

## Organic Sow Management



## Michael and Karma Glos



## Kingbird Farm



### The Economics of Keeping Sows

- If organic piglets are available in your area from a breeder you trust then keeping your own sows may not be economically helpful.
- The cost of raising and maintaining breeding stock is very high and production can vary according to season, weather, fertility, health, and husbandry skills.
- Several sows must be kept to economically support a boar and AI is difficult to accomplish without a boar present.
- Keeping and breeding your own stock enables you to control the production of your pork from day one.
- Breeding allows the development of a pig that does well for your land and management style.

### Acquiring Breeding Stock

- The most foolproof way of farrowing your first pigs is to buy pregnant sows in their first third of gestation and manage them organically from then on or purchase pregnant organic sows.
- Purchasing weanling gilts may be less expensive, but they will not be ready to breed for 5 to 6 months and will require a boar of a similar age or at least a smaller adult boar.
- Registered breeding stock is not necessary for your first sows, but be prepared to cull or sell them if you decide to get serious and move on to high quality breeding stock.
- Once you start acquiring breeding stock be sure it's the breed you really want; transitioning to a new breed later is very difficult.
- Only buy animals from breeders whose management you feel good about, your investment will pay off in healthier animals that do well in your system.



### Housing and Basic Management

- Sow housing can range from simple sheds, to porta huts on pasture, to permanent sow barns.
- Dark skinned heritage breeds do very well outdoors year round with minimal infrastructure.
- Sows and boars readily respect electric fencing if they are properly trained and fences are kept hot.
- Farrowing may require additional infrastructure such as farrowing huts, creeps, heat lamps, and tighter fencing.
- All housing, feeders, drinkers and anything else sows and boars come into contact with must be very rugged.
- Sows and boars must have access to drinking water at all times; a sow is either pregnant or lactating and requires a lot of water. Breeding boars eat and drink enormous amounts.
- A boar may live with the sows if the boar does not get in the way of sow management and if you don't mind not having exact control over breeding. We do not recommend allowing boars to live together or with very young gilts who could be injured by an older boar.



**Feeding and Healthcare**

- Gestating gilts, sows, and boars should receive no more than 4-6 lbs of full ration sow feed per day.
- Lactating sows can eat 9-15 lbs per day (for 50-56 days) since they are producing 15-25 lbs of milk/day.
- Piglets will begin consuming feed at about three weeks at which point you will need to supplement the sows feed to compensate for the piglets intake.
- Current cost for Certified Organic Sow Feed delivered bulk to our farm is \$558/Ton (.28/lb).
- Sows require a fair amount of bedding as well, particularly if kept in a deep-bedded barn or hoop house.
- Good Certified Organic straw costs us \$125/Ton.
- We also feed good Certified Organic hay in the winter as well as farm-grown mangel beets and turnips.

**Sow Feed, 16%**

Ingredients:	LBS
Shell Corn Grain	925
Roasted Soybeans	450
Oats	400
Crab meal	100
Rumi-Cult 40	25
<u>Sow Premix</u>	<u>100</u>
Total	2000

- When sows are not on pasture (winter or farrowing) we provide them with a daily “salad” of garden weeds, grass sod, and cull vegetables.
- Sows should have access to a broad range of broad leaf plants, shrubs, and trees while on pasture, not just sod.
- Organic healthcare begins with and depends on a healthy well-developed immune system and the ability for the animals to help regulate their own welfare.
- Sows should have access to soil, plants, weather, and the company of one another.
- Vaccination is allowed under certification and may be advisable for certain endemic reproductive diseases.



