

It's a Bunderful Life! Raising Rabbits for Meat and Manure



I believe rabbits are the best source all round for small scale meat production that is still fairly low cost once you get set up. They eat a relatively small amount and require a little space, they are quiet and generally low maintenance. They provide meat, pelts, manure, companionship and lots of joy. I personally think they are the most selfless of creatures and so my aim with my rabbitry is to provide a happy and good life, quality care, lots of love and a quick and painless, with no fear of death. My goal is to eventually have a closed loop system , and be less dependent on foods from outside sources, pellets are relatively cheap outside of kindle season , where more rabbits require more feed.

Supplies: cages, wire with wire bottom.

***TSC has cheap cages and they last surprisingly long, but are not of greatest quality. I do like trays as it keeps the roly poly load down and I don't add more to my garden.**

***SSS has really nice cages I prefer the 30X30 bigger IS better especially if you have lots of kits and it makes for happier bunnies.**

* Make your own: it is labor intensive, BUT you get to plan for size and need. While I like the other cages it is no fun trying to crawl half way in to get a reluctant rabbit out. (SHORT ARMS)

*Food and water... Hands down I like the metal bowls that attach to the side, the plastic small containers that hook on the side and SSS water bottles.

* Political signs: recycle them! They are perfect wind and rain protection. Rabbits can't pull them through to eat them.

*Something to sit on: wood or tile(no cedar)

Nesting boxes: again I like the ones at SSS, they are metal, you can make your own wooden ones. Some bunnies like to use it as a potty so being able to replace the bottom is a must

Hay and Feed : Costal from SSS and Feed from Rippy's

Tamuk breed rabbit- My preference due to ability to handle extremes of weather. They don't mind heat or cold and seem to take it in stride.

How your rabbits live is entirely up to you. Some really love the colony style, others have open pens, cages, rabbit tractors. I think it entirely depends on climate, circumstances and means. I hear conflicting things about colony style, but I think as with anything you have pros and cons and environment will play into pests, worms and other things that could do rabbits harm. Colony seems to have more disease risk. I choose to have my Rabbits in individual cages, I prefer to have a way to capture feces and urine and having a place for them to rest (wood, tile, etc... plastic is not recommended or cardboard as they will eat it and having something you can easily clean.

I choose individual cages mama's keep babies about 6 weeks, bucks are loners, they compete and will hurt each other for the honor of mating, they are not discerning and some of this is a dominance trait. Females will do the same at times and imagine the surprise of the buck when tables are turned. Females will neuter a buck if not in the mood... it is better for all involved to have space.

I do use a play pen, doggy exercise area for them to get time out of their cages,

Where I live it is pretty harsh, between the wind, heat, cold, driving rain. A well shaded area is a must and protection from all directions from the winter winds (poll signs, plastic, old sheets, shade cloths) some kind of roof to keep rain/sun off. I feel the less they have to deal with the sun the better their survival chances. In the summer they are well shaded and do well in the heat which is our main concern.

Tamuks seem to handle it well. In the past my Californians suffered so much and I swore off rabbits for many years. It was a BIG struggle with frozen water bottles, dying rabbits and the constant fear of what was happening with them when I had to leave for the day. I never really worry with Tamuk. They stretch out pant and nap and spring up when the heat of the day is past. I have tried ice, cold bottles, cold water and they just want to go about their thing. Shade and a breeze and they do just fine.

I'd like to do a balance of both. I try to give my bunnies some time to have ground time, free space and access to greens and a natural environment.

Big note: some people like to keep chickens and rabbits together. It's a great idea.

Two problems with it are 1. Chickens pooping on your bunnies. Being able to roost on the cages makes for a dirty and pesty environment.

2. I don't trust chickens, make false bottoms for your cages to protect your babies and your bucks nuts because apparently chickens will neuter your bucks.

