

By Kate Glastetter

You've probably heard it all before "Kunekune pigs are perfect pastured pigs!" But what does that really mean? Any hog will eat some grass if given the opportunity, just like any hog will root when the soil is there. What can we do as breeders to help our Kunekune herds succeed as pastured pigs?

Instead of getting lost in the heap of reasons why Kunekune pigs are awesome, let's touch on what a pasture really is. What makes up a good pig pasture specifically? First it's not just grass. Grass is never just grass. When you look closer it is orchard grass, rye grass, and Timothy grass just to name a few. There's so much more than grass when really studying a productive pasture. Think legumes. Think alfalfa, vetch, and the multiple clover varieties. We can't forget the common millets, oats, and barley. Not to mention the amaranth, chicory, burdock, brassicas, and even thistles. Flax and Field Peas are also favorites here on the farm. Sure a couple I named may be considered weeds by some, but the pigs don't need to know that! These plant varieties need to make up a high percentage of your pig pasture in order for your Kunekune herd to really thrive without much supplementation. Of course it's not all belly rubs and pig kisses. There are certain plants you'll want to make sure aren't included in your pastures as they may be toxic to pigs and other livestock. Fiddleneck, Lambs Quarters, and Pokeweed are a few toxic plants commonly found in pastures.

Supplementation can vary greatly from one operation to the next. Some prefer a store-bought, pelleted pig food or farm-grown grain mixed at their local mill. Here on our farm supplementation means pumpkins, watermelons, turnips, kale, apples, sweet potatoes, eggs, whey, and any other garden waste. Not to mention hay. I hear a lot of people having trouble with getting their pigs to actually eat hay. Given the choice they will pick pasture and grain over hay any day that's a given. However it's worth noting that not all hay is created equal. Stick with the soft, leafy hay, stay clear of coarse, stemmy hay. Your pigs will appreciate it. Clover hay is a good choice with its high protein content. Alfalfa is another hay type that will provide protein, but be careful, as with other high protein feeds too much can make Kunekune pigs fat. Of course, you shouldn't expect your pigs to live on nothing but hay. They need more calories, so adding some pellets or garden scraps is a good idea.

Now that forage varieties are out there we can't forget about pasture health. You can grow the best forage available but if you don't care for your pastures none of it will last for long. Here on the farm we are big believers in the rotational grazing systems. Fencing our pastures into multiple paddocks split creates different grazing areas. Rotating the pigs from one area to the next after varying amounts of time, allows the farmer to focus pigs on some areas while allowing the pasture to rest and recover in others. We like to rotate our herd every other week or so depending on the growing season and weather, but there is more to a rotational grazing system than just the split grazing paddocks. Here on the farm we have something called a sacrifice paddock. This is usually located at a high traffic area, and the focal point of the grazing paddocks. This is where the pigs are kept when the weather and the growing season make the grazing paddocks most vulnerable to destruction. For instance during the rainy season when all our pastures are water logged, instead of allowing our pigs the opportunity to root up the saturated soil, they are kept in the sacrifice paddock until the pasture can dry out a bit. When the summer heat is at its worst, the grass has stopped growing, and the pigs are all about making wallows to cool off. Instead of allowing them to wallow up our grazing paddocks and stomp down the dormant grass we hold them in the sacrifice paddock every other week or so to give the pasture an extra break.

Of course green grazing pastures aren't everything. You don't necessarily need to go out and clear every tree so the pigs can graze it all. In fact if you have woodlots scattered around the farm your pigs will be more than happy to snuffle through them as well. Chestnut, oak, and pecan are a few trees that nut mass beneficial to pigs. Mulberry, honey locust, and persimmon trees are favorites here on the farm, as well as, popular fruit trees such as apple, peach, and pear. Of course, special care should be taken so that pigs are not allowed to remain on these woodlots for extend periods of time. We simply turn the pigs into these trees when the acorns or other tree goodies have fallen to the ground. Once the pigs have gleaned all the nuts or fruits available at that time, it is strongly recommended you remove them to prevent unnecessary damage to the soil and tree roots. A word of warning, stay clear of cherry tree varieties. Wilted leaves can be deadly to livestock.

Truly, there is so much more material on pastures and grazing operations than this rough overview. We could fill a book with all the great information. Lucky for you all far more talented writers than I already have! I strongly recommend picking up a few books on animal nutrition focusing on foraging and grazing with pasture and even woodlot management details. You won't regret it, your pigs and their pasture will thank you.



