids, than older pigs do. To maximize your pigs' growth, 50 lb. pigs should have a high protein diet and a specified lysine content, while pigs that are over 200 lbs. can have less protein and lysine. A wealth of information for swine nutrition can be found through the Iowa Pork Industry Center (Iowa State University) and the Pork Information Gateway.

Here are some selected resources to get you started:

- [IPIC- Iowa State University, Swine Nutrition](#)
- [Pork Information Gateway](#)
- [Growing-Finishing Swine Nutrient Recommendations and Feeding Management](#)
- [Factors Affecting Nutrient Recommendations for Swine](#)

Many folks are tempted to feed table scraps. Pigs are able to digest table scraps; however, these should be fed with careful discretion. Aside from not necessarily providing balanced nutrition, table scraps may contribute to the spread of diseases in swine, such as *Trichinella* or African Swine Fever. Any table scraps fed to pigs should not contain meat products, particularly any that are not thoroughly cooked, and should be considered a treat, rather than the base diet for pigs. If you are feeding pigs to sell the meat to others, you should look into the requirements for food safety around meat production and feeding, as food safety is very important when producing meat. Use these resources to get started:

- [Feeding for Niche Swine Production](#)
- [Leftovers for Livestock](#)

Often overlooked in feeding pigs is water. Pigs require a constant supply of fresh, clean water. The recommended best practice is to utilize automatic waterers, where the pig learns to turn the water off and on when they want a drink. These range from an attachment fitted on a 55-gallon drum, to a "nipple" type that is screwed onto the end of a hose or pipe. Do not use buckets for watering pigs, as their curious nature will spill and waste water that is supplied in a bucket on the ground. The importance of water for animals should be emphasized for your herd. Utilize this resource to better understand water recommendations for swine: [Water Recommendations and Systems for Swine](#).

How am I Going to Address Illnesses?

Raising livestock should always come with a plan to address handling sick pigs. It is a good practice to always start with healthy pigs, preferably from a reputable breeder. Purchasing pigs from a livestock auction carries the risk of exposure to other pigs and they may get sick. Reputable pig suppliers should provide evidence of health records for the herd. If you do choose to purchase from an auction, the pigs you purchase should be associated with a premises identification. This provides the opportunity to return to the source should your pigs get sick after purchase. To learn more about the premises I.D. program, review these materials from the USDA-APHIS: [Animal Identification](#).

Once you purchase your pigs and bring them home, be prepared for illnesses that may occur outside of purchase origin. Because of their propensity to root, pigs are highly susceptible to soil-based parasites and bacterial infections. Pigs are also susceptible to a range of viral infections, including diseases that can be mutated from human illnesses, such as the influenza (flu) virus. These illnesses will slow the growth of your pig, and possibly lead to death if left untreated. It is imperative to have a good relationship with a veterinarian when raising swine. While not all veterinarians have experience treating pigs, they are a very necessary first resource in assisting you in developing a health plan, guiding you to appropriate medications and vaccinations for treating and preventing illness. Should you have access to a vet that lacks experience treating pigs, [contact your Penn State Extension Educators](#). We would be happy to help you and your veterinarian find the appropriate health plan for your swine herd.

Other Management

After answering the key questions of caring for your small herd of pigs, there are many steps that can be taken to further develop your herd for your needs.

For seasonal meat production, it is advantageous to look into what breed of pig you wish to grow. Generally speaking, any modern commercial breed will work for your project. Crossbreds grow faster and are more efficient than purebreds. There are numerous other breeds of pigs, and any combination may be more or less advantageous for the purposes of your enterprise. The most important considerations for meat production are growth and meat quality. High growth and quality breeds are described concisely by the [National Pork Board](#). More exotic breeds of pig can be found from the [Livestock Conservatory](#), however many of these pigs are prized for their historical significance or specific markets, rather than superior growth rates.

Finally, Market Day!

The day will come when the pigs reach market weight. To collect the meat from your pigs, you need to either haul them to a processor (butcher) or harvest them yourself. It is recommended to take your pigs to a butcher if you have no experience in harvesting meat. A skilled butcher will not only treat your pigs with respect at harvest, they will be able to maximize the amount of usable meat from your pig during the cutting process.

To get your pigs to a butcher, you will need to haul your pigs.

When moving pigs, keep in mind that they do not like to be pushed. Take your time and let them move at their own pace. Patience is the key to high quality meat production, as stressed pigs will have damaged muscle at harvest, and poorer meat quality.

Hauling pigs can be achieved with a pickup truck or horse trailer as long as you have some sort of ramp for loading. If you chose to use a pickup, be sure that the sides are high enough to prevent pigs from escaping or falling out during transport. There are also commercial livestock haulers that will transport the pigs for you. To keep stress to a minimum, your loading ramp should have solid sides, so they can't escape, and you should follow behind with a barrier or panel to keep them from turning around. In fact, a hurdle should be used whenever you are moving pigs. Be sure to never take sick pigs to butcher. Wait until you obtain a clean bill of health from your veterinarian before transporting pigs, regardless of final destination.

Raising market pigs can be a short term, low investment project for any family looking to save money on meat and to get started in raising livestock. With the right management, you can maximize the return on your investment, and have a high-quality product while learning a new skill.

We are working diligently to improve the amount and quality of materials available to all swine producers, useful for newbies and the pros. Please don't hesitate to contact your educators for specific questions in the meantime, we are happy to help!

Authors

Michael Fournier

County Extension Director

Elizabeth Hines

Swine Extension Specialist

eah405@psu.edu

814-865-3267

extension.psu.edu

Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences research and extension programs are funded in part by Pennsylvania counties, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Where trade names appear, no discrimination is intended, and no endorsement by Penn State Extension is implied.

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

Penn State is an equal opportunity, affirmative action employer, and is committed to providing employment opportunities to all qualified applicants without regard to race, color, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, disability, or protected veteran status.

This article, including its text, graphics, and images ("Content"), is for educational purposes only; it is not intended to be a substitute for veterinary medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of a licensed doctor of veterinary medicine or other licensed or certified veterinary medical professional with any questions you may have regarding a veterinary medical condition or symptom.

© The Pennsylvania State University 2020

Code: ART-2955