

LES PORCS IN PERMACULTURE



All photos © S & G Anderson

Stuart and Gabrielle Anderson share their experience of raising pigs and how you too can be as happy as pigs in permaculture.

Have you a place for pigs in your permaculture plan? As meat eaters ourselves, we want our food to have been as ethically, sustainably and humanely raised and slaughtered as possible. Whilst local organic and free-range meat is available we've taken the next step and now keep our own animals. As well as enabling us to be responsible for their raising and slaughter, it's given us a deeper understanding of all that's involved in putting meat on the table and learning how their needs, habits and outputs fit into our permaculture design.

Raising animals doesn't inevitably require acres of land. Both chickens and rabbits can be humanely kept in a town garden and the responsibility for larger animals could be shared with others in terms of both time and space. Pigs are the archetypal smallholders' beast – could you imagine yourself going the whole hog?

GETTING STARTED

As permaculture pigs, they'll be out working the land, rather than cooped up in concrete barns, so they will need a bit of rough pasture, which could be rented, rather than owned. You must have a minimum of two as they are social creatures and need company. To their list of other essentials add housing, fencing, shelter and shade from wind and sun, drinking water and a place to wallow. Stock fencing can be expensive and hard work but many of the other items are easily created with a bit of imagination and improvisation. In return, you will get some of the best pork you've ever tasted.

Assembling a network of knowledge and assistance is invaluable and a good vet essential. In Europe, it's obligatory to register with the local office of the animal health and welfare organisation (DEFRA in the UK) even for a private person keeping just a couple of farm

animals. These two provide a conduit for dispensing official advice and information and coordinating action; absolutely essential when you consider epidemics like foot and mouth. There are some good books, such as *Starting With Pigs* by Andy Case and *Black's Veterinary Dictionary* but we have still been faced with many questions and we've benefited from forging friendships with other local pig keepers, including farmers.

INPUTS & OUTPUTS

To justify including pigs in our permaculture design, we should analyse their inputs and outputs honestly. The most difficult aspect is their diet, as pigs are conventionally fattened up eating cultivated cereals. As we enjoy pork and bacon, our challenge is to reduce the pig's reliance on such food.

For beginners, buying weaners is the way to go. We take delivery of ours in the spring, so over the months that



follow, they're using their food to grow, rather than just keep warm. They might not be ruminants but pigs, especially Kune Kunes, eat a surprising amount of grass. Our first pigs were an amiable pair of 'Kunies'. During the height of the summer, they'd graze all day on the sun-enriched grass and consume a little cereal-based food more as a supplement than a major part of their diet.

To make a pig of oneself is to over-indulge, and pigs have acquired this reputation for good reason. Be aware that they'll always call out to you as if they've been starved for days. We overfed our Kunies, a breed noted for running to fat, and that's to be avoided. Andy Case talks of 'feeding pigs by eye', which requires a level of experience that we just didn't have on our first year. With our second set of pigs, three Gloucester Old Spots, we followed a regime given to us by the breeder, weighing out their food each day.

The summer brings excesses of fruit. They feast on cherries and plums first, crunching through the stones as well, then windfall apples from our own and neighbours' gardens. As autumn approaches, they gorge themselves on fallen acorns from the oaks that border their paddock. This free bonanza halved the cereal intake of last year's Gloucester Old Spots and we'll look to reduce that further in the future by experimenting with pig forage crops.

Catering waste, even from a domestic kitchen, is forbidden due to foot and mouth, but they will enjoy eating cast-offs from your vegetable patch; see the DEFRA guide for further advice.

PLOUGHING & MANURING

In permaculture theory, pigs improve rough pasture by ploughing and manuring, but the permaculture manuals we've read refer to farm-scale stocking densities... so what might we achieve with just a pair? Certainly, they do root around, turning over sods of earth, and we've discovered that our Gloucesters absolutely love bindweed and its roots: fan-permaculturally-tastic!

