This article is a brief overview designed to pique your interest in keeping pigs, either as income producing animals, for your own freezer, or to clean and clear difficult areas on your farm. It includes a little about how to care for pigs, some references and information about mating, growing and butchering.

I. A little about the pig:

Pigs are wonderful animals. They are smart and resourceful-- sometimes too clever for us! They are friendly and recognize the folks who care for them. Most pigs are good parents-- often both mother and dad will care for the piglets. They are generally clean animals if allowed to have enough space to keep a bathroom space and a food and sleeping space. Pigs are generally very healthy. Again, if allowed enough space to eat well, forage, have clean water and a sleeping space they require little other care. In the summer pigs need shade, and if possible a mud hole as a wallow. They have very little fur and can get sunburned. They also are subject to insect bites. A good coating of mud will take care of both problems. They also enjoy dust baths and will often keep a dry wallow as well.
In the winter we try to keep a cover and a wind break available for the pigs--but they do
tend to push their cover down the hill frequently! And as I look out in the freezing rain I cannot
see a hen or a goat, but the pigs are out! Some pig nomenclature might be in order here: A
mature female pig who has had a litter or more is a sow. A pig who is an intact male is a boar.
Intact means that he has not been neutered or “cut” in country speak. He is a boar at any age.
A female pig who has not yet born a litter is a gilt sow. When a sow gives birth, she farrows.
Very young pigs are pigs or piglets.

II. Sources of information:

We started out with no more information than a local old timer’s recommendation that pigs were easy to take care of and grew quickly. Our search for information about pastured pigs
was pretty fruitless six or seven years ago, but we have gleaned some additional information at
conferences like Southern SAWG and in some blog posts. We have talked with our local large
animal veterinarian and with our local small animal veterinarian (make friends with these folks
who can really help you!). We have raised a handful of purchased piglets and have farrowed
numerous piglets on our farm. Whenever we have the chance to meet another farmer who
raises pigs we take the opportunity to chat them up. Finally, we feel as though we are getting
the hang of it after five years.

III. Space requirements, pig society:

Pigs do grow to be quite large--several of our boars have topped 500lbs. But they
actually need less space as big pigs than they do as younger pigs as they are less active and are
growing more slowly. Pigs like to live together, so bedding space is just enough for all of them to
sleep together. They then need a clean space for their water, and space for their bowl or trough
(or possibly range feeder) and they need space to eat grass and to root and forage. We do not have enough pasture to allow our pigs access to the actual grass, but we do rotate them through the woods. They are very fond of green vegetation and they are very effective at removing weeds. They will root out perennial weeds and eat the tops of both perennials and annuals.

They are also very fond of fallen wood and can take old logs and stumps apart. They will find grubs and insect larva. They are very willing to help with weeds and overripe produce from the garden, the orchard or scraps from a local restaurant. We start out with a smaller space and gradually enlarge it—we also move the fences back and forth quite a bit. Because we are keeping our animals in the woods we use quite a bit of temporary fencing. Pigs are very sensitive to electric charges and will stay behind a hot wire. We have used the flexible netting made for poultry and have had reasonable success with that as a temporary fence.

Young pigs are very active and can get into mischief—they can wiggle under fences and get themselves into places you do not want them to visit. A small group of young pigs can take minutes to root out all of your transplants or trample lettuces and greens. Young pigs are very fast, and since they almost always act as a group they need good fences and possibly a dog who knows where they are and where they are not supposed to be. My nightmare is that a new litter of pigs will go up the hill to my neighbor’s house and root out all of her landscaping one afternoon!

Pigs are very social animals and they will not thrive as well as single animals. We have never tried—we have always kept a pair, even if the male was neutered. Pigs do have a pecking order and some of it is based on family ties, but if one pig has been separated from the group for a matter of weeks or months, there will be a reintroduction period. This can be just a brief wrangling that is loud, but not much more than posturing. If you are introducing pigs who do not know each other, it is advisable to allow them to see and smell one another from adjoining pens without being able to touch one another for a day or so. If after about 24 hours all seems calm, then allow them to get together. We have had instances when a pair we wanted to mate hurt one another and we did have one instance on a hot summer day when the boar chased the sow around so much that he fell over dead.

IV. Feed requirements:

Pigs need plenty to eat. We generally feed twice a day, although if we have a lot of green vegetation we may back off to once a day. We feed as much green stuff as we can find; some restaurant scraps—usually human quality food—but sometimes peelings and trimming of vegetables or older soups and sauces that cannot be served again. We also feed non-GMO sow/grower feed and when we can get it we feed non-GMO (or organic) corn. Corn needs to be cracked or ground at least a bit for efficient feed usage. If the corn is not ground, much of it will pass through the animals without offering any nutritional benefit. Pigs have stomachs that are
more like ours than like the stomachs of the goats or the cattle. They will eat grass, but they cannot digest it like the ruminants. They really cannot eat hay, although they will play in it and appear to eat it, usually it is just mouthing in the hay. In the winter we feed more than in the summer, but there is not much to find in the woods in the winter!

Pigs do not thrive on leftover doughnuts, day old bread or out of date cookie dough, any more than you would. Products like these do not fulfill nutritional requirements to grow healthy pigs. Products that you might be able to find left over from another farmer’s field that are good for the pigs are peanuts, sweet potatoes and regular potatoes (although they like regular potatoes least out of those three). Some pigs will eat cabbages and turnips, but not all of them like those stronger flavored items. We always get pumpkins from a local farmer’s pumpkin patch after Halloween and we have had great luck with those. I have a secret ambition to grow Jerusalem artichokes in enough quantity to be able to let the pigs loose in a big patch in the winter, but I haven’t tried that yet!