**Breeding and Gestation**

- Gilts may start breeding at the second or third estrus (6-8 months of age). Young boars at the same age.
- Sows usually provide us with 4-6 litters (2-3 years) of good production before their litter size falls or they begin to have farrowing difficulties.
- We typically replace our boar at two years of age as he becomes too large to breed young gilts.
- Sows come into heat about every 21 days and exhibit “standing heat” for 50-60 hours.
- Exposure to the boar as soon as heat begins is important since sows begin to ovulate within 35-45 hours.
- After weaning, sows come into heat 4-7 days and may breed on that heat or wait an entire 21-day cycle.
- A pregnant sow will not come back into heat 21 days after breeding.
- Gestation is 3 months, 3 weeks, and 3 days—this time period is very consistent.
- Avoid allowing sows to become too fat during gestation and be sure they get enough exercise.



## Farrowing

- If sows are to be moved to a new location for farrowing, do this at least 2-3 days before she is due.
- Farrowing areas should be safe, well bedded, draft free, and have ample available water.
- Farrowing should be attended for first-litter gilts and in very cold weather.
- Many sows do not like to be disturbed during farrowing and may actually crush more piglets if you are present.
- Delivery usually ranges from 2-5 hours with a piglet coming about every 20 minutes.
- If using nipple drinkers for farrowing sows, give them a tub of water to drink after delivery.
- Remove the afterbirth if the sow does not want to eat it and remove all dead piglets promptly.
- Provide a small meal with salad to the sow after she is up.



## Piglet Management to Weaning

- In cold weather and/or with an agitated sow piglets will benefit from a heated creep; a simple heat lamp in the summer or a partially enclosed brooder box in the winter.
- We typically ear notch at birth and castrate within 3-5 days; we do not clip needle teeth, cut tails or give iron shots.
- Ear notch after piglets have suckled but before they are too active.
- Piglets must suckle and receive colostrums within hours of birth to develop their immune systems.
- Badly injured piglets very often survive and heal well, resist putting them down.
- Begin providing piglets with daily sod and soil (for iron) on the second day and continue for a week. Set aside bags of soil for winter farrowing or dig from the greenhouse with the ground is frozen.
- We prefer to castrate within a week of age as the testicles are accessible and the piglets are small and easy to handle, and they heal very quickly. Use caution when removing pigs for castration, sows can get aggressive.
- Provide clean bedding or ground for newly castrated piglets.
- Begin providing additional feed for piglets at about 2 weeks of age.
- We like to wean at 7-8 weeks, but will wean earlier if the sow is very thin and the piglets are eating feed well.
- It is always best to remove the sow at weaning and allow the piglets to stay at home while they adjust.
- Be sure newly weaned piglets have easy access to water and moistened feed at all times.
- Expect variation in the number of piglets produced by each sow according to husbandry skills, sow health, sow personality, and weather.



## Sow and Boar Retirement

- We have culled sows for the following reasons: distocea of the uterus, consistently small litters, would not breed, savaged her piglets, or was overly aggressive with us.
- Certified Organic sows have a high value for meat so do not keep a poorly producing sow.
- Animals that you do not like or who do not work in your system can be sold as breeding stock to others with full disclosure.
- First litter gilts who are culled can be butchered and cut just like a market hog.
- Older sows are primarily ground for spiced sausages and hot dogs while pulling the tenderloins, baby back ribs, and smoking the bellies (bacon).
- Boars who become too large or aggressive can be sold as breeding stock, but can be difficult to place.
- Boars can be castrated by a veterinarian and butchered at least two months later to be used for spiced sausages and hot dogs.
- All retired sows and boars should be treated with the utmost respect to the very end. They should be removed from the herd, loaded, trailered, and slaughtered with compassion.



## Resources

- Swine Resource Handbook for Market and Breeding Projects, 4-H Circular 134R, The Ohio State University, 2001.
- Small-Scale Pig Raising, Dirk van Loon, Garden Way Publishing, 1978.
- The Pig Site, [www.thepigsite.com](http://www.thepigsite.com)
- Considerations in Organic Hog Production, ATTRA's Organic Matters Series
- Hogs Your Way, University of Minnesota Extension Service, BU-7641-S, 2001

