

Red Pig, Black Pig

Karma Glos
Kingbird Farm

Sophie is that rich russet-red, like a fox's fur. The tips of her bristles glow golden orange and the hair around her long snout is burnished copper. Even the tuft on her curly tail is a different shade, with a peppering of stiff black hairs. The thick coat covering her long, plump body soaks up the afternoon sun and shines under flecks of straw. She stretches out long, strong legs with ivory-colored trotters and blinks her ruby eyelashes. She squints, shutting her eyes tight against the sunlight, and groans contentedly into the bedding. Beside her, Ella grunts in acknowledgement. Ella lies back-to-back with Sophie, equally satisfied in the warmth of the sun. But Ella doesn't need to clamp her eyes shut against the glare. Her giant flop ears not only muffle the sounds of the sow-house, they also completely obscure her eyes. These elephantine appendages also tend to make Ella a bit more docile than Sophie and her redheaded sisters. Ella nestles up to Sophie with her long, lean body and tucks in her short legs with their impossibly tiny trotters. Her coat is matt black with a soft, silky texture. She sports some stiff bristles on her forehead and tail tuft, but the majority of her hair is as smooth as a horse's coat.

These two sows, though both British bacon breeds, have very different characteristics. We originally chose these breeds in order to determine which one would suit our needs. Both types are known to be good free-range pasture hogs, but they have some significant differences. Sophie the Tamworth is a good-footed, rugged pig with ample winter hair for cold climates. Her ears are prick (erect) so she can hear and see danger more quickly, and her snout is long for rooting and foraging. Ella the Large Black is a little more delicate in limb and definitely challenged visually and aurally by her enormous flop ears. Her skin and coat are dark to protect against the sun, and she does better in hot weather. Their contrasting attributes are the result of choices made by hog breeders who had different goals—or perhaps just different preferences.

A Brief History of Pigs

Pigs were one of the first animals to be domesticated. This may be because they have similar habits to humans. They are non-discriminating omnivores that will not only eat the same foods we eat, but most of what we throw out as well. They are

Recommended Reading

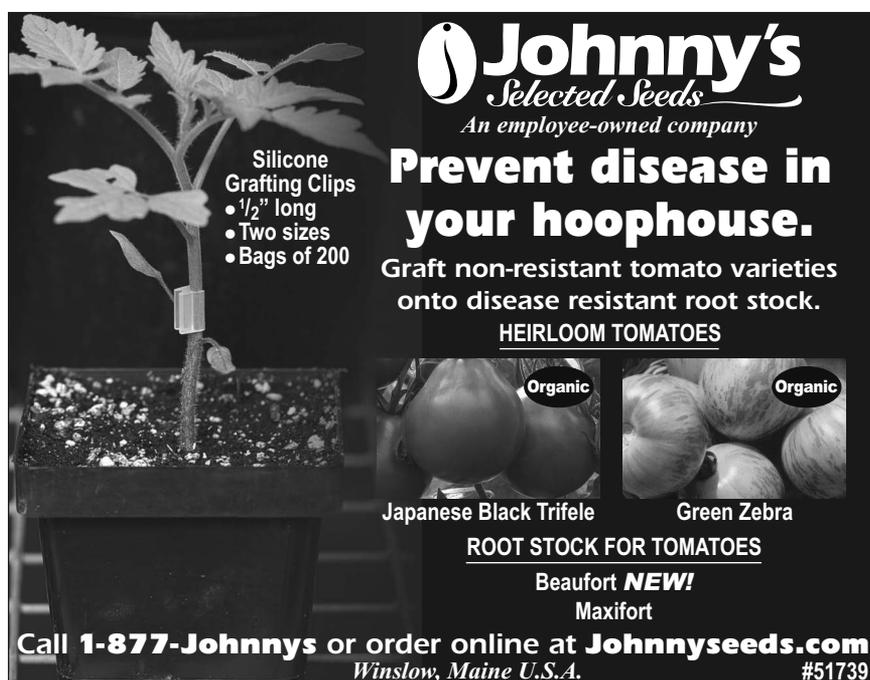
Pigs: A Handbook to the Breeds of the World, Valerie Porter, Cornell University Press, 1993.

The Whole Hog: Exploring the Extraordinary Potential of Pigs, Lyall Watson, Smithsonian Books, 2004.

also very accommodating, living in confined groups with few territorial disputes, and reproducing copiously.

The Eurasian wild boar is the most likely ancestor of the domestic pig. The wild boar is round-backed and long-legged with a small head and ears. It has a coarse, brownish coat and possesses a long, *straight* tail. Domestication and deliberate breeding brought about hogs with longer bodies, shorter legs, smaller heads, and sometimes even floppy ears. Since domesticated pigs no longer needed to be alert for fighting or running away from predators, they also became fatter and more docile.

There are now hundreds of recognized hog breeds and even more local varieties. Breed characteristics vary according to climate, habitat, and local demands. Breeds are identified by a combination of color, ear carriage, face shape, and general conformation. European breeds follow two distinct lines. The Celtic races of the North have narrow bodies, long heads, a bristled crest, large tusks, and long, floppy ears. The Iberian races of the South are smaller. Their bodies are smooth and compact, and they have long snouts, short tusks, erect ears, and dark, reddish coats. The northern breeds have seen great commercial success because they have better hams, a thicker belly (bacon), and less back fat. The southern breeds formed Italy's pastured herds (famous for their finely flavored and textured hams) and traveled with Spanish explorers to spread their genes to West Africa, the West Indies, and America. Breeders from the north of England preferred White pigs, and in the 18th and 19th centuries, the ideal pig was a large, puffy beast with an upturned nose and short legs. These pigs formed the basis for countless breeds, notably the English Landrace pigs. Today most British producers concentrate



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Sophie the Tamworth hog has a clear view of life at Kingbird Farm, while Ella the Large Black must take sidelong looks from behind her floppy ears. *Photo by Karma Glos*

on hybrids (crosses) of Large Whites, Large Blacks, British Landrace, Berkshire, Tamworth, and Middle White, which are suitable for the more confined style of modern hog raising.

Early American breeders had feral “razorback” hogs to work with, but also imported European breeds like the Black Hampshire and Yorkshire. The first local hybrid developed for the American market was a rangy black hog improved by the Shakers and eventually called the Poland China. Another, the Chester White, was developed along the Delaware River from English White pigs and Chinese pigs. The ginger-coated Duroc, which resembles the Tamworth, was developed and improved in New York from Iberian stock. These three American breeds and their hybrids have formed the basis for the lean, fast-growing, “other white meat” hogs that tolerate confinement and maximize production.

Farmers’ Favorites

Currently, free-range and organic producers in the U.S. use a mix of American breeds appropriate for range production

along with several British breeds like the Tamworth, Gloucester Old Spot, Berkshire, and Large Black. Larger range producers such as Niman Ranch prefer a breed called Farmer’s Hybrid due to the breed’s even growth and consistent size under free-range conditions. Unlike small producers who typically sell individual cuts directly to customers and can have some variation in size and quality, larger cooperatives or “labels” need to use a hog that meets more exact production standards.

No matter what a breed’s characteristics may be, each has its utility and appeal. In the end, the Tamworth appealed to me the most. Their rugged conformation and red coats protect them from the elements. Their alert ears and eyes allow them recognize and respond to events around them. Their long snouts and strong shoulders make powerful digging and foraging tools. And lastly, but certainly not least, their muscling provides streaky bacon, succulent ham, and plump chops. These beautiful red hogs fit my bill, though I certainly admire the rest!

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