Big pigs will eat 4 to 5lbs of feed at a sitting, little pigs proportionately less. Be sure to feed in several places so that the younger and smaller pigs have the chance to eat without being thrown out of the bowls. We do not use a medicated wormer with our pigs, but we do add diatomaceous earth to our feed and have been known to allow our pigs access to a little coal, free choice. The coal is an old timers’ wormer. This is the same coal you might burn in your stove. I have neglected to mention that pigs need regular access to clean fresh water at all times, especially in hot weather. If it is possible to allow pigs access to water enough for them to get their whole body in the water during the summer they would really appreciate it!
V. Breeding and farrowing:

Pigs mature sexually very young. A six month old boar (and they will mate younger) can mate any sow he can reach and it is usually safe to try to mate a gilt sow at about eight or nine months. Breeding sows do not have a terribly long productive period, and as the sow ages, her weight may prevent her from settling into pregnancy. Heavy sows do not carry their pregnancies as successfully as trimmer sows. You can probably plan to breed a sow from eight or nine months old until she is about six or seven years old. There is a progression in the size of the litters from small (under ten) to large (possibly more than twenty in a litter), and then again a reduction in the size of the litter as the sow ages. Gestation for a pig is four months, and the piglets are usually born at about sixteen to thirty six ounces. When they are born they can see, hear and walk and will immediately look for a teat. If your sow has more piglets than she has teats, plan to take a couple of the littler piglets away to be bottle fed. Allow the little pigs to get some colostrum from the sow by rotating the babies from the sow, and then bottle feed and keep the piglets warm until they can be weaned.

Piglets are very successful bottle feeders, so don’t hesitate if you notice one or more of the little ones falling behind. You will often lose a couple of the little ones early after the birth. Sometimes a couple of the piglets are just not quite fully developed. Most sows are very defensive and will stand up to you or any other intruder who might come to take her pigs. I have never lost a tiny piglet to a predator, but some sows are clumsy and step on or roll on their young. Sows can breed as often as three times a year, and if you are unable to separate the sow from the boar, he will breed her again a few days after farrowing. A strong healthy sow will be
able to carry the pregnancy and nurse all of her offspring, but it is hard on a sow to nurse ten or twelve babies, and you will see her lose weight pretty quickly.

We have kind of settled on breeding our sows twice a year, and for the marketability of the litter, we aim for spring litters and fall litters. It is very easy to sell piglets in the spring and a bit more of a feat to sell them in the fall. We always try to keep at least two of each litter and more if we feel we can feed them. Boars can breed as long as you are willing to keep them. The only issue is that they may be too heavy to mount a smaller sow, and can hurt her in the mating. We prefer to keep a younger boar, and a bigger sow; the younger boars are better tempered and easier to manage. Sows do not usually wean their young on their own, so it is best to plan to separate the sow and her offspring after about 10 or 12 weeks, when the babies are eating well.

We have been successful at weaning the babies to grits or to cream of wheat with milk replacer or raw milk as the liquid. We have also built a temporary creep feeder for the piglets--usually by feeding them outside the fence and feeding Mama inside the fence. When you creep feed a litter, you are trying to provide a safe place for the baby pigs to eat without having to worry about competing with the big pigs. On other occasions we have not been able to get the piglets to leave Mama’s side until they were well separated and had figured out how to eat on their own. Each litter is a little different and each Mama sow is different as well.

VI. Sale and butchering:

We raise pigs for three different stages of sales. It makes life complicated and we understand why you might not want to do a farrow to finish operation. We do it because we want to assure our customers that we can provide them with a reliable source of non-GMO meat, and if we purchase piglets we cannot be sure of their early upbringing. If we want to farrow, we must keep or borrow a boar. This presents us with the problem of getting rid of the boar when he is older. Sometimes we can find a buyer, but usually we must sell him for very cheap.

Sometimes we can find a vet who will neuter him for us at a reasonable price. Then if we keep him for at least 45 days, he can be butchered for sausage. An older sow meets the same fate. Animals that you want for prime cuts of meat (like chops and loins) are more desirable at a smaller weight--say around 300 pounds. We have developed a relationship with our local butchers and they are willing to stock non-MSG sausage mixes for us. We also have a relationship with a local BBQ restaurant, and we can sell things like hocks and neck bones and offer the smoking as a service.

If you plan to butcher your hogs for retail sale, you will need to consider transportation for them. You cannot plan to put a pig in the back of a pick-up truck unless it is a very small pig. If you are taking any animals larger that 30 or 40 pounds you will need to invest in stout caging. If you are going to transport larger animals (300 lb market weight) then you will need to invest
in a trailer. It must have stout sides and a solid latching door. Pigs are pretty serious contenders in the escape artist realm and they are strong and fast.

VII. Conclusion:

For us, despite the fact that pigs eat quite a lot, they are profitable and provide us with some really good cash flow. We have also decided that we love having sausage in the freezer at all times. We also count on having those litters of pigs to sell for extra income in the spring when we have lots of beginning-of-the-season expenses (those piglet sales help us out a lot!) and in the fall when we always seem to be running short. We enjoy our pigs and we enjoy having the ultimate portable clearing machines. We don’t have the right kind of land for cattle, so our pigs make our farm a “real” farm!