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Guide to backyard rabbit management

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Quick Facts

- Before raising rabbits, a person should be sure there will be a market for the product other than the family dinner table.
- Rabbits do not require a lot of space: a small area for the hutches and a protected area for supplies.
- A properly managed backyard rabbitry can be income-producing, but a person should not plan to make an entire living from it.
- Two does and one buck are a sufficient number of rabbits to start a rabbitry.
- Good healthy rabbits should be purchased from a reputable rabbit producer.
- A hutch can be purchased or simply constructed from wood and wire mesh.
- Rabbits should not be overfed; they should be fed once a day.
- Gestation period for a rabbit averages 31 days; average litter size is eight for larger breeds.
- Good management and sanitation practices are the best means of preventing and controlling disease.

So you want to raise rabbits! Hopefully, this information will help you get started on the right track so that your backyard rabbitry may be a fruitful and delightful experience.

Plan First

Before raising rabbits, a person should be sure there is a market for the product. The family table should be the number-one market, but what should be done with the surplus animals? Rabbits are not popular everywhere and unless a family wants to eat them, or is willing to expand the rabbitry indefinitely, there should be a destination for them.

Once the operation is begun, accurate records of who's who and who is whose should be kept. It is not wise to hang on to a nonproductive mother just because she's cute, as she will cost money and keep the operation from improving. The practice of "weeding out" poor producers is known as culling, and this is best done in the house while looking at records instead of outside looking at pretty eyes. (CCRP News, 1975.)

Space

Rabbits do not require a lot of space—just a corner of the backyard for placement of hutches and a protected area for organized storage of feed, vitamins, medicines, spare wire, tools and records.

Organization is a virtue in the rabbitry because daily labor is necessary. Any time-saving device will help keep the rabbits as a hobby instead of as an all time-consuming venture.

A properly managed backyard rabbitry can be income-producing, but a person should not plan to make an entire living from it. (See Service in Action sheets 1.204 and 1.205, *Economics of a backyard rabbitry.*) The venture into commer-

cial, full-time fryer rabbit production would be quite a different situation than the backyard rabbit enterprise. Enjoyment and satisfaction in producing a fine living creature is probably the greatest payment the backyard producer will receive.

Starting the Herd

As a beginner, the best way to dive into this business is slowly. Two does (female rabbits) and one buck (male rabbit) are sufficient at first for becoming acquainted with the operation, and the investment is not so great that a real loss is incurred should you decide rabbits are not for you.

Choosing Stock

A word about breeds, varieties and selection of breeding stock is in order. The best place to buy rabbits is a reputable rabbit breeder. There are many breeds to choose from and a given breed may have several varieties (colors).

Four size classes are available: giant (11-14 pounds or 4.9-6.4 kilograms), large (9-12 lbs or 4.1-5.4 kg), medium (7-10 lbs or 3.2-4.5 kg), and dwarf (2-5 lbs or .9-2.3 kg).

For both meat production and utilization of pelts, the New Zealand White and the Californian are most widely used. There are three varieties of the New Zealand breed—black, red and white. From a marketing point of view, the Californian breed is considered white although it has black ears, nose, tail and feet. Both of these large breeds are excellent for meat production, have excellent pelts and also are recognized among the top breeds for show.

The first rabbits selected for the rabbitry should be good healthy ones. A buyer should visit the place where they will be purchased to check out their conditions. Only lively, bright-eyed specimens should be chosen. New rabbits should be isolated from any rabbits already on hand for about two weeks before housing them close by.

Housing

A ready-made hutch can be purchased or one can be built. In general, facilities constructed of wood and wire mesh are satisfactory for housing the rabbits of a backyard venture. Hutch or cage floors should be the heaviest available, 1/2" x 1" (1.3 x 2.5 centimeters) welded wire mesh; 14 gauge is satisfactory.

Facilities should be constructed so they are waist level off the ground for easy access. (See Figure 1.) Plywood walls lined with wire will last much longer than unlined walls, because rabbits chew and can literally chew their way through their own house.

Hutch doors should be side-hinged and have predator-proof latches. Floor to ceiling height should be at least 18 inches (46 cm), the minimum cage depth 30 inches (76 cm), and the width can vary from 30 to 36 inches (76-91 cm).

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The easiest way to house three rabbits is to build one hutch and divide it into three parts (see Figure 1), making sure the cage sections for does will accommodate nest boxes. For Colorado, with its cold climate, rabbits outside in the backyard should have nest boxes made of plywood about $\frac{3}{8}$ " to $\frac{3}{4}$ " (1-1.9 cm) thick, depending on the severity of cold for specific areas. A false bottom of the nest box should be of $\frac{1}{2}$ " x $\frac{1}{2}$ " (1.3 x 1.3 cm) hail screen or $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 1" (1.3 x 2.5 cm) welded wire. A removable bottom below the wire should be about 2½ inches (6.4 cm) deep and have about two inches (5.1 cm) of wood shavings to absorb moisture. This arrangement keeps the bunnies dry and warm.

