

## PASTURED PIGS ON THE GUNTHORP FARM

By Greg and Lei Gunthorp

### Overview

I'm Greg Gunthorp from LaGrange, IN. My wife Lei, daughter Kara (2), and son Evan (6 months) have lived here for about five years. I'm a fourth generation pasture pork producer. My parents have a 1000-acre corn, soybean, wheat, and cash hay farm. My grandparents moved here when the toll road split their farm in two. When they couldn't graze hogs on the backside of the farm any more, in their opinion it became worthless ground.

I farm about 100 acres, 65 of my own and 35 of my parents. Our farm is profitable because we are utilizing pasture ground that wouldn't be used otherwise. Four hundred acres of cornfields are available for gleaning by our sow herd in the fall. Fifty plus acres of interseeded clover following wheat is available in late July. These are important facts to understand farrowing time selection on our farm. On a true grass farm, without the availability of excess crop acreage at portions of the year, I would combine a seasonal hog operation (once a year farrowing) with a primary sheep or cow grazing operation. Pigs would make an excellent addition to a farm for pasture renovation. Pigs can be extremely rough on pasture. Why not use unring pigs on poor pasture instead of a plow. Then just level and reseed. Fertility would be taken care of by rotational grazed pigs. But our operation makes the most dollars for us with our available land, labor, and equipment. I thought I would answer some questions on breeding, gestating, farrowing, weaning, finishing, sorting, fencing and watering.

I am a firm believer that there wouldn't be a confinement hog industry today if we had big fence chargers, rolls of black plastic pipe, and 4-wheelers back in the fifties. Every problem that buildings create could be cured by pasture. I know because I have a partially slatted building that sets empty because I can't afford the death loss in it! Respiratory problems and tail biting are non existent on a pastured pork operation. My definition of a pastured pork operation: pigs raised on grass, legumes, standing crops, or any other ground cover. Operations with hogs on bare ground are outside operations. These operations exchange feed for building costs! I virtually eliminate building costs and lower feed costs. Stocking rates are important to maintain pastures. 8-10 sows per acre are reasonable sow stocking density in our area. Market hog rates vary from 75 to 15 depending on their weight. Alfalfa hay yields are 4-5 tons per acre in our area. Of course Management Intensive Grazing can move these stocking rates up and also helps with rooting.

### Fencing

I am using all electric fences for our pigs. Woven wire will work, but isn't as convenient or affordable. The same basics for other animals apply to pigs. Fence placed at nose height of a walking animal with a 2000+-volt charge will keep a pig in. Sows are probably one of the easiest animals to keep in. The only time they ever get out is when I put them in a pen and they can't see the fence. Five wire high tensile with a total height of 36" or less will never have a sow escape! Little pigs are a different story. If you have a wire at their nose height they will stay in, but that means 4" from the ground. Therefore you need a huge fence energizer if you are going to fence in pigs less than 40 pounds with electricity. It will work. I recommend a minimum of a 10-joule fence charger for little pigs. Any old fence charger will work for sows. Market hogs above 40 pounds aren't hard to hold if you keep them from digging dirt on the fence. One polywire fence on step in posts inside the high tensile fence keeps them from digging dirt onto the high tensile!!!! Just put this wire a little high for the pigs (say 12"-16"). Low enough to just catch their back. This will keep them off the permanent fences. That little trick right there makes the difference between keeping pigs on pasture and putting up buildings because you get tired of chasing pigs. The first place a pig will ever start digging is along the fence. I don't

know they dig along the fences first, but I don't dig dirt off my high tensile anymore. If they do get anything on the polywire it doesn't carry enough electricity to even slow my 18-joule Pel fence charger down. A \$650 fence charger is a bargain in my opinion for just the peace of mind that I am not going to have to chase pigs. Besides that only pays for about 4 pig spaces in a confinement building. I've been getting my fence from Gary Wright in Reading, MI(800-231-2329). He has as much experience at keeping pigs in on electric as anybody in my area, possibly the country or world. Remember big charges aren't necessary for sows. Sows don't cover vast areas of pasture. They can't eat that much. A good low impedance charger is still recommended.



