

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing interest in managing woodlands using foraging animals. Pigs have the ability to manage woodland very well under certain situations and are gaining in popularity as woodland managers. Pigs can easily be used to clear the 'brash' and undergrowth of woodland to help regeneration of saplings, woodland pasture and small herbaceous plants. This same clearance can also be used to help movement and access through the woodland for gamekeepers, beaters and woodland managers by creating tracks. However, as their role is mainly as a scarifying tool, they cannot be maintained in woodlands all year round. Pigs have also been used for the removal of invasive Rhododendrons in Scotland. Such practices allow for reductions in both pesticides and machinery in woodland management.

BREEDS

The correct breed choice is a key factor when using pigs in a woodland situation. Woodland pigs must be hardy, good foragers and have some resistance to sunburn. Pigs will be outside for long periods where the weather may be harsh, especially in the winter months. The desirable traits are more associated with the traditional pig breeds such as the Tamworth, the Berkshire, the British Saddleback, the Duroc, the Gloucester Old Spot, and the Welsh.

STOCKING AND SHELTER

Pigs must be provided with a shelter in each foraging area. The shelter can be made from a variety of materials, from large straw bales with a plywood or box-profile roof through to specially designed pig arcs.

There are no definite recommendations for stocking rates of pigs in woods as in many cases it depends on the management objective. However, the very minimum is two animals as pigs are very social animals. Pigs should be kept either in family groups or in same age and sex groups. They should be kept in the woodland until approximately two thirds of the site is scarified, then moved on to avoid boredom on the part of the pigs. Signs of boredom include escaping pigs. Pigs should be fed a feed supplement even when in the woodland to ensure a balanced diet. Supplementary feed can be used to encourage the pigs into areas of vegetation where they have not been active. It should be noted that the feeding of domestic or catering waste to pigs is prohibited under the Animals By-products Act 1999.

The methods described here apply to the use of pigs in the sensitive management of woodland. Pigs can be very destructive creatures, particularly large pigs which can destroy ground flora, shrubs even mature trees and if left in the same area for too long. They can also destroy archaeological remains like charcoal hearths which are found in many woodlands. Keeping a small number of small pigs and moving them regularly can be highly effective in controlling bramble and bracken in woodland, but it is not a commercially sound way to produce pig meat.

Do's:

- Select hardy breeds or crossbreeds, e.g.: Tamworth, Berkshire, Gloucester Old Spot.
- Start with weaners of 8 weeks and enclose them in a small area, 0.1ha, using electric fencing. They must have a dry shelter, constant clean water and supplementary feeding every day. Although electric fencing can be used to contain the pigs within selected temporary areas, the whole area will need to be strongly fenced with pig netting.
- The pigs need to be checked regularly and be prepared to move the fence and shelter regularly to prevent damage to trees and shrubs. This can soon get out of hand.



Tamworth pigs foraging

Don'ts:

- Keep a pig on its own. They are sociable creatures.
- Expect to get the best from both the pigs and the woodland. Pigs fed a full ration will not forage with the same enthusiasm as those kept on tight rations. Based on experience at Fairbirch, a pig which would finish at 24 weeks in a pen would finish at 30 weeks in the wood.
- Let pigs forage at will in a woodland. They are highly selective and will often ignore the areas where you want them to forage. Careful management with temporary electric fences
- Expect pigs to tackle large swathes of bracken. Pigs can be very effective in clearing bracken but the fronds in particular contain a toxin which induces a vitamin B deficiency that can prove fatal. Supplementary feeding would be recommended, but veterinary advice should always be sought. Making a start in Autumn and Winter avoids the growing fronds.

Used properly, pigs can be highly effective in disrupting dense bramble growth in woodlands for a period. Depending on the size of the pigs and the nature of the ground cover they may achieve this in anything from a few days to a couple of weeks before they need to be moved. Regrowth is inevitable but the open conditions created will allow trees and other seedlings to get started. For these to thrive some thinning of the woodland canopy will probably be needed to allow light in. This will require a felling licence unless it is part of an approved management plan in which case the fencing and thinning may be eligible for grant aid. See www.forestry.gov.uk or www.coedcymru.org.uk

With thanks to Vic Lilygreen and Colin Owen for their experience of using pigs in Fairbirch Wood, Gower.

Further information:

www.pigsinwoodlands.co.uk