

Guide to Keeping Pigs

Introduction

With careful preparation and humane treatment pigs are relatively trouble free to rear. They can be kept in small numbers in smaller areas. They are relatively inexpensive, easy to feed and can be reared from weaners in six months.

However, keeping any livestock is a commitment. Pigs need looking after every day of the year. They need to be bought, moved, fenced and fed, which costs time and money. Organic pigs are free range so soil and land type must be considered to allow for the organic requirements of outdoor access throughout their lives.

Choosing a breed

What breed you choose all depends on what you plan to do with the pigs. Whether you want to finish for meat, breed and finish, or breed and sell offspring, these are all factors that will determine breed choice. You will also need to establish a source for your organic replacements as there are tight restrictions for buying in non-organic.

Traditional UK breeds suitable for an outdoor life include Berkshires, British Lops, Gloucestershire Old Spots, Large Blacks, Middle Whites, Oxford Sandy and Blacks, Tamworths, British Landrace, British Saddlebacks, Large Whites, and Welsh. Also popular is the Kune Kune, an import from New Zealand.

It is advisable to buy direct from a breeder, not through a market, to reduce the risk of introducing infectious disease. When choosing a breeder, look for breed society membership. A breeder who meets Soil Association standards will have done much of the work for you. Inspect the pigs on offer. A healthy young pig has bright eyes, a moist snout and a shiny coat. A sick pig generally has a dull, staring coat and stands about with an arched back, or buries itself in bedding.

People who keep pigs must register with Defra who allocate you a herd number, use the Guide for New Pig Keepers for details on registration and licenses

Converting

Conversion of land takes at least two years before full organic status is achieved, with a series of inspections to monitor progress. Farmers who have non-organic animals prior to converting land to organic will require their sows to undergo the appropriate conversion period before they can produce organic young stock on organic land. These breeding females will never achieve organic status themselves but can be sold as converted breeding stock and can produce organic offspring providing they have been kept to organic standards on organic land from the time of mating.

Breeding boars can be brought in from organic or non-organic farms but when on an organic holding they must be kept to full organic standards. Artificial Insemination (AI) is also permitted and cases when the sow needs to be taken to the boar can also be agreed on a case by case basis.

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Land management & Housing

A pig's natural habitat is deciduous woodland providing them with shade and nutrients from the forest floor. Organic pigs must have outdoor access all year round unless in severe weather conditions and when agree with the organic certification body. Land should therefore be relatively level and free draining in a low rainfall area (less than 800mm/year).

It is vital for the land and pig's health and welfare not to overstock, or keep them in one area for too long. Pigs will clear brambles and weeds, dig out, eat roots and then start on any available trees, stripping the bark. Resting your land is a vital part of pig management so that it has time to recover; you could grow vegetables or other crops to rotate the land. Moving pigs on every few months will also help keep ground cover. Pigs 'escape' because they root across land in search of food. When a pig reaches a barrier it will push, 80kg is a lot of pig power. If you use pig netting, put the netting on the outside of the fence posts and on the inside put one strand of barbed wire about 15-25cm from the ground – the bridge of the pigs nose will meet the wire as it walks forward and it will turn and walk in another direction. Electric fencing is also used. Pig netting and barbed wire cost more to begin with but require less maintenance, on the other hand, electric fencing is labour intensive, but more mobile. As the pigs grow raise the bottom two strands of fencing slightly to account for their size.

Pigs generally cope well with cold but must have shelter, particularly against wind, rain and sun. You can buy arks or make one. All pigs must have unlimited access to drinking water and a wallow to relieve them from heat and sunburn. You need a good supply and backup supply of water. Use water troughs heavy and large enough to stop pigs turning them over.

Pigs are social animals and should be kept in litter groups not left alone. They are motivated to keep clean and should always have clean dry bedding, straw is commonly used. You will also need to manage your pigs to protect thin or bullied pigs and to avoid bullying in group-housed dry sows or gilts, particularly at feeding and when mixed with boars. When housing pigs you will need to consider methods of enrichment.

Feeding

Pigs reared outside on a natural diet of organic cereals, fresh fruit and vegetables (but not citrus and only vegetables and fruit picked directly from land, not kitchen waste, unless organically certified), grass/silage/hay and water will not grow as quickly as intensively reared pigs, but will have a good life and taste better as the meat matures slowly as nature intended. Pigs also do well on whey protein so if you have an organic dairy farmer nearby, you'll do well to form some links there. These pigs are likely to take between 26-36 weeks to reach slaughter weight. Organic pigs' diets must contain roughage, fresh or dried fodder, or silage as part of their daily ration. Commercial feed is affected by global changes in grain price. Build good relationships with your supplier but regularly compare price and economies of scale.

Farrowing

Organic standards require outdoor access, this includes during farrowing. Farrowing stalls/crates are not permitted. You should settle sows into farrowing accommodation well before piglets are due to be born. Use a

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farrowing arc of around 2.5m x 2m and supply sufficient straw bedding (suitable temperatures are kept in the nest by using straw). A sow cannot look around to make absolutely sure her piglets are clear – her neck is designed for looking down and ahead.

Weaning

Piglets are best weaned at 8 weeks or more and when taking in enough solid food. Then try to group according to sex and size. You must not withhold food or water for drying off sows, or wean your piglets when they are less than 40 days old.

Welfare

Prevention is better than cure. Check your pig's health and welfare at least twice per day. The first sign of illness is often seen by a lack of enthusiasm to eat. A dirty trough provides the perfect environment for harmful bacteria to thrive or food that has got damp during storage. Provide plenty of water and monitor closely for 24 hours. If they show additional signs of discomfort or the problem does not clear up after that, isolate your pig and call in the vet.

The routine use of antibiotics to treat the whole herd as a preventative measure is prohibited under the Soil Association's standards. However if antibiotics are needed to prevent the suffering of a sick animal then that treatment must be used. An extended meat withdrawal period applies for any veterinary medicine used.

To ensure your pig's wellbeing you need to objectively assess welfare. Soil Association use outcome assessment to evaluate welfare compliance at inspection. This is a practical and scientifically informed approach to provide a more direct picture of welfare by looking at the health, physical condition and behaviour of the animals themselves. You can adopt a similar technique to strengthen your management. Find out how to measure your pigs here: www.assurewel.org/pigs

Health and Treatments

Converting to organic greatly restricts the use of conventional veterinary medicines and treatments and prophylactic use of these is prohibited. Where effective, the organic standards recommend the use of homeopathic and herbal preparations in preference to synthetic chemical medicines. However, the standards do permit the use of chemical medicines in order to avoid suffering and distress, and where homeopathic and herbal preparations would not be effective. Under no circumstances can organic pigs receive antibiotics, copper diet supplements or probiotics to promote their growth.

Good rotation, clean bedding and disinfecting of housing along with used biosecurity measures will reduce disease incidents.

Nose ringing; farrowing crates; castration; tail docking; teeth cutting or grinding and prophylactic use of iron injections are all prohibited under SA standards.

Slaughter and processing

You will do well to plan where you will get your pigs slaughtered and butchered prior to committing to conversion. Pigs don't travel well long

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distances and too much travel can impact on animal welfare and quality of the meat. Some organic butchers and abattoirs are advertised on the Soil Association website as are details on processing your own meat. When moving pigs you should use driving boards and if you need to use races or hurdles to move your pigs they should be of solid construction.

For more information

www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/id-move/pigs/pdf/new_owner_guide.pdf

Chapter 10 and 13 of standards www.sacert.org/standards

www.assurewel.org/pigs

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