



Pigs of a Different Color

For hobby farmers thinking of raising pigs, Tamworths offer a perfect package of good temperament, hardiness, and great taste.

by Carol Ekarius

Traditionally, pigs had a place on every farm—large and small, but today most pigs are raised in industrial operations, with a thousand or more sows under one roof—confined in crates that prevent them from even turning around.

You won't find Tamworth hogs in any of these places; they can't stand up to the conditions in a confinement facility, and they gain weight slower than the commercial breeds.

Tamworth Characteristics

Color: Golden red to a dark red—often described as ginger. Black spots in the hair and curly coats are detriments.

Body type: Deep-sided and uniform with a strong arch of back, and muscular top and long rump. The ham is muscular and firm although it lacks the size and bulk found in most other breeds. Comparatively long of neck and leg, with firm, trim jowl; firm underline and firm fleshing.

Head: Striking, long head with moderately long and straight snout, and medium-size erect ears. Seen from the side, the face usually has a very slight suggestion of a dish, but a short or turned-up nose is unacceptable.

Size: Medium to large, weighing 500 to 600 pounds at maturity.

Resources

Tamworth Swine Association
Shirley Brattain, Secretary
621 N 850 W
Greencastle, IN 46135
(765) 653-4913

American Livestock Breeds Conservancy
www.albc-usa.org

Certified Humane—Raised and Handled

www.certifiedhumane.com Yet the small farmers who raise them praise the breed: Tamworths are hardy, with good mothering capabilities, and they perform very well outdoors, especially when grazing on pasture. They are particularly known for great-tasting, lean meat with good texture.

BRINGING HOME THE BACON

There are two essential types of pigs—the lard type and the bacon type. As the name suggests, lard pigs produce high concentrations of fat that is rendered for cooking and the production of lubricants.

These pigs are compact and thick, with short legs and deep bodies. They “fatten” quickly, particularly on a diet rich in corn.

Unlike the lard types, long, lean and muscular frames distinguish the bacon pigs. They were traditionally fed legumes, small grains, turnips, garden and dairy byproducts—feeds that are high in protein and roughage, and low in energy. They grew slowly, and yielded high-quality, finely grained meat.

Historically, strong markets for lard (which has been used not only for cooking and as a mechanical lubricant, but also as a key ingredient in products ranging from cosmetics to explosives and pharmaceuticals) limited the call for bacon breeds in the United States.



Only the Yorkshire and the Tamworth breeds of bacon-type pigs ever developed reasonable herd numbers in this country, and their numbers were limited.

Through World War II, the market for lard was strong, but after the war, cheaper, vegetable-based cooking fats found their way into the American diet, and petrochemicals largely replaced lard for commercial and industrial uses.

The declining market for animal fat caused the demand for lard pigs to collapse, so breeders began selecting for leaner hogs, but ones that could produce well in confinement.

Only three breeds of traditional lard-type pigs are still alive, the Choctaw, Guinea Hog and the Mulefoot—all breeds that, like the Tamworth, are considered rare heritage breeds by the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (see “Saving a Breed?”).

Farmer’s Marketing Tip

Ed Shavely shares some advice for those thinking about selling meat at a farmer’s market:

He says the first thing to do if you want to sell at a farmer’s market is to check out the health regulations in your state.

“When I first started going, our state didn’t have any regulations, but three years ago a law was passed. I didn’t know about it until a local health inspector read me the riot act.”

Expect to start slow, until people find out you have a quality product.

“My first year I didn’t sell a lot, but every week it would build, to the point that now we don’t have enough product. So, don’t go buy 10 sows and expect to sell all your meat at the farmer’s market the first year.” Through the 1970s and into the ‘80s, pigs were still an integral part of most family farms. But as the ‘80s rolled into the ‘90s and on into the new century, pork production moved to a handful of large corporations that are vertically integrated, controlling every step from selection of breeding stock to marketing in the supermarket. According to the Center for Rural Affairs in Walthill, Neb., 200,000 producers got out of hog production in the last decade.

