



Rabbits



Rabbits make an ideal 4-H project animal. They are gentle and quiet. They are interesting to watch, and easy to handle. They do not make noise and because of their size, they require only a small living area. Rabbits can live either indoors or outdoors.

Selection

Rabbits come in many sizes, shapes and colours. The larger breeds are usually kept for meat production. The medium weight breeds are usually kept for meat, fur or for pet or show stock. The smallest breeds weigh about one kilogram and the very large breeds weigh over six kilograms.

Here are a few of the breeds classified by their adult weights (based on ideal weights for show).

Small Breeds (Under 2.5 kg)	Medium Breeds (2.5 - 4.5 kg)	Large Breeds (Over 4.5 kg)
Dutch	English Angora	Argentine Champagne
Himalayan	French Angora	Bevern
Holland Lop	Belgian Hare	Checkered Giant
Mini Lop	Californian	Giant chinchilla
Netherland Dwarf	Standard Chinchilla	Chinchilla Heavyweight
Petite	English Spot	Flemish
Polish	Havana	English Lop
Tan	Rex	French Lop
	Silver	New Zealand
	Silver Marten	Satin

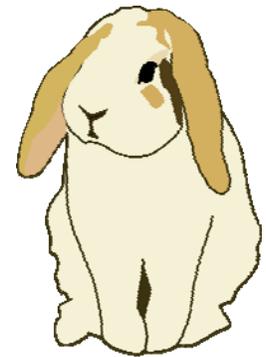
If you are choosing a rabbit as a pet, you might choose a small breed. These rabbits require less area for housing, eat less food and are small and easy to pick up. The rabbits on the medium breed list are also suitable as pets, but most of these are also large enough to be used for meat production. The rabbits on the large breed list may also be kept as pets, but as they mature, these rabbits will become quite large. They will require extra living space and food. Because of their greater size, they may be quite difficult to handle.

The English Angora and French Angora rabbits have very long, soft, woolly coats. They require special grooming and must be regularly plucked or clipped to remove the wool which they shed on a continuous basis. If they are not groomed adequately, their coats become extremely matted. They will also try to groom themselves by licking their coats and will swallow large quantities of hair. This can result in a deadly digestive system blockage known as "wool block".

You should try to purchase your first rabbits from an experienced rabbit breeder. Most serious rabbit breeders will be able to help you start out right with your new rabbits. Most will be able to make suggestions about ways to feed and care for your new rabbits. You might like to take a notebook along when you go to purchase your new rabbits. Ask for instructions on feeding and care and make notes on these for future reference.

The health of the animal is very important when selecting a rabbit. The following are some pointers and a ten point inspection list that will help you choose a healthy rabbit.

Look around when you enter the seller's rabbitry. The rabbitry should be clean. All of the cages, waterers and feeders should be clean. The air should be fresh and not heavy with dampness and odour from urine. All of the rabbits should be clean and healthy-looking. Listen for any signs of coughing or sneezing in the rabbitry. These are signs of serious health problems.

