

## Planting Annual Pig Pastures

We raise pastured pigs. Pasturing pigs means different things to different farmers. Here, at Snake River Farm it means that we rotate small groups of pigs through annually seeded paddocks. Pigs are not ruminants. They cannot prosper on forage alone as our bison and cattle can. Pigs are omnivores with digestive systems somewhat similar to humans. Because of that, our pigs have continuous access to a special grain ration.

Some farmers try to restrict their hogs to eating above ground material only. That is hard to do. It is very difficult to prevent pigs from rooting and digging in the soil. Digging for roots and blow ground morsels is basic to pig nature. I believe both grazing and rooting are good for a pig's diet, physical health and general wellbeing.

We allow our hogs to root. Nevertheless, we manage to rotate the pigs through pastures two or more times each growing season with only one planting.

Each year between May and November, we raise and sell 150 hogs. The pigs are born in March and April and harvested from October until late November. In Minnesota, we are able to sell those animals directly to consumers by the ½.

We raise pigs in four pastures. Each pasture contains 10 to 50 animals. Pigs are not herd animals although there are frequently classified as such. Their social structure is closer to a tribal or extended family model.

Groups of small sizes socialize well. Small groups are also easier to manage especially on pasture. Each pasture has a shed, a water supply, a grain feeder and enough space to provide green plants throughout the growing season.

Less than an acre of pasture is required per group if it is highly productive and carefully managed. Fresh parcels are provided to the pigs about once a week on average.

A single electrified ribbon is adequate to control well trained pigs.

When exposed to a new pasture segment, the pigs first devour all the green above ground material. That may take a few days. Then they root and dig. Even though the paddock seems to be completely devoured, the same area can be grazed two or three times, with sufficient recovery time. I plant once in the early spring. No replanting is necessary.

By late fall, the hogs are big, up to 500 pounds. and they leave the pastures deeply pock marked. Joel Salatin calls it "moon scaped".

Because the pastures are small and because of personal preference, I use old Farmall tractors and equipment that was originally horse drawn.

I start the spring preparation with a disc as shown in the **first photo**. I go over it enough to at least smooth out the edges. I do not try to level the paddock as might be done for a normal tilled field.

The photo shows a typical pig shed. There is a buried ¾ inch irrigation pipe for water and a buried 14-2 power line to each shed. The line powers an electric fence charger and lights. I use a separate fence energizer for each pasture. Power and a shed light come in handy when I load the pigs late in the fall. The **second photo** shows the same lot after I have crossed it a few times with a spike tooth harrow. The photo also shows a red walking seeder that I use for planting. Such seeders are commonly available for less than \$30.

I seeded these pastures with radishes (Nitro & Daikon), rape (Dwarf Essex & Buckmaster), Purple Top Turnip, Brown Mustard, Cowpeas, Oats, Barley, Wheat, Red Clover, Yellow Sweetclover, Dutch White Clover and Sunflowers.

Some seeds are large, such as grains, sunflowers, and peas. Others are quite small. Because of the size difference I make two seeding passes. I first spread the large seeds. Then drag the harrow until 90% of the seeds are buried.

I then reset the seeder and spread the small seeds. I do not try to bury the small seeds. Instead I use a heavy packer to press the small seeds firmly into the soil. The packer is shown in the **third photo**.

The **fourth photo** was taken ten cool days later. You can see many broad leaf seedlings of various sizes. There are also many leaf spikes of emerging annual grasses, (oats, barley and wheat). Many of the plants are aligned in rows. The seeds were broadcasted but fell into small furrows left by the harrow and were then pressed in by the packer.

The plants that dominate in the first growth are determined by the soil conditions and subsequent weather. Normally the annual grains take over for the first grazing. In the summer and fall brassicas often dominate. Legumes are an ever-present understory. Second and subsequent growths are determined by the weather, how long the hogs graze, which plants have already gone to seed and many other variables.

No matter how many times the hogs turn this pasture, if there is moisture and sufficient warmth, there will be forage for another grazing.

The **fifth photo** shows hogs grazing in late summer. There are oat plants just heading out and brassicas in bloom. Obviously a second growth in both cases.

The **sixth photo** shows October grazing. Notice the high number of clover leaves.

The **seventh photo** shows a radish that managed to grow to good size by late October.

The **eight photo** has a 400-pound hog grazing on lush brassica greens in November snow. Every year the forage sequence is different. This stuff works. Best regards. Tom

