Chuck Hassebrook, executive director of the Center, says, “The problem isn’t that smaller farmers aren’t economically efficient. It’s that industrialization leads to closed markets where prices are fixed not by open, competitive bidding, but by negotiated contracts. Small producers are discriminated against in the commodity system, and many are forced out of business. The long-term effect of that reaches far beyond the farmers themselves; there is a profound impact on rural communities and the environment.”

But the situation is not all doom and gloom. “The good news is that there are cost effective, efficient ways to produce hogs outside of total confinement,” says Chuck, “whether it be in lower-cost facilities or on pasture, that can compete on cost terms and respond more directly to the social, environmental and health concerns consumers are interested in. What I see among most innovative, small-scale farmers is that they are focusing on developing a product that responds to consumer demands, and selling that product at a premium.”

This good news also means good news for a breed like the Tamworth that fits so well into a non-industrial system.

PORKER PERSONALITY

Pigs are highly intelligent and curious, and generally very friendly. They can become as pet-like as a dog, happily greeting you when you come out of the house, or rolling over to have their bellies scratched. They are social animals, doing best with other pigs, but can be raised successfully alone if they receive lots of attention from people. In spite of their normally good nature, sows and boars get very big (600 pounds-plus is not at all out of the ordinary for fully mature animals), and they can be dangerous when provoked. Occasions to be on your guard include feed time, handling or moving (such as taking sows into a building for farrowing), performing medical treatment, or handling young pigs around the sow—the piglets screech when picked up and mama comes to their defense.

Although pigs have a reputation as being dirty animals, they’re not. Pigs will pick one area for their manure, and will keep it separate and unique from sleeping and eating areas. Pigs like to roll in mud during hot weather, but that is simply a method of keeping cool.



RAISING PIGS

Raising pigs is fairly easy. Consider the following:

Feeding:
Pigs are omnivores, and will eat anything that people eat. They prefer a mixed diet of vegetable matter and meat, eggs or dairy products, and are great at finishing off table scraps, vegetable garden excess and surplus milk from a dairy operation, and other “leftovers” from on the farm. If raised on pasture, pigs are excellent grazers, obtaining a large portion of their diet directly from pasture plants. Their rooting can be hard on the land however, so either run them on pastures of annuals—like rape and oats—or ring their nose with a humane ring (available from feed and farm-supply stores). During winter, they will eat a fair amount of hay (particularly legume hay, like alfalfa or clover); provide it free choice. Pigs require a higher percentage of protein, minerals and vitamins than other classes of livestock.

Housing:

Pigs can get by with just a small shelter (like Port-A-Shelters), or a stall in an existing barn. Whatever type of shelter you provide, bed it well with straw.

Health:

Baby pigs are very vulnerable to anemia, so for farm-born piglets provide supplemental iron (available as a single injection or as a daily supplement swabbed on the sows udder with molasses). There are vaccines for several swine-related diseases, like hog cholera and swine influenza, but the best approach is to check with your veterinarian before deciding on an appropriate vaccination strategy, as recommendations vary by area. Pigs are susceptible to several types of worms, but for a small herd, good sanitation can reduce their impacts. Again, talk to your vet, and have him check a fecal sample before deciding on a deworming schedule.

RESPONDING TO THE CONSUMER

Ozark Mountain Pork is a new, farmer-owned co-op in Missouri. They are one of the innovative groups of farmers that are trying to respond to consumer wants, at the same time as they create an economic niche that will allow them to continue farming. In January of 2002, the Missouri Farmers Union, the Humane Society of the United States, and the nonprofit Humane Farm Animal Care organization, which operates a “Certified Humane” labeling program, helped 34 farm families begin the co-op.

Bob Street, a member of the co-op board, has been a pig farmer for years. With 150 sows, he spent much of his career moving in the direction that the industry was going: more sows in confinement operations. But he was moving on a path that felt wrong spiritually, and seemed to lead to never-ending financial struggles. “I can’t say that the co-op is going to be a success, but I think it’s the only opportunity I have left for my farming operation,” says Bob. “The direction the rest of the hog industry is going—well I’m just not interested in going in that direction anymore. I think even a lot of people who fully bought into some of these trends [industrialized hog production] won’t be around in a few years, even those who have fairly good size to them. The way the system works, the profit is squeezed out of everybody on the ground and concentrated at the top [of the corporations].”

