



Jr. Animal Scientist

APRIL 28, 2020



Rabbit Farming

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Cuniculture

Cuniculture is the agricultural practice of breeding and raising domestic rabbits as livestock. We breed rabbits for pets, showing, meat, and wool. A rabbit **fancier** is someone who works in the development and betterment of rabbit breeds. Scientists also practice cuniculture in the use and management of rabbits as biomedical models in research or to help create antibodies used in research.



Photo: <http://heropetmarbrunei.blogspot.com/2011/01/my-new-rabbit-cage.html>

Rabbits were one of the last animals to be domesticated and used for scientific research. Because of their rapid reproductive cycle, genetic modification is much faster. It is also much less expensive to keep rabbits than other larger livestock species.

Rabbits in Research

Rabbits play an integral part in research. **Jean-Joseph Pasteur** created the first vaccine for rabies using rabbits. Rabbits are also used to investigate transmission of diseases, surgical models like retinal transplants and genetic traits!

Laboratory rabbit production has the potential to be very profitable. To produce rabbits for laboratories, hospitals, or universities, the producer must be licensed and meet the criteria for breed, age, weight, and any other characteristics that are specified.



Photo: iStock /Artfully79

Rabbits used as Meat

We raise over 1.2 million meat rabbits per year. More than 4,300 farms in the United States sold 890,000 rabbits. Small-scale farms are a thing of the past—rabbit farming has grown into large-scale commercial operations with each farm raising 1000s of rabbits.

Rabbits are classified according to their weight and hair. The weight categories are small (3 to 4 pounds), medium (9 to 12 pounds), and large (14 to 16 pounds). A common breed used for meat production is the medium-weight New Zealand White.

Rabbits processed for meat are either fryers, roasters, or stewers.

- **Fryers** – Youngest and lightest category. Fryers are less than ten weeks old and weigh 3.5 to 5.5 pounds.
- **Roasters** – Intermediate age and weight category. Roasters are ten weeks to 6 months old and weigh 5.5 to 9 pounds.
- **Stewers** – Oldest and heaviest category. Stewers are over six months old and must weigh over 8 pounds.

Source: https://www.canr.msu.edu/uploads/resources/pdfs/4h1508_4-h_rabbittracks_meat_quality.pdf

Rabbit meat is often considered a delicacy. The meat is white (which contains less saturated fats), fine-grained, well flavored, and high in protein and low in fat, cholesterol, sodium, and calories.



Photo: iStock / spline_x

Fun Fact: Rabbits can turn 20% of the protein they eat into edible meat.



Photo: iStock / Sonsedska



Rabbits used for Wool

Angora rabbits are the only breed used for wool. The market for angora wool is small. Angora is purchased mostly by individuals or organizations buying for mills. Angora wool can be spun into yarn and marketed directly to the general public.

Angora is high quality wool because of its softness and thin fibers. It is often referred to as a halo by knitters due to its fluffiness. Luxury garments and therapeutic clothing for people with arthritis and other joint diseases are made from angora wool.

Source: <https://extension.psu.edu/rabbit-production>

Rabbits as Pets and for Show

Did you know there are almost 5.3 million rabbits owned as pets today. That's a lot of rabbits! Rabbits have been kept as pets since the 18th century. These animals need a lot of time to themselves, but also enjoy being handled on a regular basis. But you have to be careful not to leave anything out. These cute fluffy bunnies have a natural tendency to chew.

It is also very common to own rabbits for show. These animals are kept well conditioned and are judged on flesh and fur condition, as well as their teeth and nails! Handling is also very important when showing a rabbit and many kids participate in showmanship.

Showmanship is about the person handling the animal vs. the animal itself; presenting and showing the animal to the best of a person's ability.

What do rabbits eat?

As a pet, or in commercial production farm, rabbit nutrition is similar. Like all animals, rabbits require fresh, clean water every day. It is common to find automatic watering systems that offer a continuous supply of water in rabbit barns. This is one way to reduce waste and contamination.

There are two types of nutrition programs that are used when raising rabbits: hay and grain diets or commercial pre-balanced pellet rations. If a producer is using hay and grain, they must work with a nutritionist to formulate the diet to meet the rabbit's nutritional requirements. Pelleted rations allow a producer to easily feed a rabbit based on their dietary needs by using one feed. It is common for owners to feed the pre-balanced pellet while supplementing hay and vegetables as a snack.

Fun fact: A doe and litter require 1 gallon of water a day in warm weather!



Photo: iStock / JanJBrand



Photo: iStock / sergio_kumer

Rabbit Housing

On commercial operations, you will find both cages and nesting boxes. Cages are all-wire because wooden parts are not as sanitary or convenient to manage. Cages are also used to house pet rabbits.

Nesting boxes are used for the mother rabbit (doe) to give birth to her young. Although wood is not as easy to clean, most nesting boxes are made from wood. It is important that these boxes are not wire on the bottom because the doe burrows to the bottom to give birth (kindle her young). Also, a wire bottom may not be warm enough in the winter.

How to Care for a Pet Bunny

1. Set up safe housing

Bunnies can live inside either free-reign in a bunny proofed room, or they can be contained within a puppy pen, bunny condo, or large rabbit cage. Every space needs to be big enough for them to hop around. Bunnies should always be let out for a few hours a day for exercise.

Some homes may choose to have their bunny live outside. Most outdoor hutches have multiple levels and/or rooms that are dry, clean and properly ventilated.

2. How to bunny proof your house

Bunnies like to chew! Make sure all wires are covered so that the bunny doesn't chew and get hurt.

3. Provide fresh water and feed—this is important for bunnies inside and out!

As we learned before, it is important for a bunny to receive a diet that meets their nutritional needs. This can be accomplished by feeding a mixture of hay and pellets. Bunnies also really like treats! Fresh greens and vegetables are great treats for your rabbit.





4. How to set up a litter box for your new bunny

Similar to cats—rabbits naturally like to poop and pee in one area. Set up a medium-sized litter box near their food and water bowls. Rabbits require a special rabbit-safe pellet litter. Because rabbits like to eat and poop at the same time, having the litter box close to their feeder will encourage good litter box habits.

Outside bunnies like to have options. If your bunny is outside and in a wire cage—litter boxes may not be needed. If the bottom of the cage is not wire, placing multiple litter boxes around will help keep their pen clean!

5. Provide enrichment for your bunny

Like all animals, bunnies get bored easily. They need lots of exercise and mental stimulation. You can make a fun cardboard castle that will allow them refuge and hours of satisfying chewing. There are also many enrichment toys that your parents can help you find for your bunny.

6. Grooming your pet bunny

Rabbits are naturally clean animals and usually take care of washing themselves. But, rabbits do go through shedding cycles a couple times a year, so it's important to groom them on a regular basis.

7. Veterinary care

It is important to find a rabbit-savvy vet! Because rabbits are prey animals, it is natural for them to hide when they do not feel well. You have to keep a good record of their health and ensure your bunny is eating, drinking, pooping and peeing regularly.

8. Understanding your pets behavior

Rabbits are very different from cats and dogs. It is important to learn more about rabbit behaviors so you and your bunny can live a happy life together.

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COVER PHOTOS: iStock / Thorsten Spoerlein (large),
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