

# SELECTING YOUR SHOW PIG

# Selecting Your Show Pig

*Selecting your show pig will be one of the most interesting experiences you will have in your pig project. Many times, it will be very rewarding; other times, it may be frustrating. You'll probably need some help to select your pig(s) for the first year or two.*

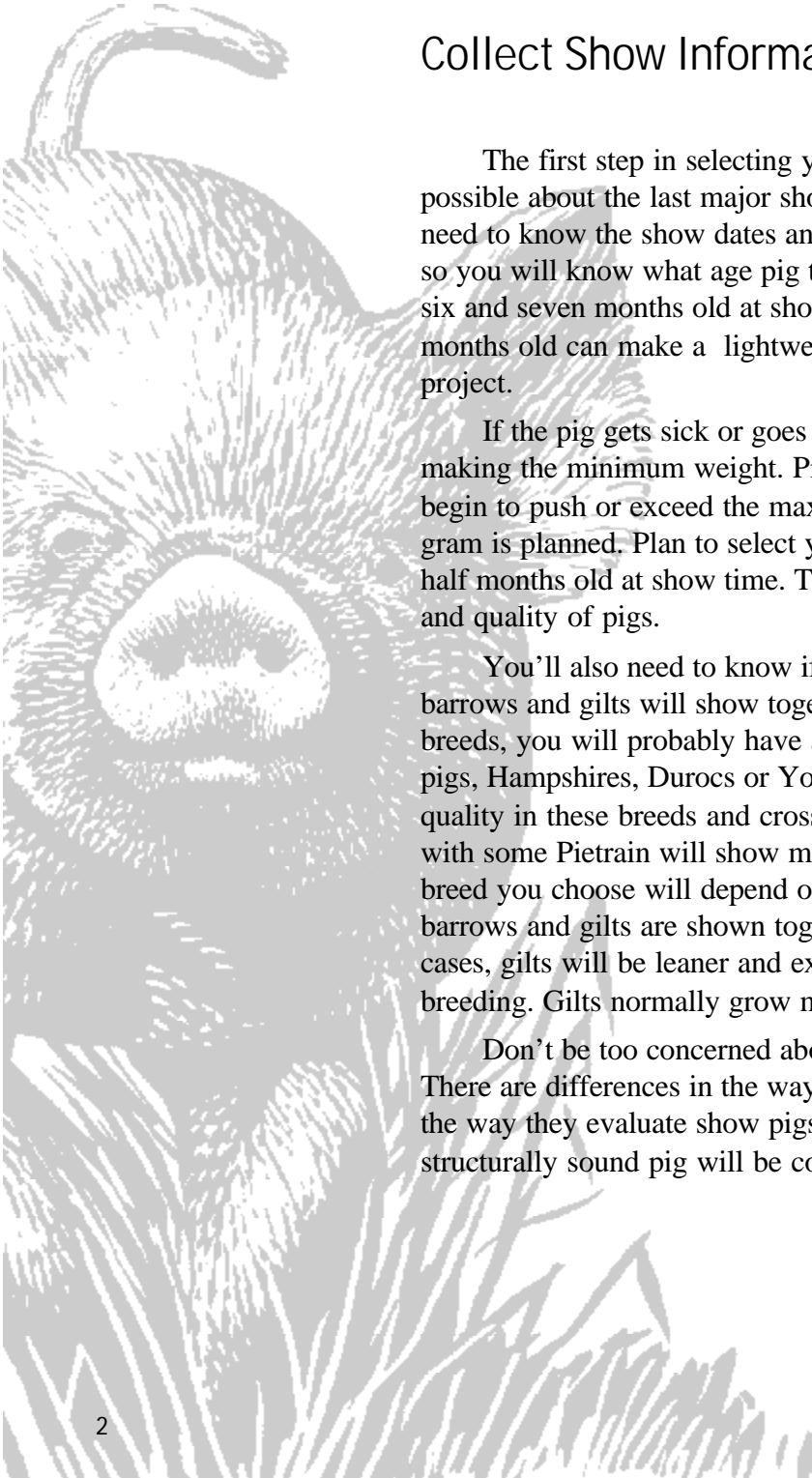
## Collect Show Information

The first step in selecting your pig is to get as much information as possible about the last major show in which you will be participating. You'll need to know the show dates and the minimum and maximum show weights so you will know what age pig to select. Most show pigs should be between six and seven months old at show time. Pigs as young as five and one-half months old can make a lightweight class if there are no setbacks during the project.

If the pig gets sick or goes off feed for a few days, it may have a problem making the minimum weight. Pigs older than seven months on show day begin to push or exceed the maximum weight unless a special feeding program is planned. Plan to select your show pig so it will be about six and one-half months old at show time. The age can vary a few days based on the age and quality of pigs.

You'll also need to know if the pigs will show by breeds and if both barrows and gilts will show together. If your last major show does not show by breeds, you will probably have a better selection when choosing crossbred pigs, Hampshires, Durocs or