



## Introducing... guinea pigs as pets and lawn-mowers

Apart from making lovely pets, guinea pigs do a great job at mowing your lawn! They give you manure you can use as free fertiliser and if we ever need to eat them, they taste good too!



Guinea pigs like grass. Grass is the most important food for their health and wellbeing. They also need to chew constantly, so if you put a guinea pig on the lawn it will start eating. Each day a guinea pig will mow approx 1 square metre of lawn, so when that's mowed to your satisfaction all you need to do is move it to the next patch.

You can keep your guinea pigs in a hutch which you can move around the lawn from one place to the next. The guinea pig hutch must:

- ~ be safe from predators like dogs, cats, rats, foxes and birds;
- ~ provide dark, comfortable and private sleeping quarters;
- ~ be large enough for them to wander around in and get away from each other at times;
- ~ have a roof so they can keep dry, stay healthy and feel secure;
- ~ be insulated so it is cool in summer and warm in winter.

On hot days pigs need the cool shade of trees. A wet towel or hessian draped over the cage with one end dipping into a bowl of water can keep them cool. On cold days they need warmth and sunshine.

Apart from grass, your guinea pig needs fruit and vegetable scraps. Guinea pigs need vitamin C and like foods such as oranges, crab apples, rose hips and many other fruits. They also like dandelions, banana skins, and many vegetables and peelings. A branch from an apple tree is good for their teeth. A guinea pig's diet is set when it is 6 weeks old so make sure you feed them a very diverse diet during this time. The key to a healthy diet for the guinea pig is diversity of foods, lots of food containing vitamin C and lots of grass to chew daily. They also need water every day: two sources are essential in case one runs out or becomes blocked.

Guinea pigs need companionship otherwise they can become withdrawn and depressed. It is a good idea to keep two in your 'lawn mower' guinea pig hutch so they have each other to communicate with.

Guinea pigs make great pets and are useful too. If kept in the correct circumstances to meet their needs, they can help both you and the environment. They save us the work and maintenance involved in mowing the lawn; they reduce our use of fossil fuels on lawnmowing, and as a result they reduce our production of greenhouse gases. They provide us with manure to fertilise the garden, they compost our scraps and they are even a good source of protein if one day we need them for this. (Guinea pigs are frequently eaten in South America.) Love your guinea pig! Meet their needs and they'll meet yours too!

### How to make a guinea pig 'lawnmower'

#### Build a timber framework

This will be rectangular, 1 to 2m x 0.5m.

#### Wire the hutch correctly

On the top and sides of the hutch use small square aviary wire (5mm, gauge 6). This stops rats and mice getting in and stealing their food or fighting with them which can cause serious injuries like abscesses and even death.

On the bottom of the end where you will make the sleeping quarters, use bigger gauge wire (say 20mm) to allow droppings to fall through. This keeps the hutch clean, reduces maintenance for you and allows the grass or garden to be directly fertilised.

On the bottom of the hutch where they eat the grass, use a still bigger gauge wire so the guinea pigs can eat the grass without hurting their teeth. Some people prefer not to wire this section so the guinea pigs can have direct contact with the lawn. If you choose this you need to be very careful that dogs and foxes don't dig under the cage.

#### Insulate the hutch

Place Styrofoam boxes on both the outside and the inside to make the sleeping quarters. These will reflect light and heat, and so reduce fluctuations in the temperature. The inside box can be turned upside down (with its opening at the bottom) and a small hole cut into the side, just big enough for your guinea pigs to squeeze through.

#### Roof the hutch

In addition to enclosed sleeping quarters, a roof on top of your hutch keeps the pigs dry and less likely to get sick, and makes them feel safe from predators such as birds. Choose something that's not too heavy: Corflute, Styrofoam, tin or plywood. Don't overhang the roof, so the sunlight can still get in through the sides of your hutch - this is very important for the pigs' health and wellbeing. Find some weights for the roof.

#### Maybe wheels and a handle?

Some people like to put small wheels on the bottom at the back of the hutch, and a handle on the front, to make moving easier.

#### Provide bedding, toys, water containers

It is important to put lots of bedding like dry grasses in their sleeping quarters. Small boxes or a pipe is good for them to tunnel into for fun, and two water containers are essential as they occasionally block up.

#### Introduce your guinea pigs

Now introduce your guinea pigs who will be happy and healthy in their new home - and productive, should you allow this!