Ear oil: ear mites. this is your biggest maintenance in my opinion. You can simply make a garlic olive oil infusion for your furry friends or complicate it and add things like mullien and marshmallow and chamomile to the mix. I am finding that pregnant and nursing does are more susceptible to it. I am venturing to guess it is an immune system response and they get it when they are stressed. The bucks we treat periodically. They should be treated monthly or at least checked often. I do not treat if I do not see it. I tend to see it in winter months or after long bouts of rainy weather. I generally do not treat for worms. I haven't had any health issues in my animals and try to give them a clean. Stress free environment as possible with herbs and a varied diet.

Manure; Rabbit manure is a cold manure and can be added directly to the garden and no composting needed.

Meat: Rabbit meat tastes much like chicken breast, it is very lean though an older doe may have some really nice fat. Older animals are tougher like chicken (stews) and I prefer 13-18 weeks in general for harvesting. Some do earlier and that is ok. It really depends on grow out and stress. Some years they grow fast. They burn more energy in the cold or extreme heat and seem to slow, but on average everything is MUCH easier and they are tender and easier to harvest. An older animal are MUCH harder to skin and clean.

Harvesting techniques: Alas this is my most unfavorite part, but necessary. THIS IS HOW MEAT IS HARVESTED.

There are many ways to do this... some prefer broomstick, bop and bleed, hopper popper, chain (neck breaking of any means), Dick (puts a hole in top of head, they die) and shooting.

I prefer shooting. It's easy for me, it's quick, painless and they bleed out. Makes for easier cleaning. I Hate any neck breaking method. It bruises meat and overall makes for an unpleasant experience in my opinion. I have too much cleanup to do. I also notice a difference in the smell and taste of the meat and am put off by it. All methods can have mistakes and accidents and not as quick a death as you wish. My goal is to be quick and efficient. Do whatever method suits you. But know that there will be times things don't always go as planned especially in the learning stages and you must be prepared to remedy the situation quickly.

I am still learning what works and make mistakes, but get better with time and experience. Whatever gives you confidence to do what you need to then do it. Shooting means I can do it myself, they bleed out and I can do the rest with help if needed. It is doable for younger people, but know if you are needing to be efficient then there are other options.

What can be used in a rabbit? Everything! Some people feed all the extra parts to dogs. Ears, head, feet, innards. Heart, liver are good treats.. Of course meat and bones for soups. Pelts for projects,

Rabbits are a whole use animal and keep giving. Manure for your garden grows veggies and greens for both you and your furry friends.

Problems I have encountered: Missed pregnancies (most likely failed pregnancies)

Ladies not interested in mating, babies born on the wire, too many babies, New mamas (generally make mistakes and babies die) deaths of babies within 1-5 weeks..

New babies not strong enough to compete for nipples, seemingly umbilical bleed outs, general failure to thrive, hernia, heat, ear mites, cold kills babies, red ants, bad mamas.

You WILL lose kits. It is inevitable, failure to thrive happens.. Sometimes in big litters and sometimes in new less experienced mamas. It usually only takes one “mistake Litter” If you find you have more than a couple she may not be a good mama and not worth keeping. Mean mamas happen and are not worth keeping. I had one mama have her “ mistake litter’ second litter she broke bones, jumped on babies and was plain mean. I was lucky that my other mama would foster them and mean girl went to freezer camp.

Fostering mamas: I find bunnies cannot count and don’t seem to care, if babies are close in age mama will take them. Two of our mamas had big litter and we swapped babies back and forth. “Squishy bellies” got a mix up in the nest and we had no litter losses.

We are dealing with this right now and are playing mix and match babies and trying to get a better outcome.

Another mama had a big litter and the other lost her 4 kits (first time mama mistake having them on the wire) She was distressed and happily adopted 3 which gave everyone a better chance. I could have bred her instead, but this decision gave us better outcomes in the long run. She just gave me a litter of 11 last week. I expect losses. It’s a big litter!

That’s the thing with breeding. Having a few does and a couple bucks gives you insurance that you WILL get litters, things happen, animals die or get injured. If you

have diversity you have options. There have been seasons I have been grateful I am not dependent on them entirely.