Yorkshires. There seems to be more pigs of show quality in these breeds and crosses than among other breeds. Crossbred pigs with some Pietrain will show more muscle development at a young age. The breed you choose will depend on personal preference and availability. If barrows and gilts are shown together, gilts usually have the advantage. In most cases, gilts will be leaner and exhibit more muscle than barrows of the same breeding. Gilts normally grow more slowly than barrows, however.

Don't be too concerned about who will be judging your last major show. There are differences in the way judges evaluate show pigs, but judges change the way they evaluate show pigs from time to time. A heavily muscled, lean, structurally sound pig will be competitive when driven before most judges.



# Sources of Pigs

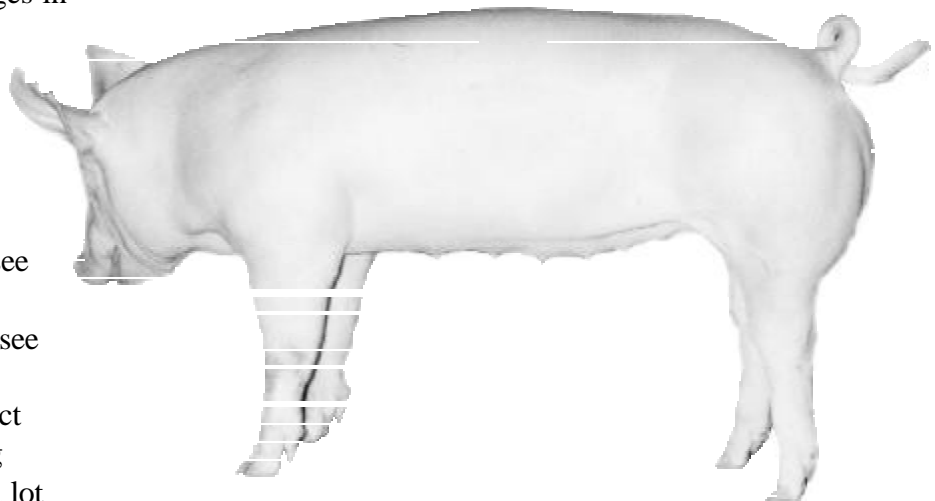
After you have determined the age and breed of pig you want, your next step is to decide where you will select your pig. There are three major sources of show pigs. Some swine exhibitors raise their own pigs and therefore can select from the pigs on their farm. Selecting a pig from your farm will allow you to take “first pick,” and there will not be any stress on the pig caused by hauling. Also, you will know the age and breeding of the pig and what can be expected later. Some possible disadvantages of selecting pigs on your own farm are: pigs farrowed too early or too late, poor quality pigs or few pigs from which to select.