## Grazing

Sows are the best place to start on grazing. Sows feed demands can easily be reduced by 50-75% by good pasture. With enough rings sows can be kept from rooting. I haven't been able to stop little pigs from digging. The better the pasture the less the digging. Also mineral deficiencies in the pigs diets have been shown in studies in the 1950's to cause digging. Good hog pastures include legumes, vegetative grass, and brassicas. Pigs cannot bloat on pasture, therefore the best pasture would be a mix of legumes. Alfalfa works well. Clovers like Red, ladino, Kura, and alsike work good. Chicory also works well. Rape is an excellent annual hog pasture. Grasses work best for farrowing lots because they keep down the mud. If you are planting pasture for just pigs stick with mainly legumes. They are a lot easier to manage than grass for an animal that doesn't bloat. High percentage of grass in pasture will require keeping it very short for it to be palatable to pigs. Also high stock density rotational grazing will keep more uniform pastures. Up to 30 paddocks with movable poly wire on reels may be necessary to keep them uniform. (a different lot each day for a month on a 30 day rotation) Sows respect poly wire on reels very well. They get used to the rotation in a few days. We use a sacrifice lot for coops, shade, water and spot to feed some concentrate.

Gilts will require more feed than sows on pasture if you want them to gain. Purchased gilts will require normal feed levels because a hog takes a couple of months to adapt to high fiber diets. Results will be disastrous with breeding age gilts never exposed to fiber that are expected to forage for their food. This could explain varied research results from pasture experiments! If you buy replacement gilts don't replace feed for pasture for a while. Monitor animal condition and weight gain very closely! Get them on some fiber as quickly as possible. Replacement boars will also have this problem. I've seen my own gilts who have been exposed to forages from since they were born gain big weight on less than 4 lbs. of concentrate while the confinement reared boars in the pen just about fell apart. Your own gilts raised on pasture will already be acclimated to a forage diet. They also will have much less farrowing problems on pasture. Don't get caught up in this lean pork production theory that they say requires purchased breeding stock. The best breeding stock for a pasture pork operation is the gilts that thrive under pasture finishing! Another plus is these gilts show the best immunity to diseases already present on your farm. This is a very good component of any successful PRRS reduction program. PRRS is an airborne virus that is very prevalent in hogs (80+% of the nation's herds). It causes very poor reproductive performance, abortions, and weak and stillborn pigs. The best defense

you have against PRRS on your farm is to not bring in any more replacement animals than necessary. We vaccinate sows for PRRS, Parvo, Lepto, and Erysipelas. Baby pigs never get shots. I couldn't catch them if I wanted to. Medication on pasture operations is a waste of good money. You can't lower an almost 0% death loss from weaning to market. Lice and mange controls, as well as worms are harder to control on pasture.

## **Farrowing**

Farrowing on pasture is not difficult if you follow a few basic steps or rules. First of all keep the farrowing date in each pen as close as possible. Sows can be allowed to farrow for 10-14 days in the same pen if the weather is cool enough to keep the little pigs from running all over the place. When it's hot 4 days of farrowing or less in the same pen may be necessary. To get optimum performance from gilts, keep farrowing intervals in pens very short. Sometime only 2 days. One hot tape that will later be taken down can be used to temporarily separate older litters from younger litters. Try to keep groups that are let together within one month of age. Make sure little pigs are on creep feed before taking tapes down between pens. I farrow in 6'x6' farrowing huts. They are two bin sheets bolted together. (6' galvanized bins) I then put a 32"x6' plywood back on them. This leaves a 4"X10" hole at the top. These backs are wired to the steel hut and a steel post is driven in the center to keep the hut from flying in the wind. Each sow in the pen has a bedded hut available in the pen before farrowing. I suggest putting quite a few extra huts until you understand where a sow would prefer to farrow. The majority of sows that farrow out in the open is because of management errors!!!! A few hints: Sows don't like to farrow close to an older litter. They definitely won't farrow where an older litter was farrowed. And in hot weather they prefer to farrow in the coolest spot in the paddock. Gilts are notorious for all farrowing under the only tree in a pen. That's a sure disaster waiting to happen. Remember we have to help Mother Nature. We have to outsmart the pig. One more hint: try to place huts so sow and litter don't have to walk by another litter to get feed or water. Circle huts with water and feed in middle would be ideal except for logistics of getting water and feed there. If your suited to pasture farrowing you will pick up these little tricks in nothing flat. Otherwise you will swear you can't raise a pig on pasture!

Cooler season farrowing requires closing half the front down with a 3'X3' sheet of plywood. I'm going to experiment with setting a round bale of straw in front of the hut to block the wind and let the sow bed the hut herself. Self-feeding lactating sows saves a lot of labor. Our pigs are weaned at 6-8 weeks old. This keeps the sows on twice a year farrowing. We try to farrow in April and Early October. Once again we are trying to not fight Mother Nature. Eventually we will be farrowing only in the spring because these are the only pigs that can have pasture their whole life. Farrowing on pasture is possible at any time of the year that you can get to the pigs. Better coops would be necessary for winter farrowing in our area. A-frames would be the cheapest coops to build if extra farm labor and rough sawn lumber is available. Seasonal production is by far the lowest cost and highest quality of life for the operator. Southern producers would have to be more concerned about heat. Pigs can take any kind of temperatures if shade and wading ponds are available. Another reason for southern producers to keep their own gilts; they would be the ones that thrived under their heat conditions. The lowest stress castration for the pigs and owner is to get the boars when they are one day old. The sow is still slow enough that she won't tear you apart and the pigs are not easily caught after they are 24 hours old. The lowest stress weaning for pigs is to take the sows and leave the pigs.

