Pigs: Breeding, Gestation and Farrowing

Care of the Brood Sow
A gilt can be bred when she reaches a weight between 90 kg and 115 kg. On average, this means she will be 24 to 25 weeks old when she becomes a brood sow.

It's important that the sow be in good condition when she is bred. It is common to increase a sow's ration just prior to breeding. Flushing, as it is called, causes the sow to be gaining in weight at breeding time. This seems to allow her to settle (conceive and maintain the pregnancy) more readily and generally results in larger litters. Current industry practice will include a feeding program that generally maximizes feeding from weaning to breeding (often sows do not eat much), then restricts feed for the two or three days at breeding, followed by feeding to condition.

Once the sow is *in pig* (pregnant) the ration can be cut back again. The sow should gain no more than 35 kg to 45 kg during the pregnancy. A sow should be in fairly good flesh condition at farrowing time.

One way to find out a sow’s suitability for breeding is the sow productivity index: This a report may include information on the age at puberty, conception rate, litter size born alive, litter size weaned, ovulation rate, embryo survival, uterine capacity, weaning to service interval, birth weight and weaning weight.

The Big Event
The gestation time for a sow is usually 112 to 114 days, but may range as much as 110 to 118 days.

Factors that you should be aware of during Gestation:

1. **Temperature:** This is mostly a concern when trying to breed swine. High temperatures result in poor quality semen from the boar. Be aware that high temperatures during implantation can lead to a higher embryo loss, and high temperatures during farrowing may result in a larger number of stillborn piglets. Eliminate the effect of temperature on pigs with the use of sprinklers and ensure there is proper ventilation. Remember pigs do not have sweat glands!
2. **Stress:** At the beginning and the end of gestation, avoid putting a pregnant pig in any situations that might be considered stressful. This includes fighting with other pigs, overcrowding, heat stress and transportation. In particular, avoid moving sows between 4 and 28 days after breeding (with the most critical period being 7 to 14 days), as this can cause reduction in litter size due to increased embryo mortality.

3. **Housing:** Prior to farrowing allow the pregnant pig to enjoy a pen all to herself. Provide some nest building material, such as straw, otherwise she may show signs of distress.

   *Feed Intake:* Do not overfeed a pregnant female before farrowing. This can lead to a decrease in feed intake during lactation.

   *Parasites:* Be sure to check for parasites and apply prevention techniques 2 weeks before farrowing. The best control is to use a larvacidal dewormer 4 days before moving into the farrowing area. In addition, wash sows to remove eggs attached to the skin. This will allow newborn piglets to come into the world parasite free.

   One week before the sow is to **farrow** (give birth) the sow should be washed and moved into a disinfected **farrowing pen** or **farrowing crate**.

   A farrowing crate restricts sow movement to help minimize crushing of the piglets. Crates have different designs using adjustable rails, solid panels or other methods. The most important consideration for farrowing crates is to make sure it is of appropriate size in relation to the size of the sow.

   Farrowing pens allow the sows more freedom than a crate. They measure approximately 2.4 meters by 2.4 meters and can be square, rectangular or circular in shape. Rails or wall cutouts provide a space for the piglets to get away from the sow and an area to **creep feed** the piglets.
Both these designs provide a warm area for the young that the sow cannot reach. The warmth is important because it is otherwise common for young pigs to get chilled within a few hours after birth and die of exposure. The separation of sow and litter prevents the sow from accidentally crushing her young. Look again at the illustrations of the farrowing pen and farrowing crate. They show how the piglets can both be separated from the sow and nurse.
When the gilt or sow is getting ready to farrow, the following changes will be visible:

- Exhibits restlessness and nest building
- Respiratory rate increases
- Rectal temperature rises
- Udder fills out
- Milk may be dripping

Once the mother actually starts giving birth, maintaining a quiet room is important so as to not disturb her.

Once labour begins, the first piglet will take quite a while to appear. The sow will rest for up to an hour, then the remainder of the litter will appear relatively quickly. Each newborn will get up and nurse within minutes of birth.

The whole process will take an average of 4 to 6 hours. It’s a good idea to observe the farrowing in case of trouble, but not otherwise disturb the sow.

**Suckling and Weaning**

In intensive production situations it’s common to allow the young to nurse from their mothers for 3 to 4 weeks. In less-intensive operations the young may stay with their mother for 6 to 8 weeks.

The main benefit of earlier weaning (taking the young from their mother) is that the sow is ready to rebreed sooner. The main disadvantage is that the piglets are younger and therefore have weaker immune systems when they go into the big world. But this disadvantage can be somewhat countered by good management of the weanlings.

Milk yield increases gradually from farrowing up to a maximum at the third week of lactation. It remains relatively constant during the third, fourth, and fifth weeks, after which it declines. Feed needs increase and decrease with the milk production.

The sow can typically be rebred 4 to 7 days after her young have been weaned.