



Heirloom pigs



By ANN CLIFF

We've been talking in previous issues about rare and minority breeds of farm livestock and now, it's time to take a look at pigs. Attractive, intelligent outdoor pigs are a pleasure to look at and most of them are nice to know.

The hardy coloured breeds of pig are ideally suited to small mixed farms, but they have been neglected for about forty years. Since the commercial pig industry went indoors and went intensive, producers have demanded white, slimline pigs, docile animals that will accept confinement. Specialist breeders developed hybrids that grow quickly. Striped, spotted, ginger and black pigs were out.

Sadly – or perhaps happily for them - the traditional breed of pig, in spite of its variety, was the wrong shape, the wrong colour and definitely the wrong temperament. It is a forager, descended from a scavenger. Medieval European pigs lived mainly on garbage and kept the villages clear of rubbish. They liked a varied diet

and plenty of room to wander, including into the forest when the beech and oak were dropping seeds for them to eat.

There was no place for such an independent and resourceful animal in specialist pig systems. Fortunately, a handful of breeders and some small farmers have kept the old breeds against the trend, preserving their genes for the future in free range systems that help to maintain the hardiness and vigour of their ancestors. And it seems that perhaps their day has come. There is world wide alarm about the loss of 'biodiversity' and more value is being placed on forgotten breeds of livestock, just the same as on heirloom tomato varieties.

There are good practical reasons, too, for keeping

ABOVE: AN ELUSIVE BERKSHIRE.

RIGHT TOP: LARGE BLACK BOAR.
 RIGHT CENTRE: SADDLEBACK LITTER, THE SOW IS
 FERNLEIGH ADORABELLE
 RIGHT BOTTOM: _

free range pigs. Consumers are beginning to look more carefully at food quality and once they try it, to appreciate the 'real' taste of free range meat. Many people are also concerned about animal welfare and like to know that the animals concerned have had happy lives. The butchers' prejudice against colour was mainly because they couldn't sell meat with black pigment in the skin, but now, a touch of colour guarantees authenticity!

Just as they are about to disappear, there may be a new, gourmet role for the old breeds of pig. But there are perilously few pure bloodlines left of the type of pig that will thrive in outdoor conditions. New breeders are needed. Even keeping just one or two sows will help, as long as they are kept pure and not crossed with other breeds. Crossing, scrambling the genes, will lead to loss of the pure breeds. Once mixed, they can't be unscrambled and there are too few of them to risk the loss at the moment.

This sort of pig keeping makes a wonderful hobby, or perhaps will provide a part income. Large Black, Tamworth, Wessex Saddleback and Berkshire pigs are all vulnerable, still at risk of extinction in their pure state. Originally from Britain, these breeds are also kept in Australia and New Zealand and some in USA, but numbers are going down.

Representatives of all four breeds live happily on Bronwyn and Michael Cowan's farm in Gippsland, Victoria. Bronwyn has what is probably the largest herd of Large Blacks in Australia and possibly the biggest group of Tamworth pigs. "My primary reason is to preserve the genetics," she told me.

Bronwyn has been pig breeding for ten years and obviously loves her pigs; they snuffle up to her affectionately, looking for attention. But she says sternly, "You have to be one jump ahead of them. They need to know who's in charge." She disapproves of people keeping pigs as pets. A cute little weaner will inevitably end up as a huge, unmanageable sow or boar and there will be tears all round; it doesn't work.

The property of just over 100 acres is ringed by shelter belts, all planted by the Cowans, who have owned the land for more than 20 years. Any management system for outdoor pigs has to be worked out carefully; they're not the same as cattle and sheep. Pigs eat everything. They do graze of course, but they also scabble up the roots of plants and reduce a grass paddock to bare earth. They are good at weed control, but can't be left on one patch for too long.

Bronwyn's system allows for this, because she can move the pigs around. She uses temporary small paddocks, fenced off by three strand electric fencing that can easily be dismantled and put up somewhere else.