If your farm doesn't have any pigs, there are two major places to buy them. The easiest way is to select and purchase your pig at a show pig sale. Each year many sales offer show pigs that are the right age for the major shows. The advantages of a show pig sale include the convenience of seeing many pigs from different breeders in one place at one time and being able to see the pigs clean and walking on solid flooring. The disadvantages of show pig sales may be that the pigs sell at higher prices than you are willing to pay. Also some breeders may “fit” their pigs for the sale and you cannot see the real pig. The sale also increases stress on a pig. This can affect future growth and productivity.

The other major source of purchasing show pigs is directly from the show pig breeder's farm. Many breeders will let you visit their farms and make your selection. When purchasing from a farm, you will be able to see all of the pigs with a natural fill and may have an opportunity to see their sires and dams. You'll be able to get valuable information from the breeder about each litter that may help predict what the pigs will do in the future. Most of the time, the price of the pigs will be known ahead of time, and you will know if the price is in the range you are willing to pay. Some breeders will reduce the price when you buy more than one pig.

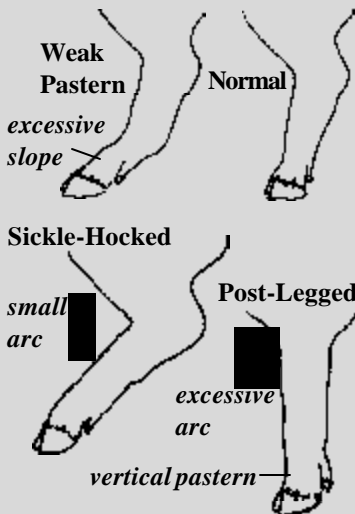
There are some disadvantages in purchasing directly from the breeder's farm. Many times the pigs are on wire or slatted floors, and it is impossible to see how soundly the pig walks. Sometimes there are many pigs in a small pen, and it is hard to see the pigs. On some farms, the lighting is poor and it is hard to see the pigs. In a few cases, the pigs may not be clean; this will detract from the real pig. Also, traveling from farm to farm may require a lot of time and expense.

Ideal Market Hog

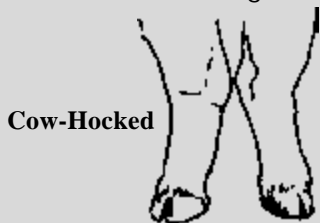


# Soundness of Feet and Legs

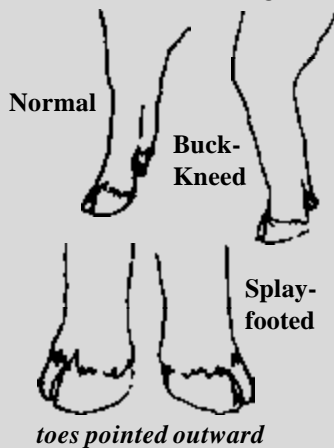
Side View of Rear Leg



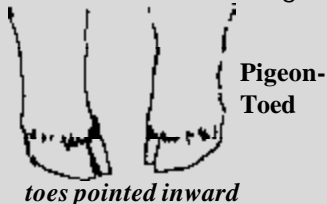
Front View of Hind Legs



Side View of Front Leg



Front View of Front Legs



Inside Toes Shorter Than Outside Toes



# Selection Criteria

The final step in selecting your show pig is to find one that has all of the qualities you consider important in a show pig. There are many traits to look for in selecting a show pig. The major traits include:

- soundness
- muscling
- free of excess fat
- width of body
- frame size
- general appearance

These six characteristics are important, and a good show pig will combine all six.

## Soundness

Soundness is very important for a pig to grow, develop and move correctly. The pig's soundness will determine, to some extent, the amount of voluntary exercise that will affect muscle and fat development. Pigs that are not sound will not place as high as sound pigs in the show ring. When selecting for soundness, check to see if the front legs are straight when viewed from the front. The toes should point straight forward and each toe should be the same size. When viewed from the side, check the knees to be sure they aren't protruding forward (buck-kneed), that the pasterns have some slope and the toes are in front of the legs. Be sure to avoid long, weak pasterns.