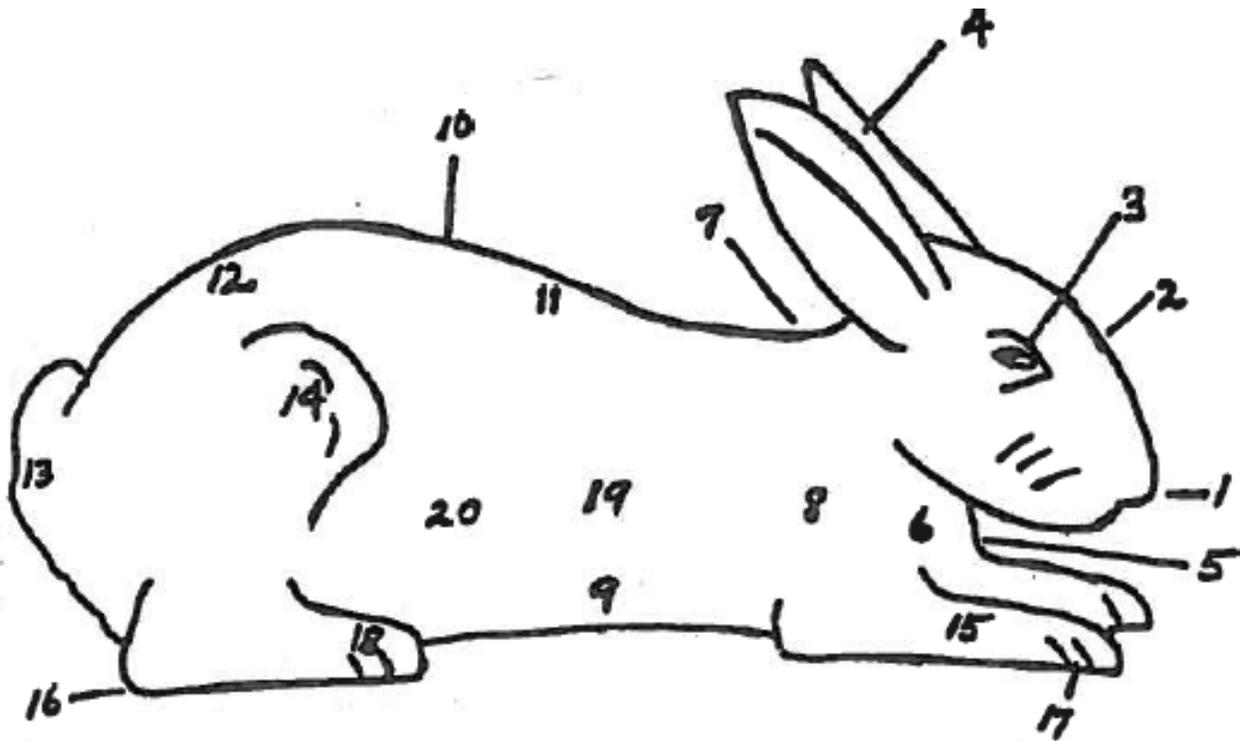


Do the "TEN POINT INSPECTION" that follows when you find a rabbit you wish to buy. Take your time and watch carefully for health problems as well as defects that would affect the health of the rabbit and its usefulness for breeding or show.

1. Look inside the ears. You should not see any dried, yellowish or brownish crusty discharge. This could mean an ear mite problem. Ear mites are very tiny bugs that can cause damage to rabbit's ears. The rabbit should not mind having its ears handled close to where they join the head unless the ears are sore from ear mite damage.
2. Check the eyes to be sure that they are clean, shiny and bright. They should not be covered with a milky-looking coating. This would mean an eye infection. There should not be discharge from the eyes. The fur on the face below the eyes should be dry, never wet.
3. Check the nose. There should not be any yellow or white discharge. The fur around the nose should be dry, never wet. A runny nose and noisy breathing could mean that the rabbit has snuffles. Snuffles is a serious disease that cannot be cured.
4. Check the teeth to be sure that there are none missing. The teeth should be straight and a normal length. Watch out for upper and lower teeth that do not meet properly. Malocclusion (mal-o-clue-shun) is the proper word to describe teeth that do not grow properly.
5. Check the front paws of the rabbit to make sure that they are clean and dry. A rabbit with runny eyes or nose will rub its front feet on its face. Its front paws will then become wet. This is a common symptom of snuffles.
6. Check the rabbit's front and rear feet for missing toenails. Missing toenails are a disqualification at a show. Be sure that the nails are the correct colour for your breed of rabbit.

7. Check the bottoms of the feet for sores. Sores on the bottoms of the back feet and legs are called sore hocks. This is caused by poor hair covering and from being kept in an unclean cage.
8. Check to see that the tail is normal and not bent, broken or missing.
9. Turn the rabbit onto its back and check to see if it is the sex you want. Check that there are no sores or other skin irritations around the reproductive organs.
10. Check that the rabbit's colouring, coat type, nails, eyes, etc. conform to the breed standard (if you want a particular breed of rabbit for show).