Co-op members began moving into sustainable practices, like pasture production, and began trying to meet consumer demand for leaner meat grown without the routine use of antibiotics. They knew that to succeed, they would have to adjust their breeding.

“The guy who started the slaughter plant we are using raised Tamworths because he felt the meat was higher quality, better tasting ... Now, most of our members are cross-breeding Tams for our market animals, and raising purebred Tams for breeding stock.”

Like Street, and the farmers of the Ozark Mountain Pork Co-op, Ed Snively, of Ohio, ran a commercial hog operation. But with 40 sows in a farrow-to-finish total-confinement system, Ed still had to work off the farm, and his operation seemed to drain money and hope. In the 1980s, he began converting his farm to organic practices, and became active in the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA).

“We were thinking about phasing out of hogs altogether,” he says, “but at an OEFFA meeting I met a fellow who was interested in selling organic, humanely raised pork. That was probably the late 1980s.”

Today, Shively has a profitable operation, marketing his pork directly to consumers from the farm, through farmers’ markets and to chefs at regional restaurants; Tamworths and Large Blacks—another heritage breed—are an important component of his breeding program. Shively says he has moved toward these breeds because “they are excellent grazers with great dispositions; they have high quality, tasty meat and they just want you to come up and rub their backs.”



In Shavely's case, the switch in production methods has proven itself to be profitable. "Today I can clear \$200 per hog after processing and feed cost. That doesn't include depreciation and my time, but after my actual out-of-pocket expenses, I'm clearing \$200 and my meat is not overpriced. I set prices comparable to meat market prices."

SCALE IS RELATIVE

Greg David of Wisconsin would look at Shavely and Street as pretty big operators. Greg and his wife Sandy own just 20 acres, located halfway between Madison and Milwaukee. About half their land is in native prairie and woodland, maintained for wildlife habitat. The other half is split into two 5-acre parcels, one set aside for growing gardens and an orchard, and the other for their animals.

Greg is an elected county supervisor and Sandy is a teacher, but their farm supports a CSA (community supported agriculture) operation with 12 participating families. About nine years ago, they wanted to get into pigs, partly to produce meat from garden waste, but more importantly, to turn compost. Greg and Sandy have three working sows, and he says, "We raise 15 to 20 market pigs per year, and direct market the pork as a side product through our CSA. The meat has a wonderful flavor that our customers love. Our butcher says they are the leanest pigs he handles."

Temperament is important to Greg. "Our pigs are productive, but they're also companion animals. They aren't aggressive. We raise chickens, geese, turkeys and peacocks too, but our pigs have never become predatory, which other pigs will do."

TASTE

The taste difference of Tamworth meat is not simply something that only producers talk about. Chefs from some of America's finer restaurants have noticed the difference and are featuring Tamworth pork on their menus.

Nora Pouillon, owner of Restaurant Nora (the first certified organic restaurant in the United States) and Asia Nora (also a restaurant), in Washington, D.C., is an example. About 10 years ago, she was looking for a pork supplier. She began asking the farmers who supplied her dairy products, vegetables and beef if they knew of someone producing high-quality pork. They put her in touch with a farmer who brought pictures to show her of Tamworths. She says, "He was talking in such glorious language about how wonderful they are. We traveled to Pennsylvania to see them and they were like dogs, docile and happy."

She tried some of the meat, and she found it to be just the thing she was seeking. "I thought it was exactly as he said; it was tender, but not as fatty as other pork, and it had nice flavor," Pouillon says. "Nowadays, to have tender pork you normally have to go into the shoulder—the fatty part of the animal. We could use all the cuts and still have tender meat for our customers."

Nora's menu changes everyday, but her choice of pork doesn't. She sticks to Tamworth for the flavor and tenderness, and as a way to support independent family farmers.

About the Author: Carol Ekarius is a HF contributing editor and author of *Small-Scale Livestock Farming* (Storey Books).

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