Clean pinewood shavings (not sawdust) and wheat or barley straw are excellent bedding materials.

Watering and Feeding

Heavy crocks that are difficult to overturn are good for feeding and watering, but plastic dog food dishes will serve equally well. Caution—don't allow fines (dust particles) from the feed to build up in any dish or other feeder. Food is the single most expensive item in the rabbitry, and spilled or otherwise wasted feed is money lost.

Rabbits should not be overfed; feed only once a day, preferably in the evening, as rabbits are nocturnal and will eat during the night. Feeding quantity should be about 4 to 6 ounces (113-170 grams) of formulated rabbit pellets containing 16-19 per cent protein. (CCRPA, 1974.) The exact amount of feed will vary between breeds, ages, sexes and also may be influenced by other factors.

A pregnant or lactating doe generally will do best on full feed which means having food before her at all times. Hay or roughages also may be fed to rabbits. In addition, each cage should be provided with a rabbit salt spool. Plenty of clean, fresh water is a must at all times.

Breeding

The first rule of breeding rabbits is to take the doe to the buck and not vice versa. The male will feel more secure and be more likely to service the doe successfully if he is in his own territory. They should not be left alone as they may fight. (CCRPA, 1974.) A doe is receptive for 13 consecutive days, then she is nonreceptive for three, then open again for 13. A good practice is to breed at evening and then again early in the morning to be more sure of a completed breeding service.

Ovulation occurs about 10 hours after the stimulation of mating. Because ovulation is induced by physical stimulation, it is relatively easy for rabbits to become pseudopregnant. This condition wastes a lot of time as the doe is tied up for about two weeks until it can be determined by palpation (examination by touch) whether she is pregnant. (Suitor, 1958.) If the doe is pregnant, a person may feel with the thumb and fingers a series of nodules or lumps in her lower abdomen.

Kindling

The gestation period of a rabbit is variable, ranging from 28 to 36 days, with an average of 31 days. Depending upon size and knowledge of individual rabbits, about the 26th or 30th day after breeding the doe should be provided with her own clean nest box.

Good dimensions for a nest box are 18 inches (46 cm) deep by 8 inches (20 cm) wide by 10 inches (25 cm) high. (CCRPA, 1974.) The recommended size for a nest box for the most popular breeds, such as New Zealand, California and Satin, is 18" deep by 12" by 14" (46 x 31 x 36 cm).

Average litter size is quite difficult to detail because of so many breeds and management factors influencing this trait.

However, eight is about ideal for the herd average for large breeds. If a doe has too many young to feed, it is easy to transfer them to another doe within the first two days. A doe builds a nest by pulling her own hair and lining the nest of the kindling box provided. Babies may be weaned at six to eight weeks of age and the doe can be rebred at once. Eight weeks is the standard age for marketing fryers.

Disease

Disease always should be considered and guarded against for successful enjoyment of a rabbitry. Good management and sanitation practices are by far the best means of preventing and controlling disease. Hutches, all wire cages, nest boxes, feeders and waterers need to be cleaned and disinfected periodically. Hutches must be ventilated but not drafty. Chlorination of the water supply is a good idea, especially if any disease symptoms appear. For more detailed information on rabbit ailments, see Service in Action sheet 1.206, or contact the local CSU extension office.

Disease can be controlled only if it is noticed, so rabbits should be observed carefully. An awareness of how much they drink and eat, if their droppings are normal, if they become less active or are more nervous is important. Changes in any of these routines can be warning signs of a disease or perhaps a less severe problem, but an awareness on the part of those caring for the rabbits will prove to be most helpful in correcting the problem and makes the hobby more interesting.

References

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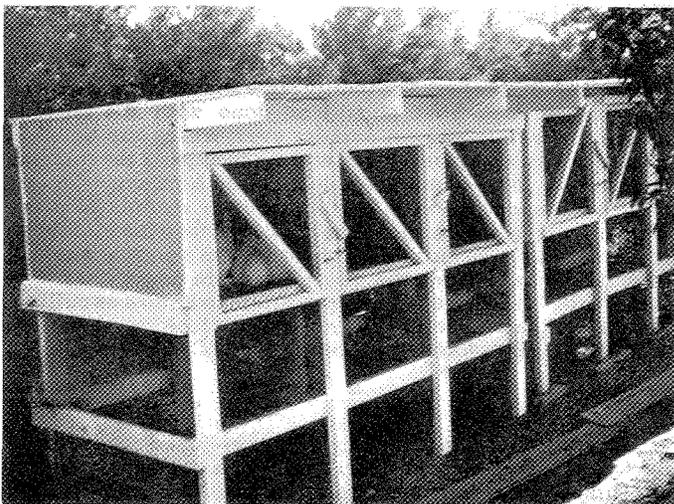


Figure 1: Example of a simply constructed three-compartment hutch for a backyard rabbitry.