The rear legs of the pig should be straight when viewed from the rear of the pig. Avoid selecting pigs that are wider at their hocks than at their toes. Pigs that are "bowed out" at their hocks will have more problems as they get heavier. From the side view, the rear legs should have a slight angle at the hock. Pigs completely straight in their hocks (post-legged) are at a very high risk of becoming lame. Pigs with too much "set" or angle to their hocks (sickle-hocked) will have problems walking correctly. Watch the pig walk from the side, front and rear to see if the legs move in a straightforward direction and that it places its feet on the ground softly. Some have a tendency to throw their rear feet out as they walk and hit the ground hard. This is a sign of unsoundness that usually gets more severe with age and weight. Pigs should take long, smooth strides as they walk.

A level top is important for appearance and soundness. A level-topped pig will have a more correct slope to its shoulder and legs and have an advantage in ease of movement. A steep slope to the shoulder will cause the front legs to be too straight, and the pig usually cannot move its legs far enough to the front when walking to be long strided. This also is associated with pigs that are too straight on their pasterns, and it causes more problems at a heavier weight.

Another place to check for soundness on the pig is at the back of the shoulder where the shoulder joins the rib. Pigs that have a weak or “broken” top line back of their shoulder will usually have this problem at show time. This condition will be penalized in the show ring.

## Muscle

Muscle is important because it is the major end product of a market pig; that’s the part we eat. Two important things to remember when evaluating muscle are the amount and type of muscle. A pig should have all of the muscle it can handle and move easily. The muscle should be long and smooth. Avoid pigs that have short, bunched muscle. It can cause problems walking and make them short strided.

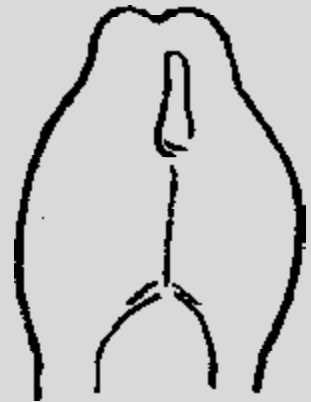
When evaluating a pig for muscle, start with a rear view. The most important indication of the total muscle in a pig is the width in the center part of the ham. The wider the better. A pig should be wider through the center and lower part of the ham than the top (rump) part. The muscling in the ham should be long and tie in to the hocks. Check to see how the inside and outside muscle is shaped and if it goes down the ham to the hock. The legs should be wide apart and straight. Watch the pig walk away from you, and be sure there is ample width between its rear legs, including ample width between its feet. Lightly muscled pigs will generally be narrow through the lower part of their hams. When they walk away from you, their feet will be close together, oftentimes almost striking each other as they walk. The rump should be long, wide and level with a high tail setting. These characteristics of a pig’s rump seldom change as the pig grows.

As you evaluate the loin of the pig, remember that it is the most expensive cut of the pig and it should have lots of muscle. A heavily muscled loin will be wide with a deep groove down the center and rounded on the edges (butterfly shape). The groove should be pronounced enough so that if a golf ball were placed in the middle of the loin, it would either roll to the pig’s head or tail and would not roll off the side. A lightly muscled pig will have the shape of an inverted “V” like the roof of a house. Move to the front of the pig to check the head for width between the eyes, width of shoulders and chest floor. Heavily muscled pigs will be wide in their shoulders and chest floor. As you move to the side view, check the length of rump and ham as well as levelness of the rump. Select a pig that is long and level in the rump with a high tail setting. You want a long ham that extends well into the side of the pig. Also check the pig’s width and length of loin.

## Free of excess fat

Free of excess fat on show day is critical. Excess fat on the finished product is not desirable; therefore, you want a pig with very little fat. You, as the feeder, can do more to control this selection criterion than any of the others, if you plan ahead. Naturally, you want to select a pig that has the genetic potential and appearance of staying lean, but feeding and management can also affect fat deposition.