Parts of the Rabbit



- | | | | |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|
| 1. Nose | 6. Breast | 11. Loin | 16. Hock |
| 2. Forehead | 7. Neck | 12. Rump | 17. Toes |
| 3. Eye | 8. Shoulder | 13. Tail | 18. Foot |
| 4. Ear | 9. Belly | 14. Thigh | 19. Body |
| 5. Dewlap | 10. Saddle | 15. Foreleg | 20. Flank |

Facilities

Rabbits may be kept in an outside hutch. Most small hutches for one or two rabbits are made like a wooden box with a door in one side. The box is attached to a wire cage which the rabbit can go into to get exercise. Some hutches are also large cages with a wire floor and a wire front with a wooden back and sides to provide shelter. The rabbit may have a nesting box and hay feeder within the cage. Regardless of the type of hutch, it should have a weatherproof roof to keep the rabbits dry.

Most rabbits are housed in cages made of welded wire mesh. It is important to never use poultry wire on any part of your cages. It is cheaper but it is also weaker. Due to its construction and gauge (thickness and strength) dogs, humans, owls, hawks, raccoons, and foxes can easily break through the wire and kill your rabbits.

Used cages are often available through rabbit breeders or through advertisements in pet and livestock columns. They may also be made from wire mesh that can be purchased at most hardware or feed stores. The mesh used for building a cage should be:

12.5 mm by 25 mm - for the floor

25 mm by 25 mm OR 25 mm by 50 mm - for the sides and top

The best size for a cage is:⁷

	Depth	Width	Height
For Breeding Does	75 cm	72 cm	38 cm
	or 75 cm	90 cm	38 cm
For Breeding Bucks	75 cm	75 cm	38 cm
For replacement Stock	45 cm	60 cm	38 cm
(young replacement	or 60 cm	60 cm	38 cm
breeding rabbits)	or 45 cm	75 cm	38 cm

⁷ *Suggested sizes for large rabbits from Agriculture Canada*

NOTE: Small rabbit breeds can be housed in proportionately smaller cages than those above.

Wire cages are usually best for rabbits because they can be properly cleaned. Wooden cages will absorb urine and odour and eventually the wood will decay from contact with the urine.

Rabbits may also be housed indoors. They may be kept in a garage or even in the house. Rabbits like the temperature of their housing to be 16°-20°C so they should be kept in a cool room if they are in the house. They are usually kept in a wire cage. If you do keep your rabbit indoors, let it out into the house for exercise but be very careful that it doesn't eat something that it shouldn't. If you do not do this, you should have an outdoor exercise area made.

You should be sure that the cage is located in a dry place where strong drafts of air cannot blow through the cage. Also, the cage should not be located where direct sun can cause the rabbit to get overheated.

Outdoor exercise areas may be made by building a large cage from poultry fencing which has small holes. The cage should have a mesh floor to prevent the rabbit from digging its way out. If the cage is constructed with a wooden frame, it can be moved around on the grass to provide a clean spot for grazing each day. If you put your rabbit into an exercise pen, be sure that it is not put into direct sunlight (remember that the sun and shade change during the day). Rabbits should have access to water at all times, even when in their exercise pen.

Equipment:

Nesting boxes are necessary for breeding animals.

A wire brush is used to brush off manure or matted hair which sticks to the cages.

The only other equipment needed for your rabbit will be some type of waterer and feeder.



You may wish to place a board inside the hutch for your rabbit to sit on instead of having to sit on the wire mesh.

During the winter you can add a wooden box filled with straw for the rabbit to burrow in to stay warm.

Feeding

The only feed equipment needed for your rabbit will be some type of waterer and feeder. The waterers and feeders can be heavy glass or ceramic bowls which cannot be easily overturned. However, you will find that the rabbit's food and water will become dirty quite often if you use this type of container. It is better to use the drip valve water bottle type of waterer for rabbits. These are available in many feed and pet stores. The feeder should be the type that fits onto the outside of the cage with a small feed trough that fits through the cage wire in a slot that you have cut to hold the feeder. Hay can also be fed to your rabbits by attaching a small wire rack to the outside of the cage.