Ladies who will not breed but are young can either have issues, be fat (it is more internal than external fat) or need a few introductions to the male. A successful breeding is a FALL OFF... the male breeds a doe when he is done; he squeaks and falls off. You can't miss it poor sweet boys! 3 of these sessions and you can usually be certain she is bred. Heat will be the enemy to your bucks sperm count and they are infertile in the hot months. Breeding is in cool months and it may take a bit for the sperm count to go up on your boys. (Octoberish to Feb-Marchish.)

There is a difference between a bucks breeding not being successful and a doe who will not lift to breed. If fall off occurred and no litter comes in a month then maybe she lost the pregnancy or his sperm was off. If multiple breedings are not fruitful then you must determine who the problem is.

In my colony I have 2 breeding bucks, 1 retired buck charlie, and 4 does. This year though a rocky start off we now have 34 rabbits.

I started off with one buck, Charlie and then eventually got a doe. They had a good litter, but the doe was mean and after a second litter she needed to be culled. I added 2 new unrelated does last year and kept two daughters from Charlie. I now have two unrelated bucks for diversity. For rabbits... Father Daughter..mother/son are fine but sibling matches are not ok. I do prefer to have a bit of diversity though I have bred father/daughter with good results. When thinking of your rabbitry; resisting a hurried purchase and giving yourself options is a good idea. Looking for good litter size, personality, grow rates, good mamas, pelt colors and where they are coming from are all good things. Rushing will not give you good results. It's ok to start with a breeding pair and get only 2 litters a year, work out kinks and add another doe for next season.

I am finding I need bigger cages and am building 4x2 foot cages for mamas with big litters and grow outs. I'd like to add another play area for bunnies too to have more "bunny fun time." having space for them to enjoy cool soil on a hot day.

It is always a work in progress, your goals may change over time and that's ok. When I started it was only for meat and security. As I gain more experience I want to use ALL the rabbit. I want to respect the animal and the life it gave to sustain us and wasting nothing is the way to do it. I am learning to tan pelts. You WILL make mistakes, but it is Ok! Better than throwing it away. Some things I have learned... Random Knowledge
*Harvesting a shedding rabbit means you'll have a shedding pelt.. Not fun if flying bunny hair makes you itch. Sewing skin is WAY harder than you imagine. *Knives are not the best way to flesh a hide. It is a lot of work, but very relaxing and the sense of accomplishment in a well tanned hide is pretty nice!

* Rabbits make good companions. Some are friendly and just love to snuggle. You can't help but be happy with a bunny to snuggle. It reduces stress and anxiety. Bunnies are the gift that keeps on giving. Watch for claws!

Honestly when I started I just wanted a doe and a buck as insurance that I could feed my children with things being uncertain, but I realized how little good that would do me if I did not learn what I would need to to be successful. I have had many learning curves in the last years from HOW I want to harvest to what knives hold up, techniques of all kinds. What I liked and what I was not willing to do. I suggest whether it's rabbits or anything else you take time to learn the necessary skills BEFORE you're in the hot seat whatever that skill may be. That skill is going to be part of your survival no matter the situation. You will be resilient rather than reactive.

Resources:

Ice Age Farmer - IAF-Rabbits forum on Telegram

YouTube: @hiddenspringfarm The real reason we raise meat rabbits (goof)

You Tube has videos for ANY type of Rabbit raising and harvesting

 **Raising Meat Rabbits For Beginners**

Housing:

file:///home/chronos/u-4991bbb64cd21bffcb9b07bd84642e513979a02/MyFiles/Downloads/McNitt%202009-Rabbit%20Housing%20Manual.pdf

Feeding Meat Rabbits for Free by Megan Hight

Tools:

<https://a.co/d/dAywPap> Outdoor Edge RazorLight Knife

<https://a.co/d/9Ua3i8P> 6 Inch Boning Knife Flexible Blade