

Pasture Raised and Grass Fed on Stony Brook Farm


Animal Welfare, Ecology, and Taste in Schoharie, NY, USA

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Novice Notes: Rethinking Pig Pastures

Posted by stonybrookfarm under [Farm Management](#), [Farm-Grown Feed](#), [Livestock Feed](#), [Livestock Management](#), [My Novitiate](#), [Pigs](#)

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 After a lot of deliberation, I finally decided to plant a prepared hog pasture mix on half of last year's pig field. The other half will be in corn with red clover undersown at the third cultivation. The pasture mix is put together by Albert Lea Seed in Minnesota and contains sudan grass, field peas, rape, and annual rye grass. They call it "Laugh and Grow Fat." You add oats to the mix when you sow it. It looks like the best chance for rain over the next ten days is tomorrow, so I am going to try and broadcast the seed today.

Over the past two days, I spent about two or three hours working up the ground, which is about 2.5 acres. Because I knew that this year I would be tilling the field and planting it to an annual crop, last year I did not worry about how aggressively the pigs rooted up the field. In fact, I let them till it bare in quite a few spots, especially along the fence lines where they generally root a lot anyway and where I dumped waste vegetables over the fence. About 50% of the pasture, however, is a nice thick sod. Because the other 50% is either bare or spotty and because the mix will take at least a bit even when broadcast over sod (according to a woman I know who has been using it for a few years), I decided not to plow the ground up, but to disc it instead. The bare spots disc up to a nice seedbed, while the discs just cut little furrows in the sod.

As I was driving around the field alternately watching the discs churn the soil into a nice seedbed and doing nothing but cutting little furrows in the sod, I realized that I should rethink pig pasture management. It seems to me that annual pastures managed so that at the end of the season the ground is bare is the best pig pasture management plan on my farm. I don't have enough land or enough proper land to adequately rotate the pigs around the farm (eg, how do you maintain a wallow on a hillside?), so I need to find a way to use the same fields for pigs year after year (or maybe with a one year break) without making those fields "hog sick." One of the main concerns is internal parasites. One solution to the problem of internal parasites is tillage — although, in truth, I do not yet know if discing a bare field counts; it may be necessary to plow the field so that the worm eggs and larvae are buried at the bottom of the furrow. Because haying a field substantially reduces the parasite load on a field, I suspect that in addition to pulling worm larvae off the field through the baler, exposure to the sun probably kills the eggs and/or recently hatched larvae as well, but this is just a hunch. Worm eggs are supposed to be able to live for years in the soil, but generally speaking, that soil is well-shaded and kept moist by the grass. Because the worm eggs have evolved to be viable in a moist, shaded environment, they might be delicate in a dry, sunny one. Tillage will, I hope, also help break communicable disease cycles. They say that sun is the best sanitizer, so I hope that as the sun beats down on the bare field while the seed is germinating and just starting to grow, it will have a powerful sanitizing effect.

Such a pig pasture management strategy runs counter to the current of the grass farming movement. Grass farming orthodoxy is anti-tillage and requires that animals be raised on mixed grass pastures that are managed to preserve and intensify the pasture "sward." I couldn't agree more when it comes to the ruminants. Pigs, however, are not grass eaters, even though they eat lots of grass, and while they love clover, clover will not pack the pounds on a pig. Rape, maturing field peas, and oats, however will. Certainly, there is a higher cost to planting annual pastures compared to grazing mixed grass permanent pastures. However, in my limited experience mixed grass pastures reduce grain costs by very little. They provide exercise and entertainment for the pigs, and a nutritious snack bar. I think pig pastures should be more than a snack bar. They should be a major source of protein, nutrients, and, especially, energy. I will know after

this season whether the costs of purchasing seed and planting annual pastures is outweighed by the decrease in grain consumption (or the increase in weight or decrease in time to market). The woman I mentioned above who has used Laugh and Grow Fat for a few years says that her grain consumption goes down by 30% to 40%, but those numbers are for open sows and gilts. Growing pigs have very different needs.

One issue that I need to address is the ecological problem of topsoil erosion on bare ground. One solution to this would be to plant annual ryegrass as a cover crop. The problem with that solution, however, is that in the spring I will not have nice bare ground. I will have a field of ryegrass, which cannot be killed simply by discing it. It would need to be plowed. One potential solution to this would be to turn the pigs into the field early in the spring to plow up the rye grass and then disc it up after the pigs are rotated off the ground. I have seen annual rye grass re-root, but as long as it is eaten down and beaten up well enough it shouldn't be a problem. A further concern, however, is that annual ryegrass has pretty powerful allelopathic properties that prevent the germination of other seeds, which is one of the reasons that it makes such a great cover crop. You are supposed to wait a month to sow seeds into a rye grass bed that was churned up and not plowed (the plow inverts the soil, so the roots are at the bottom of the furrow, more or less). If I wait a month, that might give too much of the ryegrass a chance to re-root and it will also give weeds a chance to get a good start. Maybe I should just plant buckwheat or something like that instead. I don't know, however, if a winter-killed stand of buckwheat will lay down heavily enough to hold the soil in place.

Whatever the best plan, it is definitely clear to me that for pig pastures we should be focusing on high protein, high energy annuals.



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