

Safeguarding Potbellied Pigs

By Kristin E. Holmes
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The year is full of pig-centric events at Ross Mill Farm, from a springtime memorial service for the departed to a fall festival where guests with snouts get the star treatment.



At Ross Mill Farm, a pig wanders indoors after grazing in the sun. "You need to treat your pig the same way you treat your children," says Susan Armstrong-Magidson. "Don't have the person who is sick sleeping with or feeding or sneezing on the pig."

But the mission of owners Susan Armstrong-Magidson and her husband, Richard Magidson, to protect and promote the potbellied pig as a pet has a new twist.

The flu making its way around the world has a name and possible point of origin that has put the Bucks County couple on alert. Swine flu, known specifically as influenza type A (H1N1), has infected thousands of people, contributed to a series of deaths, and reportedly been found in a herd of pigs in Canada.

"We're taking precautions," Susan Magidson said. "You need to treat your pig the same way you would treat your children. Don't have the person who is sick sleeping with or feeding or sneezing on the pig."

A primary biosecurity focus of farmers has been to protect the pigs from infection, since there is no documented evidence of transmission of the new virus from pigs to

people, said Thomas D. Parsons, director of the Swine Teaching and Research Center at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine's New Bolton Center in Chester County.

Yet pigs are taking the fall for a virus that is made up of human, bird, and pig components, said Sandra Amass, associate dean at Purdue University's School of Veterinary Medicine. The infection is a "human flu" that has traveled from person to person, with one possible exception a herd of pigs in Canada, she said.

To guard against infection, Susan Magidson, whose Warwick Township farm has 150 pigs, has barred sick workers - even those with the sniffles - from coming to work, and is in regular contact with the farm's veterinarian.

She is checking in with the state Department of Agriculture, and said she would consider vaccinations. She also has posted flu information for her clients on her Web site, as have her colleagues in the North American Potbellied Pig Association.

The initial flurry of concern from pet-pig owners has died down, said Susan Magidson, 61, but she remains in cautious mama-bear mode. The Magidsons own 30 pigs, board pigs for owners who are away from home, and place



Susan Armstrong-Magidson uses a toothbrush to clean a pig's nose at Ross Mill Farm in Warwick Township, Bucks County. She and her husband board and place potbellied pigs, in addition to owning 30.



A pig in "The Village" looks for attention. The farm's owners say pigs are taking the fall for a disease they appear not to transmit to humans.

pigs for adoption through their Pig Placement Network.

The couple became smitten with the species when the pigs came to the United States in the mid-1980s.

Smaller than commercial pigs, potbellies became known as the "yuppie puppy," said Becky Birkhimer, vice president of the North American Potbellied Pig Association. Amass said the pigs have a potbellied appearance and a squished-in nose and are smart. Susan

Magidson added "spoiled, childlike, and known to relax so much that they fall over in pleasure."

In the '80s, the Magidsons, then working in marketing, started collecting a menagerie of animals on their 35 acres. They bought their first potbellied pair, Bromley and Blossom, in 1990, and by the next year had a litter.

Lodgers such as Ed Snortin' and Oinky are housed in indoor and outdoor pens at Ross Mill. The indoor lodge has stalls for 70 pigs in a wooden structure with heated floors, air conditioning and a spa room. Pigs are treated to pink-grapefruit-scented shampoos (\$20), facials (\$5), and oil treatments (\$5). Getting the works runs \$35, and includes soothing music.

There is a general store, and a piggycam mounted outside allows owners to watch their pigs from afar. The annual memorial service comes complete with a shaman who officiates, and the fall festival and picnic include pigs bobbing for apples.

Over the years, Magidson said, the farm's Pig Placement Network, which has a six-member board of directors, has placed 1,200 pigs in adoptions. Placement inquiries have increased because the economy has forced some owners to consider finding alternative homes for their pets, she said.

She also is coping with the first U.S. wave of geriatric potbellied pigs; the species appears to have a life span of about 16 years. With the help of the New Bolton Center, Magidson is developing a database on the anatomy of older pigs.

As for the farm's future, the Magidsons have sold a conservation easement to the township and plan for the farm to continue.

"The Pig Placement Network will inherit the business and the pigs," Magidson said. "I want to make sure it keeps doing what I'm doing."