Pigs need a dry warm bed at night, so each sow and each group of gilts (young females) or young boars has a moveable shelter with a wooden floor and dry bedding. The watering system is also moveable. When a paddock





ABOVE: BRONWYN COWAN WITH A SHY BERKSHIRE.

is eaten out and the pigs and their house have been moved on, the bare ground is sown with oats in winter or millet in summer. With the fertiliser of the pig manure the grain grows quickly and makes a nutritious fodder crop when the pigs come round to that area again.

The pig menu consists of grazing, plus pig meal – about 1 kg a day for a mature animal. Bronwyn says that growing pigs can probably live on grazing because the fodder grain crops provide protein, but the sows with litters need extra meal.

Rain is the biggest headache for Bronwyn. Outdoor pigs are suited to dry climates and can reduce wet

paddocks to a sea of mud. Her part of Gippsland tends to have a high rainfall but on the rather damp day I visited, there was very little mud and a sea of green grass. In some places millet grew tall, like a forest for little pigs to play in.

All the breeds have the same treatment, but they still have different characteristics.

Large Blacks are friendly and docile; the big floppy ears prevent them from seeing too much. Saddlebacks seem to get on with their own affairs quite placidly and the Berkshires wander over for a chat. So do Tamworths, but they are wanderers. Bronwyn thinks the Tamworth is the closest to a feral pig of all the breeds. They like to visit other pens and race up the laneways and it's obvious that these inquisitive characters would not fit in to an indoor, intensive system.

To preserve the valuable genes of these pigs, Bronwyn carries a higher proportion than usual of young stock. The farm is not certified as organic, but it's run on sustainable and ethical lines.

The sows are first bred at about 16 months to give them time to mature. They farrow outdoors, but just before and for a few nights after the birth, Bronwyn shuts them in the hut at night, so that the babies don't wander out and get lost.

The piglets are weaned from the mother at 12 weeks (commercial pigs usually at 3 weeks) and the boars are not castrated. There is no regular medication and no need to dose with minerals when the pigs live out on the land. About every six months they are injected for parasite control.

Apart from the sale of young stock for breeding, Bronwyn has established a free range meat company called The Gypsy Pig, from the name of one of her blood lines.



A TAMWORTH SOW.



ABOVE: _

The meat is prepared for sale and some of it is smoked by an expert butcher. It is sold in a local fresh food shop and in farmer's markets in Melbourne. Customers appreciate the quality of meat that has come from animals living as natural a life as possible.

One of the Wessex Saddlebacks with a young litter I met was Fernleigh Adorable, who came from Fernleigh Farms at Bullato, not far from Daylesford, Victoria. I spoke to Fiona Chambers of Fernleigh Farms, who is the president of The Rare Breeds Trust of Australia (RBTA) and the author of an important report about the status of rare breeds in Australia.

In the report Fiona Chambers lists the four breeds of pig kept by Bronwyn as the most endangered in Australia. Sadly, she says that we've already lost several breeds including the Yorkshire White and the Welsh. (I worked with both these breeds in England.) She says there is no government or industry monitoring the status of pig breeds. The other issue that concerns her is the widespread use of artificial insemination, which leads to the narrowing of gene pools in farm animals.

At Fernleigh Farms the Chambers family breed Wessex Saddleback pigs as well as a rare breed of sheep and one of poultry. They grow organic vegetables as part of their sustainable farm system, moving the pigs round the farm and managing for improvement of the land. They also sell free range meat at farmers' markets, which seems to be the usual outlet for meat from the minority breeds.

Fiona also runs a 'Pig Day Out' workshop for people who would like hands-on experience of managing pigs.

Bronwyn Cowan and Fiona Chambers both work extremely hard to preserve these valuable and rare animals. We can't all keep pigs, but there are two things we can do to help: join the Rare Breeds Trust of Australia, and buy free range meat.



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