

The Deplorable Plight of the 'Mini' Potbellied Pet Pig

At 8 weeks and 35 pounds, potbellied piglets resemble cuddly, small-sized pets that can live indoors or outside. But don't be fooled. Even 'teacup' piglets grow up into pigs, with the potential to weigh as much as 300 pounds.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Southern Delaware has an abandoned potbellied pig problem, as do many other locations around the country because people don't realize that only as babies are these pigs the "size of dogs" — then they grow up
- Breeders may label their pigs "mini" in comparison to farm pigs at 1,000 to 2,000 pounds, but so-called "teacup" and "micro" pigs typically grow to 100-plus pounds
- In the latter half of last year, Delaware state veterinarians were forced to euthanize a dozen pigs who had been abandoned and were roaming wild, tearing up lawns, gardens, and native plants, disrupting wildlife, and potentially spreading disease
- For several reasons, pigs make very challenging pets for uninformed and unprepared pet owners
- If you understand that even a "micro pig" will grow into a large animal that can easily weigh over 100 pounds, and you have the adequate space and necessary resources, adopting a pig in need of a home may be right for you

Sadly, a news item out of southern Delaware illustrates the plight of potbellied pigs who join families as "adorable teacups," only to be abandoned to roam wild once their owners grasp the reality of keeping a pig as a pet. State veterinarians in Delaware wound up euthanizing about a dozen of these poor animals in the latter half of 2022. As local PBS affiliate WHYI describes the situation:

"Potbellied pigs are big and elusive, and they're running loose, often in feral packs, around southern Delaware.

Abandoned by their owners, these roaming stray pets tear up lawns, gardens, and native plants. They disrupt other wildlife, and risk carrying endemic diseases, such as salmonella and swine flu, to other animals and people.

And every day, it seems, state agricultural officials say they're receiving another call about these huge animals being spotted in residential, rural, and public lands in Kent and Sussex counties.

But when they're caught, no one wants them, so in recent months state veterinarians have had to kill about a dozen."¹

The Myth of the Micro Pig

Potbellied piglets are often marketed as micros, teacups, minis, pockets, or pygmies. At about 8 weeks and 35 pounds, they resemble cuddly, smallish pets who can live indoors or outside, and many people like the idea of having a dog-sized pig as a pet.

However, the idea that a tiny piglet is going to stay small or only grow to the size of a small dog is one of the greatest misconceptions surrounding pigs as pets. The California Potbellied Pig Association (CPPA) explained:

*"A 60 lb. mature pig is actually very rare, despite long standing myths to the contrary. Also be aware that 100 lbs. to 150 lbs. weight is only achieved with a strict diet. A 300 lb. potbellied pig is not uncommon if it is overfed, and a 300 lb. pig could be very difficult to transport, and it will probably suffer many health problems."*²

Pig Inn Heaven, a U.K.-based pig sanctuary, explains, "A micro pig is a piglet, then it grows."³ Sadly, breeders may even tell new owners to feed their "micro pig" only a small amount of food to keep it small.

One woman was feeding her micro pig one-half cup of food twice a day at the breeder's instruction, only to find it raiding the pantry and trash can. A veterinarian told her the pig was starving. Further, the pig, which was supposed to grow to be only 12 inches tall, ended up reaching 20 inches tall and 180 pounds, at which point she was brought to a pig rescue, Lil' Orphan Hammies, in California.

The problem has gotten so bad that the North American Potbellied Pig Association estimated that 90% of pigs adopted as pets in the U.S. end up being taken to a rescue.⁴ Sue Parkinson of Lil' Orphan Hammies told CBS News, "There are not enough homes out there anymore. These pigs are in big trouble."⁵

Captured Pigs Have Nowhere to Go

According to officials in southern Delaware, owners have been turning their pigs loose to wander into nearby yards, parks, and fields once they lose their appeal and especially after they've had big litters of piglets. The Department of Agriculture issued an alert to owners warning against abandoning their pigs. They included a phone number to call for information on securing or housing them, spaying and neutering, and animal identification.

