



Crossbred market swine (Hampshire x Yorkshire) raised for meat in Crook County. Photo by Sara Fleenor.

Pork or pets? Pick the perfect pig project

Looking for a backyard livestock project? Most people might think chickens, but pigs are another option, whether for meat production or pets.

If you'd like to raise pigs, first make sure your covenants and county or city ordinances don't prohibit pigs. Next, decide what purpose the pigs in your life will have: pets or pork.

Whether you're raising pigs for food or companionship, the basic requirements for feed, shelter, and care remain the same. Pigs are social creatures and are much more content when two or more are raised together.

Water and shelter

Pigs require proper shelter and adequate water sources. They do not have sweat glands and are prone to sunburn (the latter can even cause short-term paralysis), making it of utmost importance to provide a shaded shelter.

Keep in mind that pigs have a strong desire to root, or dig with their noses. Foraging pigs can destroy your land quickly, not to mention flower beds, water lines, and garden hoses, so it's important to keep pigs confined in some way.

Diet and waste

Pigs are omnivores, meaning they eat grains or meat and have very specific dietary needs. They are also monogastric, which means they have a single stomach, so their diet must consist of highly digestible grains. Pigs will not thrive on forage alone. Instead, using a pig feed designed for your end goal (pet or pork) is recommended.

Feeding table scraps is not an acceptable practice. Contaminated foods can spread disease to pigs.

In addition to feeding your pigs properly, you'll also need a waste management plan. Pig manure has a distinct, penetrating odor that lasts. It is not recommended to use pig manure in landscaping or compost because of the pathogens that are easily passed through pigs.

Common ailments

As with any animals, it's important to know your pigs and watch closely for any signs that they are "off" or not feeling well. If you suspect your pig isn't well, make sure you know whether they have a high or low temperature. It's also a good idea to establish a relationship with a veterinarian familiar with swine.

Pigs are susceptible to mange and lice, parasites that affect the skin and must be treated to ease discomfort. Symptoms are red rashes and extreme rubbing and itching. Scales and scabs can appear around the hooves and hocks if left unattended for too long. Pigs are also very prone to pneumonia, which can be deadly if not treated quickly.

Watch out for worms

Unfortunately, pigs carry many different worms and parasites. More than seven common worms regularly infect pigs. They can be found in a pig's digestive tract, kidneys, liver, lungs, or bloodstream. If left unchecked and untreated, parasites rob pigs of essential nutrients needed to gain weight and grow, while also causing discomfort.

A highly regimented deworming protocol is necessary for all pigs. It's best to rotate between two types of

dewormers: 1) an injectable dewormer used for all roundworms, nodular worms, lice, and mites, and 2) a topical dewormer (containing the ingredient fenbendazole) that is effective on most internal parasites. The injectable dewormer is not effective on many internal parasites and the topical dewormer is not effective on external parasites, but used in rotation, you can prevent the detrimental effects of worms. For optimal animal health, it is necessary to deworm monthly, alternating months between the injectable dewormer and topical dewormer.

Now that the basics are out of the way, let's talk about the differences in raising pigs for pets or pork.

Pet pigs

Keeping a pig as a pet can be a fun and entertaining experience. Pigs are highly intelligent and can have big personalities. They can be kept inside and trained to use a litterbox as well as play games.

While many people might not realize it, no breed of pig is classified as teacup, mini, or micro. Some pig breeds are inherently smaller or slower growing, but even that cute little potbellied pig will eventually grow to be around 150 pounds.

Certain pig breeds are more suitable for yard pets. **Kunekune** pigs are smaller, long-haired grazing pigs and live 15–20 years. They are known to not churn up the land with rooting. They do, however, require a minimum of a half acre of land per pig for grazing.

Another popular breed is the **Vietnamese potbellied** pig. This breed can live up to 20 years, but if not given enough space or a friend, they can be aggressive and destructive. Dogs are not recommended for a companion because they can revert to their predator role in nature, with devastating consequences for the pig.

Mangalica pigs are a Hungarian breed with a woolly appearance. They molt in the summer and have dark skin underneath that acts as a natural protectant from sunburn. This breed can live up to 25 years.

Production pigs

Raising swine as a food source is a great option if you have the space, facilities, and a plentiful water source. Pigs need approximately 12–15 feet of space per animal. A covered shelter is also necessary to keep them cool in warm temperatures and warm when it gets cold. Straw bedding is a great option for temperature

control inside the shelter as they can burrow in to stay warm; it provides a level of freshness as well. Unlimited water is also necessary to ensure optimum health and performance.

When selecting a pig breed, keep your end production goals in mind. **Berkshire** pigs are known for fatter, more marbled meat that is, according to several sources, the best pork in the world. Cuts can be cooked more like steak. Also, they are smaller pigs if space is an issue.

Another type of fatter pig is the **Tamworth**, which is known for producing the best bacon, while leaner meat comes from Durocs, Hampshires, and Yorkshires. **Yorkshires** grow well in confined or concentrated conditions. They are also known for having good back fat, lean meat, and an easygoing disposition. **Hampshires** are lean and have large loins. **Durocs** are known for fast growth and lean carcasses; however, they have a reputation for poor temperament. Crossbreeds of Yorkshires, Hampshires, and Durocs are common and can produce the best qualities of various breeds. Note that your location might affect which breeds you are able to acquire.

Production time on pigs is typically around seven to nine months of age and once the pig is around 250–280 pounds. Pigs gain an average of 1 pound for every 3 pounds of feed and should receive around 4 percent of feed per pound of weight. Your pig's feed amount should increase as its weight increases. For example, a 100-pound pig should receive 4 pounds of feed per day; when it reaches 150 pounds, the pig should be fed 6 pounds per day and so on.

Processing a pig takes skill and expertise. If you aren't properly trained or don't have the appropriate tools and facility, a local processor might be a better option than trying it yourself. Make sure to have a conversation with a butcher in your area to determine the availability for butcher times as openings might be limited.

Raising pigs can be a fun-filled experience, but knowing the basics on care, expectations, and time commitment is an important first step before jumping head first into the project.

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