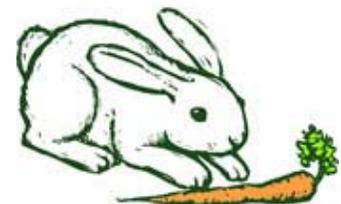
Water should be available at all times and should always be clean and fresh.

Rabbits need a balanced diet. Feed your rabbits commercial rabbit pellets. Rabbits should receive a type of feed appropriate for the type of rabbit. Most feed companies make different rations for growing rabbits, rabbits that are nursing young, and breeding rabbits on a diet to maintain their weight and condition. You should choose a feed that is right for your rabbits. Your feed store should be able to help you make the right choice. The amount of feed to be fed will depend on which feed you have chosen and the size of your rabbit, its stage of life (nursing, growing, pregnant) and the temperature of the living space. Rabbits need more food to create energy to stay warm in cold weather.

Feed a good quality hay to your rabbits. They should have access to hay at all times. Hay will provide roughage for better digestion and it will give rabbits something to chew on; rabbits do like to chew.

Occasionally you may want to treat your rabbit to a carrot, apple, cabbage, or lettuce leaf.

A salt spool may be provided in the rabbit's cage. Commercial rabbit pellet feeds also contain minerals that the rabbit needs.

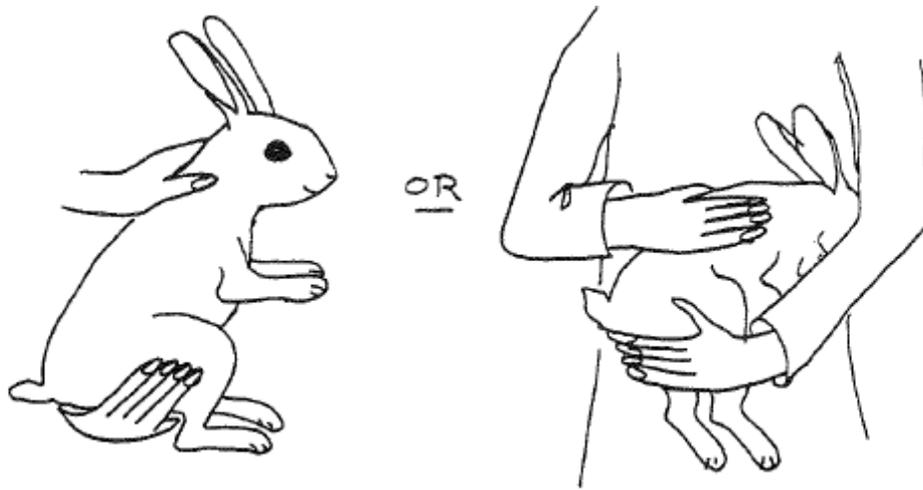


Management

Rabbits are easily excited. Learn to enter your rabbitry and work among your rabbits without exciting them. As you approach, whistle, speak to your rabbits, or knock on the door or gate to let them know you are coming. Move slowly and make no startling noises.

Handling

Although a rabbit's ears look like good handles for lifting, never pick a rabbit up by its ears! The ears are very sensitive and can be seriously damaged by rough handling. To pick up your rabbit, grasp the loose skin over its shoulder area. Slide your other hand underneath the hind part of the rabbit to support the weight of its body. Lift the rabbit and hold it against your body. You can carry the rabbit with its head under your arm and its body pressed against your side with your arm supporting its weight.

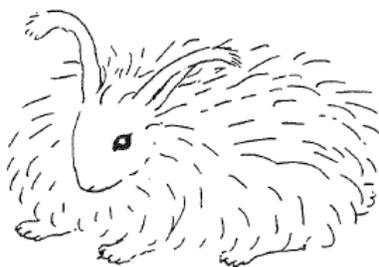


Do not pick the rabbit up by its ears or its legs.

A rabbit may be restrained by placing it on a flat surface and then firmly pressing it down. If the rabbit struggles wildly, relax the pressure so that it won't get hurt.