*"I love them, don't get me wrong," state veterinarian Dr. Karen Lopez told WHYY. "They're adorable, they're precious as tiny little piglets. But as they get older they're not as attractive to adopters. And they may have already developed behavior problems. So the rescues don't want to take these animals. But they're not food animals, so livestock auctions won't take them either."*⁶

Lopez can only guess at how many potbellied pigs are wandering loose in her state.

"I think that there are more out there than I know about," she said. "And that's what's so concerning to me. I only know about the ones that people call about. Could there be 100 pigs out there? Could there be 200 pigs out there? I don't know. Maybe it's not that much, but I do think there's more than we know about when we do get a call from a constituent."

Because there's nowhere for the free-roaming pigs to go once they're caught, Lopez and her team have no option beyond euthanasia.

“The three of us that worked on this were totally emotionally exhausted and tearful for an entire week,” Lopez said, “It is a shame because pigs are paying for the irresponsibility of their owners.”

Pigs Can Make Challenging Pets

Beyond their adult size and the need to spay or neuter, there are other common problems with owning a pig as a pet, such as where to find veterinary care. Most cat and dog veterinarians don't treat pigs, which may be considered farm animals, not pets. This means you may need to travel some distance and be able to transport your very large pig for regular veterinary care.

What's more, owning a pig may not be legal where you live, and if it is, there may be size or number restrictions. Before adding a potbellied pig to your family, check out your local (city and county) ordinances to avoid potential heartbreak.

Remember, too, that pigs are herd animals and should be adopted in pairs or more. It's also best to keep pigs outdoors in a paddock or garden, not in your house.

Pigs are highly intelligent and inquisitive and require a great deal of mental stimulation. They can get into trouble if you don't have a safe area for them to run around, dig, root, and forage in. Likewise, without an outlet for play and exercise, pet pigs may become depressed, destructive, or aggressive. CPPA also pointed out:

“Understand that pigs are different than cats or dogs — the bonding time is different, the way they show affection is different and the engagement you will have with them is different — it's super rewarding but it's different.”⁷

Can Pigs Ever Make Good Pets?

Pigs can make great pets if you're prepared for their size and special needs. You should not assume that any pig you adopt will stay small. Breeders may label their pigs mini in comparison to farm pigs, which may reach 1,000 to 2,000 pounds, but so-called teacup and micro pigs will typically reach 100+ pounds.

Those who don't may have been underfed to stunt their growth,⁸ and some are actually commercial breeds originally intended as food animals that can grow to 500 pounds.⁹ If you're thinking you can adopt a tiny pig that will be content to live in your apartment like a cat or small dog, a pig is definitely not the right pet for you.

However, if you understand that even a “micro pig” will grow into a large animal that can easily weigh over 100 pounds, adopting a pig in need of a home may be right for you, if you think you can meet the animal's basic requirements, including:¹⁰

- At least 0.5 acres of land (in an area where pig ownership is legal)
- Outdoor housing or a shed
- Access to a farm veterinarian
- Regular grooming, including trimming of hooves and tusks
- An area of mud for your pig to wallow in
- Optimal food, grass for grazing, fresh fruit, and vegetables

- Fresh water daily
- Regular exercise
- Spending time with your pig(s) daily
- Appropriate fencing

Sources and References

^{1, 6} [WHYY.org, November 21, 2022](#)

² [California Potbellied Pig Association, What You Should Know](#)

³ [Pig Inn Heaven](#)

^{4, 5} [CBS News July 22, 2015](#)

⁷ [California Potbellied Pig Association, Pigs Are Hard](#)

⁸ [Smithsonian Magazine March 1, 2017](#)

⁹ [National Geographic October 1, 2014](#)

¹⁰ [Pig Inn Heaven, Rehoming](#)