## Degrees of Muscling



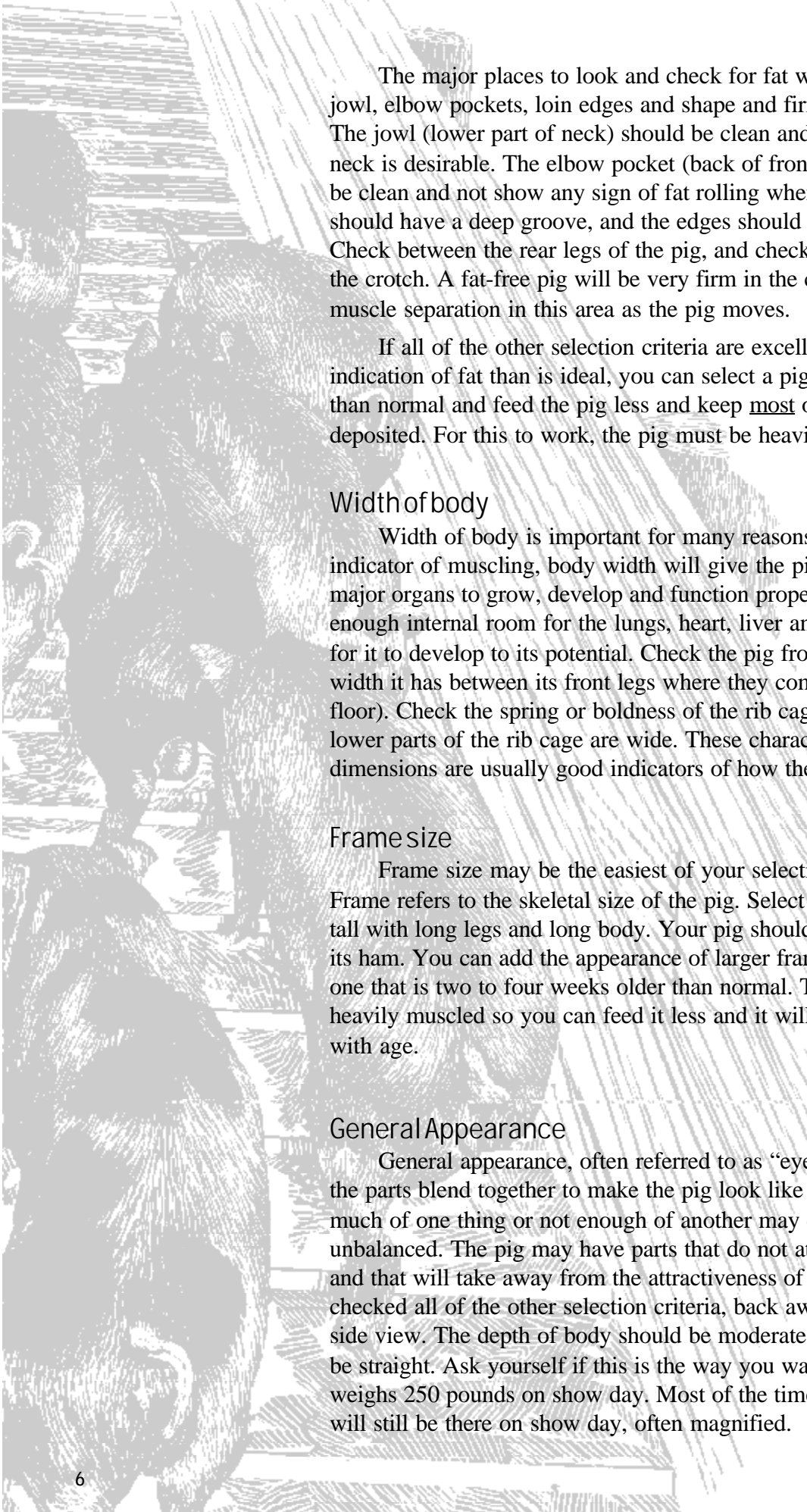
Heavy Muscling



Moderate Muscling



Light Muscling



The major places to look and check for fat when selecting your pig are jowl, elbow pockets, loin edges and shape and firmness between the rear legs. The jowl (lower part of neck) should be clean and tight. A long, clean, small neck is desirable. The elbow pocket (back of front leg on the shoulder) should be clean and not show any sign of fat rolling when the pig walks. The loin should have a deep groove, and the edges should be rounded and not square. Check between the rear legs of the pig, and check the firmness and fullness in the crotch. A fat-free pig will be very firm in the crotch area and have visible muscle separation in this area as the pig moves.

If all of the other selection criteria are excellent, but you see a little more indication of fat than is ideal, you can select a pig two to four weeks older than normal and feed the pig less and keep most of the excess fat from being deposited. For this to work, the pig must be heavily muscled.

### Width of body

Width of body is important for many reasons. In addition to being an indicator of muscling, body width will give the pig additional room for the major organs to grow, develop and function properly. The pig must have enough internal room for the lungs, heart, liver and stomach to function fully for it to develop to its potential. Check the pig from the front to see how much width it has between its front legs where they come out of the body (chest floor). Check the spring or boldness of the rib cage to see if the center and lower parts of the rib cage are wide. These characteristics of internal body dimensions are usually good indicators of how the pig will grow.

### Frame size

Frame size may be the easiest of your selection criteria to evaluate. Frame refers to the skeletal size of the pig. Select a pig that is long in its neck, tall with long legs and long body. Your pig should be long from its shoulder to its ham. You can add the appearance of larger frame size to a pig by selecting one that is two to four weeks older than normal. The pig must be extremely heavily muscled so you can feed it less and it will develop more frame size with age.

### General Appearance

General appearance, often referred to as “eye appeal,” is the way all of the parts blend together to make the pig look like the perfect show pig. Too much of one thing or not enough of another may cause the pig to appear unbalanced. The pig may have parts that do not attach to other parts properly, and that will take away from the attractiveness of the pig. After you have checked all of the other selection criteria, back away from the pig and get a side view. The depth of body should be moderate and the bottom line should be straight. Ask yourself if this is the way you want your pig to look when it weighs 250 pounds on show day. Most of the time, the blemishes you see now will still be there on show day, often magnified.

