

## Hog Notes December 10 2010

As the market gets dominated by huge operations, it creates more niche markets on the back side. I call it the Wal-Mart effect.... Of course, if the niche gets big enough, then the big guys grab it. But one thing the big guys can't replicate is the story that goes with the food. People want to know what they're eating. They want to know where it comes from. Farmers like you can provide that story (Anon., 2003a).

Small producers cannot and should not compete on the same level with corporate farms, but they may be able to produce a unique product that appeals to an upscale market. Therefore, emphasis should be placed on marketing the potential strengths and distinguishing features of the small farmer's product, such as taste differences due to diet and genetics, antibiotic-free status, and free-range, environmental, and animal welfare issues...Many people refer to pasture-raised pigs as "old timey" farming. I would rather call it profitable farming, especially if we can produce a unique product that stands out from the other nine million exceptionally lean hogs marketed annually in North Carolina (Talbot, 2003).

A majority of consumers say they are willing to pay more for products that are produced as "sustainable," "natural" or with other assurances without mentioning any improvement in pork eating quality. We were surprised at first to see that consumers now put a value on some social features of the production system quite apart from the pork's appearance or sensory qualities. A niche market is available for pork produced with certain socially-acceptable assurances even if no real difference in pork sensory qualities can be consistently demonstrated through objective research (Gentry et al., 2001).

The most common breeds of pigs in the United States are Yorkshire, Landrace, Hampshire, and Duroc. These breeds have been bred for characteristics that make them adaptable to confinement operations and the particular stresses and management conditions found in these systems. Pasture-raised hogs face different stresses and require different traits, such as hardiness in extreme climates, parasite resistance, foraging ability, and good mothering attributes—characteristics not developed for confinement hog production. (Kelsey, 2003)

Conventional swine rations consist primarily of corn and soybean meal—corn for energy and soybean meal for protein. However, diversified farmers may have other types of grains, crop residues, and forages that lack a ready market or are considered waste products. Pigs—being versatile omnivores—can eat a wide range of feeds, such as pasture grasses and other fibrous materials, as well as alternative energy and protein sources. The pig's ability to digest fibrous materials increases as it matures. Since they do not have rumens, pigs digest fiber primarily in their large intestine through fermentation. (Johnson et al., 2003) Jim Van Der Pol—who grazes and direct-markets pork, chicken, and beef in Minnesota— says in his "The pastured pig" series in Graze magazine:

Despite being single-stomached animals that often need some grain, hogs are wonderful pasture animals. Digestively, they are durable and flexible. They do not bloat, founder on grain, or ingest hardware. They eat weeds readily, even prefer them. If conditions get tough for the sward [grass-covered ground], they can be removed and switched immediately to a grain ration with no worries about digestive upset (Van Der Pol, 2002).

In pastures available to hogs, inspect for weeds that can be poisonous to them, including pigweed, Jimson weed, two-leaf cockleburs, young lambsquarters, and nightshades. A couple of Web sites providing information and pictures of many poisonous plants are

[www.vth.colostate.edu/poisonous\\_plants/report/search.cfm](http://www.vth.colostate.edu/poisonous_plants/report/search.cfm) and  
[www.spokanecounty.org/weedboard/pdf/2004ToxicPlants.pdf](http://www.spokanecounty.org/weedboard/pdf/2004ToxicPlants.pdf) [PDF

Oats' feed value is only about 80% that of corn; it has high fiber content and can be used as 20% or more of the energy source. A 2002 study by Mark Honeyman, Sebblin Sullivan, and Wayne Roush at Iowa State University discusses changes in performance of market hogs in deep-bedded hooped barns with the addition of 20% and 40% oats to the diet. The study didn't find any reduction in daily gain, feed intake, feed efficiency, or other crucial factors for either level of oats in the ration. The study is available at [www.extension.iastate.edu/ipic/reports/02swinereports/asl-1819.pdf](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/ipic/reports/02swinereports/asl-1819.pdf) [PDF/10K].

Pigs produced on pasture are usually healthier than pigs produced in confinement. Pastured hogs often have fewer respiratory diseases, rhinitis, and foot and leg problems.(Cramer, 1990b) A 1978-79 survey of Missouri hog producers demonstrated that hogs raised on pastures had the lowest health costs. Hogs raised in a mixture of pasture and confinement had the highest health expenses. This suggests that the hogs had a difficult time adjusting from one type of facility to another.(Kliebenstein, 1983)

Raising pigs outdoors can be more animal friendly and environmentally friendly, if managed correctly. However, poor management of outdoor pigs will lead to poor pig performance and environmental damage. Pigs need a dry, draft-free place to lie down; mud and slop will not produce healthy, happy hogs. Producers need to be concerned about rotating pastures and the need for vegetative cover in the pens.

Thankfully, there are other, better ways to farm and to raise hogs; the "sustainable agriculture" movement addresses the need to protect the rural environment and support rural communities, while providing opportunities for farmers to earn a decent living. But, sustainable farming takes more imagination and creativity than contract production - it requires taking care of each other and taking care of the land. Sustainable hog producers all across North America are finding that deep-bedding systems, including hoop house structures, and pasture based hog production systems often are not only more humane, ecologically sound, and socially responsible, but also, are more profitable than CAFOs. But, such systems require more management, more imagination, more creativity, more thinking, and thus, are more difficult to "promote" (Ikerd, 2003).