

# RAISING PIGS ON ROTATIONAL PASTURES

*By Daniel Brisebois*

A couple years ago, we added pigs to the mix of activities at Tourne-Sol cooperative farm. Before that, our commercial vegetable experience led us to leap into market farming whole hog, but considering our limited animal experience, we were quite hesitant when it came to livestock.

To make up for that knowledge gap, we drafted a list of questions and called up neighbours and farmers we knew, flipped through old copies of the *Small Farmer Journal*, and devoured the pig production section of COG's *Organic Livestock Handbook*. Eventually, we also picked up Storey's *Guide to Raising Pigs*.

In 2008, we fattened two hogs. In 2010, we'd increased to four pigs. We feel much more comfortable raising animals now. I would like to share how we've answered our initial questions: where to get the pigs; how to house them; how to keep them in the pen (and out of the fields); how to integrate them into our vegetable fields; and what to feed them.

## Getting the pigs

In early spring, we order piglets from a local pork producer. Though we are interested in raising heritage breeds, to get started we've chosen to take what

is locally and easily available, in this case, a Duroc-Landrace cross.

We pick up the weaned pigs around June 1. The weather at this time is warm enough for the young animals to adapt to a new location with little stress. Each eight-week-old pig weighs about 50 lbs. (23 kg) and costs \$50. We put a tarp in the back of our van, make a temporary pen with straw bales and toss some bedding on the tarp.

## Housing and fences

The pigs live in a 7 ft. by 7 ft. (2 m x 2 m) A-frame shelter in a pasture. To keep the shelter from overheating, we put ventilation openings in the front and back of the roof peak. The dirt floor helps cool the shelter. In spring and fall, we add straw bedding to keep the pigs warm.

When the pigs first arrive, we seal them into the A-frame house with straw bales. We want the transition away from their mothers to be as smooth as

possible. This means we try to keep them happy rooting around for a few days with no knowledge of the electric fence that lurks outside. The shelter is enclosed by a moveable electric fence made up of two strands attached to a battery on a solar charger.

After a few days, when they've settled in, we remove the straw bales and let the pigs wander into the pasture. They are excited to taste green grass but quickly discover that the blue line around the pen isn't much fun to touch. During their first week outside, there is a lot of running back to the safety of the A-frame house as the piglets explore the boundaries of their domain.

This initial meeting between pigs and fence is crucial since two little blue lines are all that keep the pigs in the pen. The piglets don't always see the fence clearly, so we put them in a 7 ft. x 8 ft. outdoor area initially and place straw bales just outside the pen to create a visual barrier. We don't want them getting zapped and then running through the fence. The straw bales stay in place for a couple of weeks until we get tired of dragging them with each pasture move.

## Rotational pasture

The pigs fit well in our vegetable rotation. Our fields are broken into ½-acre (0.2-ha) blocks of 70 ft. x 300 ft. (21 m x 91 m). Each block counts as a unit in our rotation and goes into a year of cover crops once every three years. We currently move the pigs through one half of a cover crop block (¼ acre) over the growing season.

To control odours and give pigs regular access to pasture, we move them every week. We put



*Opening the fence to move the pigs to new pasture.*

four pigs on a 35 ft. x 15 ft. (11 m x 5 m) pasture containing the A-frame house. Every week we move the paddock forward another 15 feet. It takes twenty moves to go from one edge of the 300-ft. bed to the other end, which means twenty weeks from the time the pigs arrive in late May to when they leave in early October.

To move the paddock, we set up a second fenced area beside the first one, then open a section of the fence between the pastures and move the pigs through. When the pigs are young, we scoot them into the house and drag the house with them in it. As the pigs get older, they start to anticipate the move and learn to cross into the new pasture on their own. However, even with the fence removed, the pigs usually have a clear idea of where that fence line used to be and some pigs won't cross the imaginary line. Sometimes we can trick them into crossing on their own by sprinkling straw to hide the de-

marcation between pens. Once one pig crosses and starts rooting in new greenery, the rest risk the imaginary fence and rush over.

After five to six moves (when the pigs are about 14 weeks old and noticeably larger than when they arrived), it takes them only a couple days to root up their new pasture. They then proceed to burrow and make wallows. They seem to enjoy fresh soil as much as green pasture. After they've moved, we broadcast buckwheat over the previous pasture. This leaves a series of small buckwheat plots of different heights. Often, we later disk the buckwheat to seed oats.

