

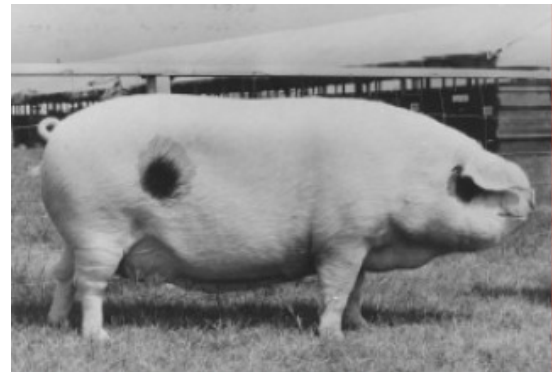
Choosing Your Breeding Gilts

In previous issues of Spot Press we have looked at pedigree GOS selection (Autumn 20) and we have looked at Your Boar His Importance, Influence & Selection (Summer 20) so we thought it was time to look at the selection of your Breeding Gilts.

Although we have seen the importance of the boar in our pig herd as supplying the 'femaleness' of his daughters. It is equally needful to remember that to produce the highest class of animal the desirable qualities and points of the sow should be as conspicuous as those of the boar. The qualities of the boar must find their fitting counterpart in the maternal appearance of the sow and the standard of excellence in the sow should for the most part be as part identical to that of the boar, the only difference being she should show a more roomy aspect and strong back which will stand her in good stead during the later period of gestation, when the weight of a large litter of piglets imposes upon her considerable strain.

When looking for gilts the buyer or breeder must look for pigs that are :

1. Of good constitution and conformation
2. Prolificacy
3. Good mothers
4. Quiet and docile
5. Economic converters of food
6. Capable of producing pigs yielding high grade carcasses



All the above traits are well known attributes of the Gloucestershire Old Spots breed.

Constitution and conformation are inherited. Evidence that a gilt has inherited a good sound constitution is to be found in the performance of her ancestors and their ability to stand the strain of bearing two litters a year for three or more years indicates that they had a good constitution. As we have mentioned in previous articles it is very difficult to select breeding pigs at eight weeks old. Conformation changes as the gilt grows so selection must start with the choosing of which dam they are to come from and after farrowing keep the litter under careful observation. If possible selection should be deferred until pigs are ten to twelve weeks old. The gilts can then be examined and any that have not at least 14 well formed even teats should be discarded to the meat pen. At this stage it is suggested that twice as many gilts are selected as will be ultimately required. It costs but little more to rear a gilt than to rear a bacon pig, so any gilts which do not make the grade and are later culled do not lose an appreciable amount of money. The final selection should be made when gilts make bacon weight so that discards can be sent off to the butchers. At this stage it is possible to form a very good opinion regarding the way a gilt is going to develop. The teats should be the first thing to be examined. We know the placing and formation of the sire's teats, although they are merely rudimentary in the male, have an important bearing on those of his female offspring which should be evenly spaced, **Photo right** well placed and well forward.



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Secondly the length of the body and thickness of the shoulder should be considered. A gilt with a light shoulder and a good length from the shoulder to the pin usually makes a good milking sow, whereas gilts with thick heavy shoulders tend to lay on fat and milk indifferently. A good width across the chest is essential, as narrow chested gilts usually have a poor constitution. The importance of good hams cannot be over emphasized. Coat and skin can also be considered. A good gilt invariably has a bloom and clean skin even if living outdoors. It is always wise to select gilts in the rough when their faults will stand out as a multitude of faults can be disguised by the skilled herdsman or exhibitor with a brush, woodflour or oil. At this stage you should always look at the breed standard the longer a breed is bred true to given standards the greater the probability that these points will be handed on to the offspring.



Windmill Star 22, competing at the RASE 2009 for Malcolm Hicks

Prolificacy. The ability to produce large litters is hereditary to some extent. Research on the subject has shown that it is possible to reduce a sow's capacity to produce pigs by malnutrition in early life and the capacity of a gilt to produce pigs is reduced if before the age of twelve weeks she is under or wrongly fed to the extent her growth is checked which is why we say never breed from runt gilts no matter how cute they are.

Good Mothers –Two factors combine to make sows a good mother (a) A good supply of milk and (b) good mothering instinct with absence of clumsiness. Both are inherited characteristics. The milk yield can of course be influenced by feeding and management.

Docile and quiet—The value of a quiet docile disposition in a breeding gilt/sow can scarcely be over emphasized. The disposition is partly due to temperament—an inherited characteristic. Quietness and docility are influenced to a very great extent by environment and management. Pigs very quickly get quiet and tractable if handled quietly and kindly but firmly. They are apt to be wild if kept isolated and unaccustomed to handling or experience rough handling. Spending time with your gilts as they grow makes for easier management down the line.

Economic Converters of food—Efficient conversion of food into pig products is again largely hereditary but an animals capacity to do this can be reduced by bad rearing or ill health. Weight for age is used as an indication of economy of utilization of food. It has long been accepted that the animal which grows quickest is the most economical feeder. A breeder who follows a definite system of feeding consistently can tell from the ages at which his pigs are sent to the butchers the comparative merits with which the pigs in his herd utilize their food.

Carcass quality—is another character which is primarily inherited and we have seen earlier in this article the method of ascertaining the merits of good breeding stock.

So we may summarize as follows: the characters which determine the value of a gilt for breeding purposes and its potential capacity are inherited. The development of these characters is influenced by feeding and management. Thus when selecting your gilts it is a good idea to take into consideration the records of previous generations going back as far as records are available and reliable i.e herdbook and wait as long as you can to chose your gilt and ensure she meets breed standard.

