



pigs



what are they?

They're hogs - *Sus domesticus*. Modern breeds have been bred from the older rare breeds to grow quickly, have less fat and have a longer body. Modern breeds include the Large White, Landrace and Duroc. Rare breeds didn't use to be rare - each county had its distinctive breed: Gloucestershire Old Spot, Tamworth, Berkshire, Oxford Sandy & Black etc. (and some breeds have become extinct, like the Lincolnshire Curly Coat), but the supermarket food system wants uniformity and leanness. Rare breeds meat tends to be marbled with fat, which adds to flavour (but isn't unhealthy because it's unsaturated, and you don't eat much of it). The British Pig Association has a list of rare breeds. There are specific breeds from different parts of the world - like the Vietnamese Pot-bellied Pig, the Kune Kune from New Zealand and the Black Iberian Pigs from Spain which get fat on acorns from oak woods, giving Jamon Iberico its special flavour.

Domestic pigs were bred from wild boars over 12,000 years ago, and in the UK, the Tamworth is closest to a wild boar. A Tamworth crossed with a wild boar produces an 'Iron Age pig' - or something similar to pigs kept in the Iron Age. Before WW1, there were often 'street pigs'. The whole street would feed the pig on scraps, use its poo on the veg patch, and share the meat when it was killed in the winter.

Pigs are intelligent animals that love to root around in the earth. However, to provide supermarkets with tons of cheap pork, millions of pigs are raised intensively in darkness, in sheds with concrete floors and slats to allow the slurry to run through. They are densely packed, breathing slurry vapours with nothing to stimulate them - they fight, and often get rhinitis, which causes their nasal passages to decay. But farmers can now get a premium price for pigs kept outdoors; specialist meats are much more popular; there is more concern about animal cruelty; and more people want to try and keep pigs themselves.

what are the benefits?

There are the usual benefits of producing your own food - it's organic, fresh and local, lower food miles, cruelty-free, and you're not supporting the corporate supermarkets. Also, pigs dig and manure ground for you in preparation for a crop. If they go in after potatoes, they'll get a bit of free food (you never get all your potatoes up).

Pigs can be used to hunt truffles, the meat can be cured and preserved longer than other meats, and there are by-products, such as gelatin and tallow.

There are additional benefits to keeping rare breeds: they're easier to look after, and not so susceptible to diseases - their genes have developed over thousands of generations, so are more robust; and they are happy to live outdoors, foraging.

what can I do?

You can support small, humane pig-keepers by not buying industrially-produced pork, bacon or sausages. If the label doesn't say they were raised outdoors, they weren't. Then if you decide to do it yourself, probably the first thing to do is attend a course, to see if it's for you.

Land: you can keep a couple of pigs on half an acre, split into 2 so that you can move them if the ground in one becomes too soggy. Pigs don't like the ground too muddy, although they do like some mud to wallow in, especially on hot days. If all their ground is muddy, they can get foot rot. It's not fair to keep them in a small sty or pen. They need room to root around, and they make a separate toilet area. They can't do those things in too small an area, and become stressed. You'll need to contain them with wire pig netting and hefty posts (pigs are strong). Bury the pig netting to a good depth, or put barbed wire at the bottom to stop them rooting under it. You can also use electric fencing or dry stone walls.

Housing: the pig house just needs to be dry inside. You can make one yourself, or use something like an old horse box. Put straw on the floor for them to make a 'nest' - not hay, as it has



Pigs being kept in woodland, where their wild ancestors would have lived.

pigs



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Home-made pig house.

mould spores and dust that can get into their eyes, like humans. Their bedding doesn't need to be changed often, if at all, as they don't use their sleeping area as a toilet. Just keep it topped up.

Legal requirements: your land has to have a holding number (see DEFRA), then a herd number. Depending on your county, this could be from your local authority or from Trading Standards. Pigs don't need vaccinations. Some breeders choose to worm them, but it's not a legal requirement (garlic and cider vinegar in their drinking water works well as a wormer). You need a movement form when pigs are moved from one site to another - online or by calling the British Pig Association.

Getting pigs: a piglet is a baby; a weaner 6-8 weeks old; a gilt a female that hasn't had piglets; a sow has had piglets; and a boar a male of any age. Registered rare breed weaners can cost up to £80, but cross-breed weaners are usually around £40. There's no difference in the taste of the meat. See smallholding or pig magazines, or if it's your first time, it might be a good idea to get them from a local pig-keeper, who you can build a relationship with and ask questions. Find your local smallholder society, or see ads at local agricultural merchants or in the local paper. You'll need a minimum of 2, as they can get lonely and depressed if kept alone. If you don't want them to do much rooting up of your land, choose a breed with a shorter snout, like the Middle White. Ears that flop over the eyes tends to mean a gentle, calm nature; ears pricked up - more flighty and nervous. But this can also depend on how much they're handled when they're young.

Care: they need fresh water at all times, and each pig can get through a bucketful a day in the summer. You can buy concentrated pig feed - a dry mash of wheat, soya and fish meal. Get it from an organic supplier to ensure it's not GM soya.

It's now illegal to feed pigs any local catering waste, or waste food from kitchens where there has been meat. They can still be fed fruit, veg, bakery or dairy waste, but the laws are so complicated that most goes to landfill or incinerators, so instead of recycling the nutrients through pigs to produce meat and to enrich the soil, 20 million tonnes a year of waste food go to landfill or incinerators where it causes pollution and wastes money. And then small farmers have to replace this waste food with soya beans from the Amazon. Pigs have always been fed waste food. The problem is not pigswill, but keeping thousands of animals intensively and transporting them all over the country, and even abroad. We support the right of people who keep a few pigs outdoors and kill them on-site or send them to a local abattoir, to give their animals waste food. It makes commercial and environmental sense.

Dispatch: pigs are usually dispatched after 6-9 months. Find a local abattoir. If they've been given certain medication, there has to be a 7-28 day withdrawal period before they can be slaughtered. Pigs can be killed on-site, but only a registered person can kill a pig. You can get someone in to shoot them, but they will have to be scalded to remove hairs. Abattoirs charge around £35 per pig, which is well worth it. You can do your own butchery, and you use absolutely everything - even the face, which can be simmered for about 16 hours in a pot on a wood stove to make brawn. See DEFRA guidelines for more information.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/pigs for information, courses, suppliers and books, including:
- Gerry Brent, *Pigman's Handbook of Problem Solving*
- Andy Case, *Starting with Pigs*
- British Pig Association, britishpigs.org, representing pig keepers; list of breeds
- www.defra.gov.uk/food-farm/animals/pigs - DEFRA guidelines
- <http://bit.ly/SE2ykh> - type this shortcut in for a convincing argument against the pigswill ban

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