

Swine genetics come of age

ST. LOUIS, Mo. — America's swine breeding industry has come of age. Many of today's commonplace genetic concepts were considered major innovations when first introduced, reports Kleen Leen, Inc., a swine breeding stock supplier, celebrates its 21st birthday this year.

"Twenty-one years does not seem like a great deal of time to life-long farmers, but an enormous amount of progress has occurred to change and improve the swine industry in that time," declares David Cardin, Kleen Leen president. "Producers looking at their business today may recognize improvement in feeds, facilities, management techniques and herd health. But some of the greatest breakthroughs came in swine genetics, and many of these went unnoticed," he continues.

Cardin believes genetic improvements are often overlooked because "they can only be measured by good production data. But, in the last 21 years, important advancements have been made, not just in the gene pool that is the basis of the nation's breeding herds, but in the way replacement stock is selected for a specific hog operation," he explains.

"Producers now can select boars and gilts for improved herd health, for increase of certain economically desirable traits in their market hogs, or for improvement of litter size. And they can make a selection based on herd data and the experience of other

producers. This was not commonplace in 1962," adds Cardin.

Improves Breeding Stock
He cites recent developments in Kleen Leen's purebred herds as an example of quiet but very significant changes in the breeding stock available to producers today.

"We raise purebreds that are the genetic foundation of the crossbreds we sell as breeding stock. Since 1979, our average Yorkshire litters are an entire pig larger, Landrace litter weights have increased 14 pounds at 21 days, Hampshires have lost a tenth of an inch in backfat, and all four of our lines (the other being Duroc) are getting to 220 pounds market weight 10 to 14 days sooner," he declares.

Improvements that can be measured by performance data are only part of the story, Cardin continues. "The other part of the story is the increasingly sophisticated hog producer who recognizes the value of efficiency in pork production and is willing to make changes, including investing capital to increase productivity."

"Twenty years ago, selling crossbred breeding stock required a tremendous amount of education. Today, most hog producers are familiar with the advantages of heterosis, or hybrid vigor, and make purchase decisions for breeding stock based on data, and not on loyalty to one specific line," Cardin insists. "One of the reasons we see less overall resistance to our crossbreds," he explains, "is that when Kleen Leen

was started, a decision was made to market recognizable crosses. Producers who purchase a crossbred boar or gilt usually know something about swine genetics, and often like to select an animal based on traits and breeds with which they have had experience. Recognizable crosses have helped put out crossbreds into the mainstream of the industry," he adds.

Health concern

Another factor that has boosted growth of the seedstock business is the need to purchase healthy animals. According to Cardin, concern for herd health is actually the reason Kleen Leen was formed in 1962 by an Indiana veterinarian who pioneered the large-scale use

of hysterectomies with the development of Kleen Leen foundation herds. Health is still a major reason why producers purchase commercial breeding stock.

In the last 20 years, the economic impact of certain diseases has grown more severe. As a result, producers are willing to invest money on specific breeding stock because they are often uncertain about the disease level that may be present in the herds of some suppliers. In most cases, producers demand health warranties and herd certification that the larger seedstock companies may provide.

"As an example," Cardin points out, "Kleen Leen offers specific

health warranties against certain swine diseases — swine dysentery, infectious atrophic rhinitis, lice and mycoplasma pneumonia — and all its breeding herds are qualified free of pseudorabies and validated free of brucellosis."

The company continues to develop techniques to limit the risk of disease in an operation. Although a long-time user of artificial insemination in both its purebred herds and the breeder herds that produce Kleen Leen crossbreds, the company recently began offering boar semen to the entire industry. "It is a small part of the genetics business, but a growing part that is playing an

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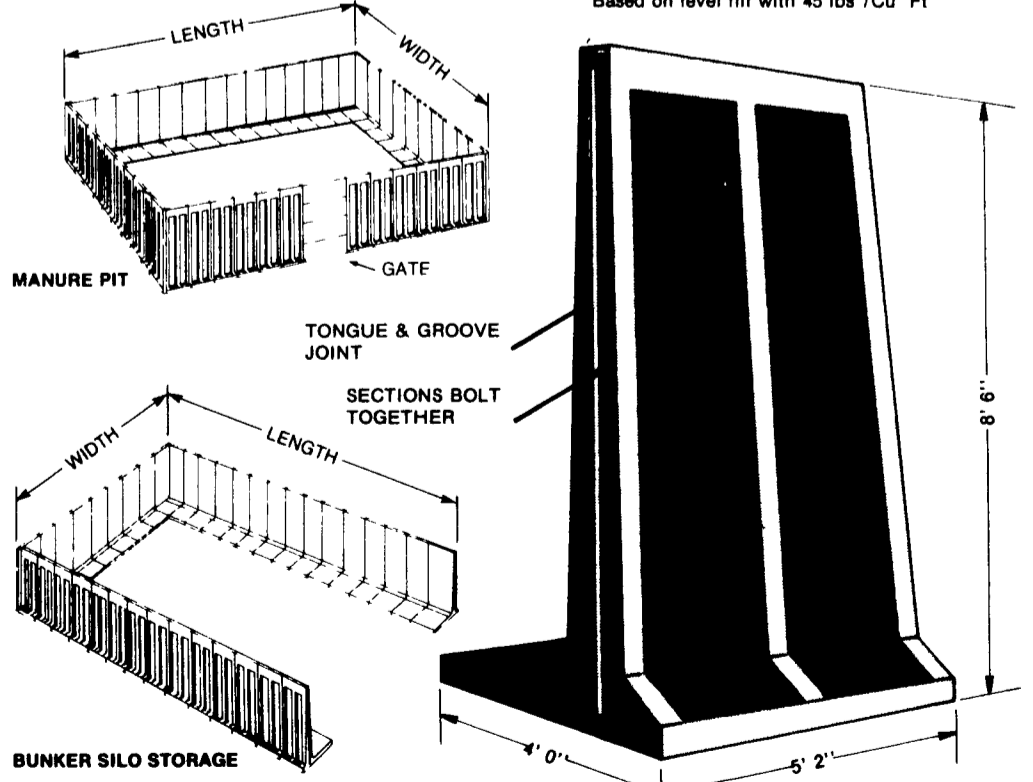
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