Sources: Fishwick's Pigs their Breeding, Feeding and Management & Archive Spot Press

Management & Feeding of your Gilt

Management of your gilts start from the very moment they are born. Litters that are born in the late spring and early summer usually grow faster and are easier to rear than those born at other times of the year. Therefore its always a good idea to arrange that any litters you want to save gilts from are born at this time of year. Some litters due to the time of year are kept indoors until they are ten to twelve weeks old and excellent gilts have been reared. None the less it must be admitted that it is easier to rear good gilts from litters that run outdoors from the time they are three weeks old hence the preference for spring and summer farrowings. *(Photo right)* It is an advantage if gilts can run outdoors after weaning except for in the rough winter months where there is no advantage to being outdoors where low temperatures will mean the gilt uses food to make warmth rather than growth and may injure herself on poached frozen ground. If they are housed a certain amount of exercise is desirable in the open air but if this is not possible they should be in roomy airy buildings/barns.



An even, gentle temperament is wanted in your gilt and here again management has the power to destroy which has been inherited. Gilts should be firmly handled and not excited in any way, they should be allowed free range outdoors as above and they should be familiar with the pig keeper *(photo left slightly extreme!)* who will handle them when they eventually come to farrow. At five months they will begin to come on heat and must be kept away from boars.

Feeding is probably the biggest influence on the growth of your gilt, whilst she will inherit size characteristics from her parents it is how she is fed that will determine how well she grows. Gilts that are going to be kept for breeding purposes should receive a supplementary ration from the time they learn to eat i.e they start to take their mothers food *(Photo right)* ideally a grower ration of a high protein 19% and above (whatever your preferred brand is) and this should be continued for at least four weeks after weaning. Gilts which are outdoors on reasonably good keep can then be put onto sow nuts 16%. If gilts are indoors it is a good plan to provide them with an amount of green forage ideally 3 or 4kgs a day. Remember 4kgs of green forage is approx equal to 1kg hard feed. Gilts should receive sufficient food to keep them growing steadily and evenly. They should be kept in good condition and not



allowed to get fat. You may find different gilts vary in their food requirements and you should watch this carefully, for example slow eaters not getting chance at the trough, bullying at the trough, picky eaters (yes even in pigs) and so on. It is desirable to feed gilts in separate feeding receptacles' if at all possible and they should be fed 11b (450g approx) per month of age to six months, if they are out on good pasture this can be reduced thereafter to 5lb or they will get too fat. A fat gilt is likely to be an uncertain breeder. *(Eds note young gilts feeding photo left Labrador accessory optional though it has to be said they grow equally well on stolen pig nuts!!!)*

Breeding from Your Gilt

One of the regular questions we get asked is when should a gilt be put to the boar for the first time. There is no right answer but we can help you with some factors to think about when making your decision.

Ideally your gilt should be eight months old but size rather than age should be the determining factor. If gilts go to the boar too young this is apt to retard their growth and your gilt will not reach the size they might otherwise attain if left to grow more. Most GOS gilts are a suitable size at 10-11mths old. Special care should therefore be taken as regards feeding after eight months as at this age they start to lay down fat and a fat gilt will not get in pig.

Take the gilt to the boar not the other way round. Only a young boar of a similar size (Photo right both 10mths old) should be used on gilts as the weight of a mature boar will cause injury to the gilts back and/or internally. Gilts may not hold their first service so its important to let them be mated two or three times. The absence of a season/heat twenty one days later is a fair indication that the mating has been effective so now you must wait 114-117 days (3 months, 3 weeks and 3 days approx) Your gilt can now return to her paddock depending on the time of year preferably at feeding time when others in the paddock will be too busy eating to notice her return. Keep up her feeding regime and watch her well. As she grows you may find it best to bring her in if the weather takes a turn for the worst.



Considerable damage to her litter can be done through careless handling at this stage especially if she is burning fat to keep warm rather than growing her the litter inside her. It is not good for a heavily pregnant gilt to be dragging a young heavy body through mud and maybe causing injury to her limbs and udder.

It is not desirable to change a gilts accommodation close to her farrowing date as this may upset her so it is advisable to move her to her farrowing quarters a week before her due date. This period of time allows her to settle, be wormed and cleaned up if appropriate and allows the keeper to win her confidence. A pig will usually respond to some belly rubbing and it's a relatively simple matter to train her to do this which is useful as she may get over excited as she comes to produce her first litter. This then raises the much discussed question as to whether a keeper needs to be present at a farrowing. Some say the presence of a keeper only serves to upset a farrowing female and only makes her more restless and prone to damage her piglets to support this theory they point to the fact that many sows are born and reared to sows who were unattended at birth. Then on the other hand you have pig keepers who prefer to attend their mums to be especially gilts when they farrow and who claim that the piglets saved more than repay the trouble involved. There's no wrong or right answer but a fair conclusion is that a keeper who does not know or has no connection with their pigs is worse than



useless whereas a keeper who understands how to handle a gilt and who gains her confidence can save the lives of a large proportion of piglets farrowed by a gilt in her first litter knowing that it is can often be a painful, scary experience for a first timer, after this subsequent litters do not usually need a keepers presence though many do prefer to keep an eye on all their farrowing either by regular personal checks or by cctv just in case there are issues and as the last piglet is invariably born in the afterbirth and apt to drown many a piglet can be saved by someone being there. Its also a good idea to be around to see the afterbirth and remove it before the gilt can eat it. (See farrowing article SP Autumn 2010 in Archive on website) once its all over you can leave your gilt to suckle her litter until feeding time. *(Photo left Dolly pig's first litter she caught us out by farrowing a week earlier than the due date we had in the byre rather than the farrowing house so even best laid plans do go awry!)*

In conclusion we can say the better you look after your gilt the better the outcome for her and her piglets so it pays to do your research. We hope we have answered some of your questions for you. Happy Pig Keeping.