## **Grazing Corn**

Late April farrowed pigs are born the ideal time to graze standing corn in my area. I plant about 40 acres of corn for hogging down every year. I get 1500-2000 pound of gain per acre. Pigs that weigh more than 125 pounds work best for hogging down corn. I try to keep my permanent pastures for sows and use annuals for growing pigs. Grazing corn is by far the best pasture for finishing pigs. Supplemental strip grazing rape with Baldrigde's high protein corn have allowed me to stay at 50% lean (no premium no discount level). This is with virtually no soybean meal. Higher leans and therefore premiums could be had by feeding more supplemental protein. I'm too big of a cheapskate to do that. There is a lot of opportunity to lower feed

requirement on growing pigs by limit feeding concentrate on pasture. One 1950's study I came across said gains above 2500#'s per acre were possible on Alfalfa pasture's while limit feeding concentrate of about 2#'s per hundred weight per day. These were pigs starting at 125# to a 200 # market weight. Today the opportunities are greater because selling weights are higher. Good pasture management should be able to top these figures. If you were going to try something like this I would put both a humane and top ring in. We sell pigs at up to 318 pounds. Pigs up to 287 go at no discount. These pigs, just before market, have tremendous forage gain potential.

## Sorting Pigs

Sorting pigs on pasture isn't any more difficult than off a barnyard. Just put up gates around their coops and shut the pigs in when they are sleeping. Pigs off pasture cooperate better than pigs in a building. Its simple to get my wife to help sort pigs off pasture. Her and my dad want nothing to do with sorting pigs out of a building. Some packers weight ranges now make semi loads of pigs off pasture very feasible. The wider the weight range the less times we have to sort. We are selling most of our pigs to Indiana Packers at Delphi Indiana. They will send out a semi for a half a load. (100 pigs) We are making sure in the future that we can produce 100 pigs at a time in their 240-287 pound, no discount weight range. They will take them up to 318 pounds with a small discount.

Just for the skeptical people: This is a whole system just like other grazing operations. Leave out one component and the others come crashing down. Some but not all of these components include genetics, farrowing season, forage availability, good bedding source, fencing, water system, and open mind. This whole system approach can't be over emphasized!!!! My grandpa always said take care of an animal and they will take care of you. Give a pig what it needs and let them go! Our feed efficiency consistently runs around 2.5. There is a lot of room to go lower than this if that is the most profitable opportunity for you. To go much lower than this you have to be comfortable with the idea that the pigs will take longer to get to market. So far I can't find anyone that gets a pig check with anything on the check about days to market. It is all a game about cost of production. Confinement operations couldn't touch 3.1 feed efficiency. Most run 3.5. Everyone in the real world I talk to has trouble maintaining those levels. Outside operations are supposed to run closer to 4.0 feed efficiency. We are obviously getting some benefit from our pasture. Remember confinement research always shows the best possible achievement without disease under impeccable management. I am not biased against confinement. That same level of management on a pasture system would have research biased towards pasture. Our cost of production is in the high 20's. Yes that was not a typing error. I'm utilizing a lot of land and resources that would be wasted otherwise. Without these additional pasture acres and crop by products (gleaned cornfields) my costs would be 5-10 cents a pound higher. If I could only get my direct marketing at \$200/pig going we would have it made. I'm not naive enough to realize that this \$60 hog market will last forever. I'm also trying to find a natural hog market opportunity. I intend to be out of debt before the hog cycle turns south and the only way anybody is going to stop me raising pigs is by taking my market away. I've taken the building manufacturers profit and the feed salesmen out of my paycheck. The only variable still in the picture is the packer's ability or desire to buy all his hogs from half a dozen huge producers.

Anybody out there have a need for some natural pork? Feel free to call me if you have any questions. Greg Gunthorp (219)367-2708. I love to talk about raising pigs. There is no way to cover all the details necessary for successful pasture pork production in less than 300 pages. I hope I covered the main points. I think we have forgot more about raising pigs in the last 40 years than we have learned. One big point I didn't cover well enough is that with a system approach, raising hogs on pasture is fun! To E-mail us our address is [hey4hogs@kuntrynet.com](mailto:hey4hogs@kuntrynet.com)

