

PIGS on the Farm

SPOT-LITE

THE PIG HAS A PRETTY BAD REPUTATION: it is dirty, smelly, gluttonous and most recently it is linked to the H1N1 virus known as “swine flu.” If our porcine friends are such a nuisance then why keep them around?

This is just one of the questions we try to answer in the Farmpark’s Well Bred Shed, where at practically anytime of the year, you’ll find one of our main animal attractions—piglets! However, the reason we keep pigs around is not just because baby pigs are cute. They are an important food source for us, fattening quickly and efficiently on a variety of foods. But as researchers and doctors know they are also important in keeping us alive by providing heart valves, medicines and other medical benefits. Swine are intelligent and the easiest farm animals to train.

At Farmpark, visitors can see pigs up close. They may even have the opportunity to see baby piglets born and witness some of the care and maintenance that goes along with keeping pigs.

by Jacki Sonewald, INTERPRETIVE SPECIALIST

It all starts with the sow, the female, and a boar, the male. In the Barnyard, visitors can meet our sows and our boar face-to-face. Currently we have two Yorkshire sows, one Tamworth, one Chester White and one Gloucester Old Spot. Usually, the piglets are a crossbreed born from the mating of our Duroc boar with the sows. At times we use artificial insemination (AI) so that we can produce a pure breed of pig, particularly with heritage breeds such as the Gloucester Old Spot. We maintain a calendar to track the sows’ heat cycles so we can control mating in order to have piglets in the Well Bred Shed all year long.

One of the exclamations I often hear when visitors encounter our sows is “Look at that big fat pig!” It’s true that pigs are big and look “fat,” but our pigs are actually lean and trim. An overweight pig suffers from many of the same problems as overweight humans such as low fertility rates. As a result, the diet of our sows and boar are carefully regulated and watched.

One of the most frequent questions asked concerns the piglets themselves. “What happens to them?” After they are weaned at six to eight weeks most are sold to local farmers and individuals who raise them to become food for us to eat. Often 4-H students purchase our piglets for their local fair projects. Most of the time there is a waiting list for our piglets because there aren’t many farmers breeding pigs in the area and our pigs are known to be strong and healthy. That makes Farmpark an important part of the local food network.

There is a lot to pig care. It is similar to the care we give our pets. We feed them right, make sure they have good health care and treat them with the respect they deserve. Pigs do important things for us, no matter how fat or funny they look. Come visit the Well Bred Shed and learn more about the wonderful world of pigs!