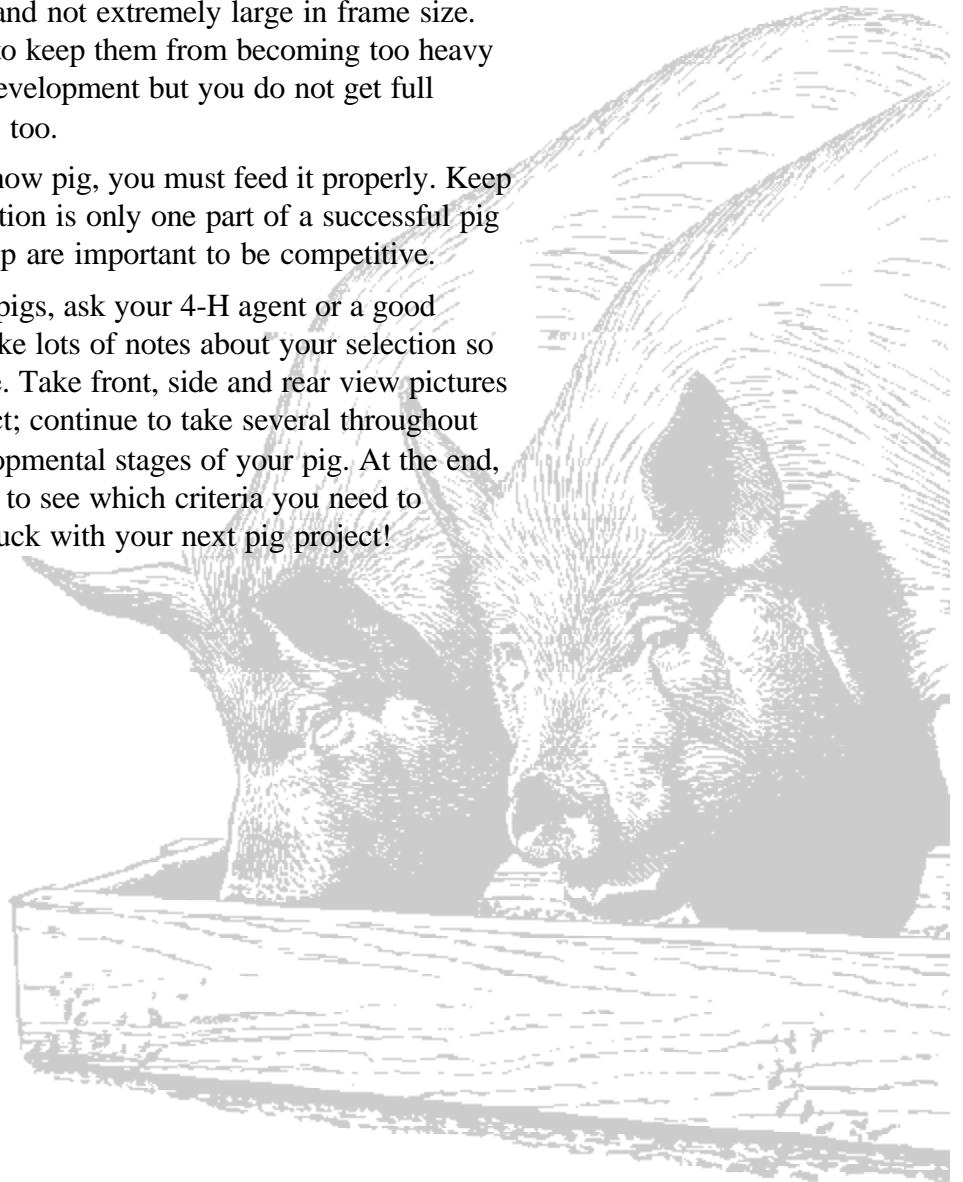
# Summary

There are two important things to remember as you select a show pig. First, there is not a perfect show pig; second, pigs change as they grow. Do your homework. Gather as much information as you can about your final show and have a plan for the age, breed and type of pig you want to select. Try to select pigs that have the genetic potential to be good show quality from breeding stock with good show history. You may not find a good pig at your first selection site. Start looking early so you will still have time to look at other places. You won't find a pig that is perfect in every criteria, but be sure it is sound and above average in as many areas as possible.

If you find excellent pigs that are younger than ideal, these pigs must be very large framed and have absolutely no signs of excess fat. Pigs that are just average in frame size and leanness will not be competitive in the show ring if they are younger than six months on show day. Pigs that are older than ideal should be extremely heavily muscled and not extremely large in frame size. When you feed pigs less than normal to keep them from becoming too heavy for the show, you still get full frame development but you do not get full muscle development. Fat is decreased, too.

Once you have selected a good show pig, you must feed it properly. Keep the pig comfortable and healthy. Selection is only one part of a successful pig project. Management and showmanship are important to be competitive.

If you are new at selecting show pigs, ask your 4-H agent or a good friend with experience to help you. Take lots of notes about your selection so you can make improvements next time. Take front, side and rear view pictures of your pig when you start your project; continue to take several throughout the project. Use these to see the developmental stages of your pig. At the end, compare your pig to the champion pig to see which criteria you need to change on your next selection. Good luck with your next pig project!





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