When it's time for the last pasture move of the season, we don't bring the house into the new pasture. Instead, we bring in a trailer with a pen built of pallets, plywood and a tarp to the edge of the pasture. We feed the pigs in the trailer so they get used to it and they start to sleep on the straw inside.

The last morning, we simply close the trailer gate before the pigs wake up, and we drive to the slaughterhouse. The ride is about an hour but the pigs seem to be soothed by the driving vibrations and arrive at their final destination without stress.

## Feed

Our pigs have regular access to fresh pasture, but, unlike ruminants, grass is not enough for these animals. Our first pigs were fed a mix of organic grains from local farmers. Those pigs didn't really size up even though we provided them with a lot of food. I suspect that our ration was short on protein.

Now, we feed hog grower mix from Homestead Organics for the first part of the season. Then, we shift to a home-mixed ration of three parts corn to one part hog grower to one part sunflower meal (the sunflower meal is a byproduct of our landlord's organic sunflower oil operation). This gives the pigs 14–15% protein. With this increase in protein, the pigs have been noticeably larger.

We also provide vegetable scraps. The pigs seem to enjoy the greens (especially beet and chard leaves), broccoli and extra-ripe tomatoes. Although root crops and zucchini are nibbled, these vegetables seem to be played with more than eaten.

Twice a day, the pigs are fed enough grain to last two hours. I check the feed bins regularly to see how long each meal lasts. If they get through it in less than two hours, I increase their serving size. We keep two feed dishes in the pasture to make sure each pig has access to food and to keep them from wrestling.



*Getting ready for the last move.*

## Water

We've attached a line from our irrigation header to the pig pasture and set up a watering nipple in the pen so the pigs always have fresh water. Even with the nipple, the pigs seem to appreciate extra fresh water, so we have a hose with a tap attached to the line to fill a watering dish for the pigs (even though they invariably flip it over).

We also use the tap to pour a wallow for the pigs on very hot days. During this past summer's continuous string of unseasonably hot days, I eyed that wallow enviously.

## Scaling up

I dream about getting more hogs on the farm. I think our system could be easily adapted to a larger number of animals. If we raised 10–15 pigs, we would probably use a full half-acre block and increase the pasture size to 70 ft. x 20 ft. This would limit us to 15 moves per season, but with the extra area, we could probably get away mov-

ing the young pigs every 10–14 days instead of once a week.

The A-frame house might be adequate for the young pigs but they would quickly outgrow the shelter. We would need several houses of the same size or one larger shelter. It is important that this building be easy to move regularly. It might be necessary to use the tractor to pull the structure to the next pasture.

Another challenge would be in getting the pigs to slaughter. Our trailer fits four pigs quite well and five pigs is likely the limit. One option is to set up multiple pastures with four to five pigs on different cover crop blocks on the farms. One pasture could start on May 1 to leave early September, another June 1 for early October, and perhaps a third on July 1 for early November departure. This would solve the loading problem but it would create more pastures to manage at once.

If we did put ten to fifteen pigs in on pasture, I wouldn't trust the

simple fence we use. We could move to electric netting or add a second perimeter beyond the first one.

If we do expand, we will do it gradually to give ourselves the chance to work out unforeseen problems. My other hog dream would be to get our own sow and raise our own piglets. This would give us more control over the breeds we raise. But, a sow requires care all year long. As I currently don't live on the farm, and my co-farmers don't all share this aspiration, it isn't easy to perform regular winter animal chores. Until then, we'll buy weaned pigs.

*Daniel Brisebois is one of the five members of Tourne-Sol cooperative farm in Les Cèdres, Quebec. Tourne-Sol produces certified*

*organic vegetables, flowers, seeds, seedlings and herbal teas on twelve acres rented from an organic grain farm. Tourne-Sol's products are distributed through a 250-share CSA, farmers' market and an on-line seed catalogue.*

*Daniel is co-author of COG's **Crop Planning for the Organic Vegetable Grower** and writes a blog ([goingtoseed.wordpress.com](http://goingtoseed.wordpress.com)) on growing seed. He is President of Canadian Organic Growers and on the steering committee of Eastern Canadian Organic Seed Growers Network (ECOSGN).*

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