

Pigs on their last picnic of the year.

The hog in the photo is eating turnip and radish greens on the 4th of December. I moved the pigs into this segment of their pasture today for the third grazing of the year.

In early April, I planted a mixture of grasses, legumes, and brassicas.

The grasses were oats, wheat, and barley. The legumes were red clovers, white clovers, and cowpeas.

The brassicas were radishes, canola, turnips, and mustard. I threw in some sunflowers for fun. I used multiple varieties of the brassicas and legumes bringing the total number of seed types to at least sixteen. Additionally, the natural seed bank of the soil includes many broadleaf weeds, canary grass and smart weeds. All of these plants are edible and nutritious to pigs.

To prepare the seed bed, I do a shallow leveling and mixing with a harrow. The harrow is pulled by a small tractor or a team of horses. Then I use a walking seeder to plant the larger seeds, followed by another trip over with the harrow. The larger seeds need to be covered with dirt for best germination. I then plant the small seeds on a second pass with the walking seeder. The seeder is an ancient machine that hangs over one shoulder. As I walk along turning the crank, the seeds are spun out more or less evenly. When set properly the seeder spreads the correct number of seeds over about a 20 foot wide swath. Although I have other planting machines, there is something deeply comforting about seeding in the old way.

Last, I use a rolling packer to press the seeds and to firm the soil. Small seeds germinate best when in firm contact with soil. If buried they should be shallow. There is a photo of the tractor and packer in the hog pasture after seeding and packing.

Contrary to common thinking, planting a high number of plant varieties has great advantages.

Every growing season is unique. The plant varieties that do best are different each year.

Oats and barley are fast germinating plants that grow well in cold, wet weather. Because of that, the first grazing was heavy in oats with brassicas a good second. One photo shows a late spring turnip.

Oats, barley, and the brassicas dominated the second grazing. The third grazing, as you can see in the snowy photo is mostly brassicas. Those brassicas, turnips and radishes, can withstand freezing cold. We have had at least 25 freezing nights this fall with several nights of ten above zero. You can see frost damage on the more sensitive, succulent plant stems in the photo.

Different plants prosper in wet, dry, hot, or cold weather. With a broad spectrum of plant types, several plant species will do well no matter what the weather conditions.

A greater variety of plant types also increases the overall biological activity of the soil. Greater variety improves the habitat for beneficial soil microbes. That in turn increases the total yield of plant food for the pigs while building the soil fertility.

No doubt, the health of the hogs is improved with a varied diet.

Each year we raise around 130 hogs in four pastures. The hogs are continuously rotated through their pasture from spring until late fall. We use temporary electric fences. With those fences, the pigs are given access to only a portion of the pasture at once. About 80% of the pasture is resting and regrowing at any particular time. To move the hogs we simply move the electric fence. The temporary fence is a single wire strand or electrified tape on step-in posts. It can be moved in a few minutes. The fence is moved at intervals as needed. It may be weekly or daily. Contrary to common belief, hogs quickly learn to cross when the fence is moved. They hesitate just long enough to get the new line established.

Unlike bovine grazing, hogs will normally eat the entire plant including the roots. Especially if left in the same segment for a week or more. That is not a problem. With moisture, the grazed pasture quickly revegetates. Even if grazed for two or more weeks. Plants for the next grazing come from many sources. Those sources include; seeds that did not germinate initially, seeds from plants that reached maturity and plants that spring from fragments that were not consumed. They can even come from seeds that pass through the hog's digestive system.

Hogs have an amazing nature. They can grow from a few pounds to 500 pounds in nine months. One photo shows some of the little piglets in April. By Early December, the largest of the hogs reach 500 pounds. Our pigs have grain available at all times. Their grain is about 50% oats with the other half either corn or wheat depending on customer preference. The pigs are provided with enough soybean meal to meet their protein needs.

I have been harvesting pigs weekly since October. In two more weeks, the last of the hogs will be gone. A couple months of rest and then the cycle of life starts anew. Tom





