

CREATING COMPATIBLE PIG PALS

(How to Introduce a New Pet into a Household Where a Pig Presides)

by Nancy Shepherd

If you are planning to add another animal to a household that presently includes a pet pig, there are several guidelines to follow. First, you need to be aware of how your present pig pal will view this idea. I'm afraid it is not with great enthusiasm and joy. Instead, it is most likely to be with great displeasure and animosity. Your pig will feel as if she is being displaced, not unlike how an only child responds to a new brother or sister. Your pig will be jealous and even aggressive to the animal she views as an intruder and stealer of your affections. You can, however, succeed in creating compatible companions if you are patient and willing to observe a few basic rules.

Designated Animal Areas: Hopefully your present pig has a space that she calls her own. This is usually where she sleeps. This should be an area you can close off from the rest of the house. If the need arises, your pig can "go to her room" where she feels comfortable and secure. The new arrival should also have an assigned space complete with all the necessary creature comforts. This area needs to be accessible to the current house pig, but separated by a barrier. I prefer to use a child's safety gate.

The Buddy System: Let your new arrival become familiar with his current environment. Allow your pig to have nose contact with the newcomer through the gate. Praise your pig using phrases like, "Good girl. You're such a good pig." This sort of interaction several times a day for a few days allows for a gradual, mutual acceptance. Since we all know that a pig responds favorably to food, a good method is to provide your pig with a treat every time she and the new pet are in the same proximity. Do not feed the newcomer. Your pig will think that the new animal is her ticket to treats and will be more likely to tolerate and accept him. This is called the "buddy system" and is purported to be a quick and effective tool when introducing animals.

When you feel the time is right and that the two pets have gained some trust and familiarity with each other, allow the pig into the new pet's area, all the while using positive verbal reinforcement. Pay attention to the size difference between the old and new pet. Harnessing both pigs is helpful — IF they are harnessed trained. Make certain that the smaller can get to safety quickly, should the necessity arise. It's only natural to expect some sort of confrontation when two animals meet for the first time. Don't get your hands in the middle of a scuffle. Use a crowding board, a chair or something rigid to break up the altercation; and, use a verbal command such as "Knock it off" or "Bad pig" so that your pig knows this is unacceptable behavior. Then send her to her room. When in the room ask for an easy trick she knows, and then reward her.

It's preferable to do this outdoors in a fenced in yard where you can scatter the food. This allows the pigs to get used to being in the same space while eating. This larger area usually allows both pigs to search out treats. Continue this process and eventually you will have good results.

Scents are Intense: Your pig may respond negatively to the scent that the newcomer leaves on your clothes and body. I suggest that you wear a smock or bath robe when playing with the new pet. Remove that item of clothing and wash your hands prior to handling your pig. This step may not be necessary in all cases; but, if your pig becomes aggressive towards you, follow the described regimen. What were once loving family pigs have turned on their owners upon the adoption of another pet. Scent is a very strong factor in terms of territory in the animal world. The smell of an unfamiliar animal on you may be translated as an infringement upon your present pet's turf.

MOTHER AND CHILD REUNION

Here I will describe the process whereby Aggie, a 3-1/2 year old intact female potbellied pig, who lived on the farm was integrated into the life of Rutledge, her 2-1/2 year old son, a barrow, who lived nearby. This reunion was suggested because Rutledge was a lonely, only pig and Aggie, not being used for

breeding any longer, would be so appreciative of the niceties of indoor living during her retiring years. This reunion took place in the fall while temperatures were comfortable. Weather will play an important role in how you accomplish this type of animal joining.

Outdoor Pen Set-up: Rutledge has an outdoor pen made of hog panels. We built an adjacent pen for Aggie, allowing the two pigs contact through a common fence. A pigloo (a preformed high-tech plastic dog house) complete with bedding, was placed in Aggie's new space. Not the perfect accommodations, but they would have to do until Aggie and Rutledge came to an agreement about cohabitation. Next, Aggie was delivered to her retirement home.

This pen arrangement allowed Aggie and Rutledge to smell each other and generally become acquainted. They spent hours pacing along the common fence. There were signs of aggression such as hair-raising and mouth-chomping; but with the fence in place, neither pig could do physical harm to the other. Their pigstress, Jane, spent lots of time praising the pigs and giving equal petting time. Meals were served in respective pens.

Common Yard Time: After a week of this contact through the fence, the pigs were allowed out of their pens to roam in the yard, always under supervision. When they faced off, they were verbally and physically reprimanded. A good hard shoulder push paired with the verbal command, "Knock it off" seemed to do the trick. Their yard time was slowly increased and they began to tolerate each other more and more.

Pen and Lodge Mates: When the second week was over, the fence that separated the two adjacent pens was removed, allowing Rutledge and Aggie to be in the same space, but each retaining their own shelter. Frequent surveillance was necessary and a few battles were broken up as these two pigs worked at establishing their pecking order. They were fed in the same area but at different ends of the pen. It was interesting to note that at first it appeared Rutledge would be "top pig." He is a larger animal and it was his territory first. As time passed it became more apparent that Aggie might usurp him and become the matriarch. After all, she is older and Rutledges' mother, for heaven sakes. After a few days, Aggie's pigloo was removed and the pair began to share the common outdoor pig lodge, though not without a few altercations but without major injury.

In-House Harmony: The final step to completing this enforced companionship process was to introduced the pigs to the house. With winter coming on, the pigs would be spending most of their time inside in a bright, sunny room where they have a custom-built, padded and rug-covered sleeping box. Aggie was immediately attracted to this wonderful cozy area. She found it so comfortable that she sort of took it over. Poor Rutledge was left to sleep outside this luxurious piggy bed even though there was plenty of room for both of them. Jane helped Mr. Rutledge obtain his share of the sleeping space by settling him in first before allowing Aggie to hop in the sack. She also spent lots of time working with her pigs to let them know that were loved equally by her.

When I go to visit Jane, Rutledge, and Aggie, I am so pleased to see the pigs either happily snurdling around together in the yard or snuggling up nose-to-nose under many blankets in their sumptuous sleeping salon enjoying sweet dreams. Sometimes Jane and I hop right in there with them and we all cozy up together. We took no short cuts in this forced friendship. Every part of the process was planned and carried out methodically with a good sense of what possible problems could arise. The point is that we achieved success by following a practical, proven process.

If you feel there is a strong likelihood of ever being a two-pig household, consider adopting both pigs from the same litter at the same time. The sibling pair will be pals for life. This will work to your benefit in several ways. If the pigs are reared and socialized together, you will never need to go through the tedious process described in this article. An added bonus is that your pigs will keep each other company during those times when human companionship is impossible. You will have happy, well-adjusted pets who will still be very bonded to you as their pigstress, but will be afforded the many advantages of having a constant buddy.