One purpose of passing a deep plough is to de-compact the soil. Our soil has a high proportion of clay and

the heavier Gloucesters compacted the areas of soil that they'd cleared by walking over it when wet. They only partially cleared their paddock and, as they love eating grass, keeping them on bare ground wouldn't be ideal. We've since learnt that they actually root less than other breeds, preferring to eat what's on the surface (grass and windfalls) before they begin. The Kunies root even less and need access to good grass for food, so ploughing couldn't be considered an output from them. The breed suited to your situation will depend on whether you want your pigs to turn over and de-weed a bit of rough pasture, for example, or clear up the windfalls in an orchard without rooting around so much.

We'll experiment with subdividing the paddock with electric fencing with our next pigs, leaving them on a smaller area until it's cleared, then moving them onto the next section. We're also learning about maintaining and improving pasture.

Manuring is also not straightforward. Pigs are clean animals and choose just a couple of areas away from their shelter for their toilet. Their droppings are not evenly spread over the land; they're concentrated in a couple of piles, so I'm not convinced we can claim too much for manuring as a useful output.



HAPPY PIGS & SWINEHERDS

Pigs are intelligent creatures and are a delight to have around. Kune Kunes are particularly noted for being tame and our two boys would run over to see us seemingly equally interested in food, a scratch or a tummy tickle.

The first year, the pig paddock was separate from our oak trees and, when we had time to supervise them, we let the Kunes out to graze fallen acorns. Watching Gabrielle sitting in the dappled shade of an oak one afternoon, equipped, as all swineherds should be, with a paperback and a glass of crisp white wine, the pigs munching contentedly around her 'chatting' to each other with soft grunting, it struck me that life doesn't get much better than this.

From different points of view, both English and French friends thought it strange how close we became to our pigs as we were planning to eat them but, for us, there was no conflict, and we count happy pigs and pig-keepers amongst desirable outputs.

MEAT

That said, our pigs are not pets and meat is the main reason for keeping them. We've had to decide how and where ours would be slaughtered and consider the consequences ethically and emotionally. The Humane Slaughter Association

is a useful reference. Under European law, home slaughter is permitted if they are for one's own consumption; otherwise it's the abattoir. We chose home slaughter the first year and called on expert help, what's known here in France as a *boucher de campagne*, an itinerant slaughter man. We worked hard to ensure the animals were as calm as possible. Stunned with a captive bolt gun, our tame pigs were as unaware of what was happening as it's possible to be.

Taking an animal's life is a serious event. For us, once the slaughter has taken place, there is a great sense of relief that they've been despatched without suffering, then the animal that we've lovingly reared becomes a carcass to process.

This isn't buying meat, as and when it's needed: a year's worth of pork arrives all at once and we had to plan for this, preserving the meat by freezing, salting and drying. Guided by Hugh Fearnley Whittingstall's excellent *Pig in a Day* DVD, Gabrielle and I prepared black pudding, sausages, chorizo, liver pâté, brawn, dry-cured bacon and Prosciutto-style air-dried ham. We braised the hearts, devilled the kidneys and even followed a recipe for the ears.

If all this sounds like too much meat for you, then think of sharing with another family, which is what we did



this year. If they're in at the start, they could help care for the pigs too, Community Supported Agriculture style.

This is obviously not a comprehensive guide to permaculture pigs. In fact, as permaculture is site, situation and person specific, there can be no definitive guide and through design, experimentation, observation and growing experience you'll discover your own way. We hope we've shown you that, given the opportunity and a few basic necessities but with no previous experience, it really can be possible for you to raise and care for a pair of porkers and then put food on the table for your family knowing exactly where its come from 

Stuart and Gabrielle Anderson live on a smallholding in France.

RESOURCES

Stuart and Gabrielle's blog:
<http://permacultureinbrittany.blogspot.com/>

Thanks to Karen Hide at DEFRA for her help with the pig-keeping guide:
www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/id-move/pigs/pdf/new_owner_guide.pdf

Humane Slaughter Association
www.hsa.org.uk

The book *Starting With Pigs*, price £7.95 + p&p, and the DVD *Pig in a Day*, price £21.95 + p&p, are available from *The Green Shopping Catalogue*. Tel: 01730 823 311 or order online at: www.green-shopping.co.uk

