

GUEST WRITER

Berkshire, The Best Breed For The Diversified Farm

words by Ryan Burnette



Photo courtesy of Ryan Burnette

Pedigree and longevity are valued traits. For over 200 years my family has tilled and worked the same land in rural Kentucky. While we have evolved over the years and many things are different, one thing that hasn't changed is the struggle to make a living on a farm. This is a struggle that is not unique to us or our state. The days are gone when our farm in the Bluegrass could rely on only corn or hemp or tobacco to pay the farm gate receipts. As the years have passed, we too have continued to adapt our farm practices to make them more resilient. Our operation, Hickory Grove Farm, is now diversified with commodity crops, produce, meat,

eggs, and honey with plans for an event space and on-farm store. We sell our products directly to consumers and Berkshires are and have been a vital component in transitioning from mono-crop to our success and profitability in diversification.

I fell into breeding and growing Berkshires in a very roundabout way. I was a happy market vegetable grower with some chickens who were being overrun with Johnson Grass. Being at the time transitional organic, I was very limited to what options I had available to me to combat it. In doing some research

I came across several articles and message board threads suggesting that pigs could be used to root up the rhizomes and help control it. I thought to myself why not give it a try. Best case, they help control my Johnson Grass, worse case I get to stock my freezer with homegrown pork. With that decision made, I began looking for a breed of a pig that would best fit into my system with no real interest or thought of selling pork commercially. I landed on Berkshires simply because they were a heritage breed that had a reputation for taste. (we will come back to this lucky accident later)

One of my first goals in adding pigs back onto the farm was that they needed to fit into the pasture-raised system. We already had pasture-raised chickens, what I like to call the gateway drug of bringing animals back onto the farm, so we had experience rotating animals on pasture. Being a heritage breed pig and reading other people's experiences, I felt that Berkshires would do well in that system. They are hardy and even though we give them free choice to a regular hog ration they also forage very well and dig up and eat the Johnson Grass, their original job! Also, we use shade structures but with the pigs foraging most of the day they spend a lot of time out in the sun. With their dark skin, we have never seen any issues with our pigs getting sunburnt. Most of the year we also farrow on pasture which our Berks have excelled at. We even A.I. our gilts and sows out in the fields.

Going hand in hand with raising on pasture, we also did not want to invest a lot of money into infrastructure.

This small amount of infrastructure needed to start your operation is also a plus for the diversified farmer. For our pigs, we rotate them around pasture using three strands of electric fence, mobile feeders, waterers, and shade structures. We try to keep our mobile structures small enough to move with a truck or small tractor. Most of ours were built using freely available extension plans that are easily found on the internet. Unlike cattle, you don't need a headgate or large handling facilities. There is also no need to go out and buy a bunch of specialized equipment or build a bunch of infrastructures starting out.

Another reason we like having Berkshires on the farm is that they are like extra workers happily giving back. At the end of every season, we run our herd back through the vegetable fields. They do a great job of cleaning up any vegetables that didn't make the grade or were missed during harvest. They also add back fertilizer to the fields and help turn over and aerate the soil, they are our natural rototillers. Our fields also seem to be more productive since we have added the pigs into the rotation. The soil also seems healthier.

Finally, the Berkshire breed has a very well-deserved reputation for taste and looks. The original reason we chose Berkshires has been a blessing in disguise. The meat practically sells itself! Our Berkshires has turned into a very nice year-round revenue stream for the farm. When competing against large grocery Berkshire pork sets you apart. A lot of times, you only get one chance to turn a person into a repeat customer. Not only does the taste bring people back but even when people don't remember our farm name they ask our market manager who sells the pork that's "redder than normal". The fact that Berkshire pork looks different than other pork is also a plus.

Our success with the Berkshire breed will cause give others the motivation to give them a try. They check a lot of the boxes that customers are wanting today and are well adapted for the smaller diversified farm. Start small and as we said before, worse case, you get a whole freezer full of delicious pork! •



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Hickory Grove Farms
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