

Transitioning Pasture Pigs to Winter: by Sally Colby

Although cold weather will soon be here, there's still plenty of time to make sure your pastured pigs will survive – and thrive – through winter.

Winter temperatures can vary widely, and weather conditions often change rapidly. The first line of defense against rapid changes and cold and damp conditions is maintaining pigs in good body condition prior to winter. Pigs that consume a quality balanced ration along with pasture are usually well-equipped to thrive through cold and snow. If pigs are accustomed to obtaining a substantial portion of their daily feed requirement from pasture, make sure you have an ample supply of good-quality hay for winter. Pigs that aren't accustomed to hay won't automatically consume it in the same way ruminants will and don't get the same feed value from it. If possible, start with small amounts of hay, preferably high-quality alfalfa, prior to putting large round bales in the pasture.

Hay for winter feeding should be leafy and free of mold. Although pigs may willingly consume weedy hay, it isn't worth the risk of weed seeds that will eventually become weeds in your pasture. Round bales should be placed on a stable surface on the flat end to avoid the formation of a "crown," which can fall over and smother small pigs. Pigs will bed down in the hay and trample some of it into the ground, so place bales where hay will compost and benefit the soil. Many farmers take advantage of excess fall produce, such as pumpkins or apples, to supplement pigs' diets.

Pigs can be confined to a sacrifice area if pastures tend to become excessively wet through winter. Once the ground is frozen and likely to remain frozen for a length of time, pigs can be returned to pasture.

Decide which pastures will be reserved for winter based on elevation, slope, access to water and convenience. Pastures that are slightly sloped are ideal for winter because pigs will always have a place that's high and dry. If a particular pasture is already decimated or muddy, it's probably best to avoid using that area until it's frozen or dry.

Pigs thrive in wooded areas in winter and will happily forage on acorns and other nuts. Wooded areas provide natural windbreaks and can be a valuable part of pigs' winter shelter.

Have a place prepared for sick animals well ahead of winter. Make sure you can move animals to the area without undue stress or injury to the pigs or the person moving them. Observe animals daily throughout fall so you're aware of any changes in behavior that may signal illness.

Check fences for holes and weak spots and make any necessary repairs. Be sure that electric fences are adequately hot and that accumulated snow and ice won't interfere with function. Ensure that water is available in all pastures that pigs will occupy, and that water lines and pipes are adequately insulated. Many pastured pig producers use shelters, or huts. Huts should be in good repair and placed so they face south/southeast whenever possible. This allows the low light of winter to enter the hut, and prevailing winds will hit the side or back of the structure. Although many huts are manufactured without floors, the addition of a heavy plywood floor may help pigs conserve heat.

If you're adding huts for the first time, select structures that are portable, easy to clean and of ample size so that anyone who is working with the pigs can get in and move around easily if a sow needs help during farrowing. Mobility is an important feature – movable huts help distribute used bedding. Shelters

that are designed to accommodate several animals usually have drop-down panels for summer ventilation. Make sure the panels can be closed and securely fastened for protection against wind. Ideally, use only new rather than secondhand shelters to avoid the possibility of bringing disease onto the farm.

Winter farrowing comes with some challenges, but sows and their newborns do just fine outside if they have access to good shelter. Sows that are close to farrowing will usually seek shelter, so the ability to enclose the hut with hog panels or gates will help confine the sow and her litter during bad weather. Confining individual animals to a hut also makes it easier to add a heat lamp if necessary. The challenge in winter farrowing is keeping newborns dry, so huts should be well-bedded. Suitable bedding includes straw, poor-quality hay or baled cornstalks. Remove wet bedding daily to maintain a dry environment for piglets. Experienced sows will often collect hay or straw to create a nest as they get close to farrowing. Farmers who use a building for winter farrowing find that a bedded pack works well. Pigs nestle deeply into the pack and can stay warm and dry if there is adequate space and bedding. Monitor the pack and add dry bedding before the pack becomes moisture-laden.

Young gilts that come from litters successfully raised during the winter months should be considered as herd replacements, while any animal that doesn't do a good job raising her litter should go on the cull list. Some producers have multiple sows due to farrow within a narrow time frame, and these sows will often "share" babies. In this case, make sure all piglets are receiving adequate nutrition.