Grooming

Rabbits may be brushed with a soft brush or just by running your hands in the same direction as the fur growth to remove loose hair. Slightly dampened hands will improve brushing. A soft cloth may be used to brush the hair to add shine before showing.



Angora rabbits (which are kept for their hair production), should be plucked regularly. If you do not pluck them, they will lick and swallow their hair and get hairballs. You should only own an Angora if you are willing to pluck them often.

Hairballs: Any type of rabbit can develop hairballs. Fresh roughage such as hay in the diet will help to prevent hairballs.

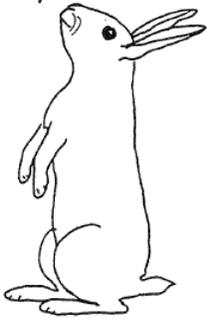
A rabbit's toenails should be kept neatly trimmed. This will prevent the rabbit from causing serious scratching of anyone handling it. Dog and cat nail clippers may be used to trim a rabbit's nails. Snip off the curved tip of the nails. BUT, watch out for the quick in the nail. The quick has a vein in it that can bleed badly if it is cut.

Training

Rabbits may be taught to come when called by name or whistling. Reward them with a treat when they come to you.



They may also be trained to sit quietly where you place them. Gently move them back into position after you have set them on a table and position them as you wish.



Rabbits can be taught to stand up on their hind legs to be given a treat. This is done by calling the rabbit's name then holding the treat about a foot above the rabbit's head.

Rabbits can be trained to use a kitty litter box. Keep the rabbit in a cage or other small area. Place a low litter box in the cage. The rabbit will probably begin to use this litter box. When you see that it has learned to use the box, you may let your rabbit roam loose in your house (if you don't have other pets that will harm it!!!) If it does not use its box, confine it in a small area again until it learns what you wish it to do.

Exercise

Rabbits should receive lots of exercise. You may put your rabbit in an exercise pen, or you may let it run loose in the house. Be sure that other pets or animals cannot harm your rabbit when it is out of its cage. Rabbits will become quite playful if they are handled often and they like to play "hide and seek" games once they are very tame. Do not treat a rabbit roughly during play or it will become very nervous of being handled.



General Maintenance

Keep your rabbit's cage very clean. A clean cage will help to prevent most of the illnesses that can affect rabbits. A build-up of manure and urine will cause odours and humid conditions which can lead to health problems such as sore hock, snuffles, hutch burn, or weepy eyes.

Clean the cage by brushing it with a wire brush to remove any manure or hair. You may then wash the cage with a bleach and water mixture while brushing with a wire brush again. Any hard white deposits, which are caused by calcium deposits from rabbit urine, may build up on the cage wire. This can be removed by brushing the cage wire with a wire brush and a weak acid solution such as vinegar. All nesting boxes should be kept clean and edges sanded so the doe will not get splinters on her mammary system or udder. This could lead to an infection of the mammary system called mastitis which affects the milk.

Health Care

Most health problems are avoided by keeping the rabbitry and cages very clean. To prevent colds, keep the hutch in a dry, airy location, free from drafts.

Vaccines are not normally given to rabbits.

Ear mites can be a problem for rabbits. Isolate infected rabbits because ear mites can spread to other rabbits. Treatment for mites must be repeated until completely cured. Treatment may be with a special ear mite preparation or with a small amount of mineral oil poured into the ear and gently massaged into the ear canal. The excess can be gently blotted away with a cotton ball.

Rabbits can get "Sore Hock" (sores on the hind feet and legs) from being overweight, being kept on a wire floor and being kept on a dirty floor. Wire floor can also cause cuts to rabbit's feet (which can then become infected). It is a good idea to put a 3.5 metre by 3.5 metre piece of plywood in the cage for the rabbit to sit on when resting.

Snuffles is a disease which causes runny nose, sneezing, difficult breathing and runny eyes. The hair on the front feet becomes wet and matted. This disease cannot be treated successfully so it is important to buy animals which do not have the problem. (Snuffles will be present in most rabbitries, but it is usually only a serious problem when animals become stressed -avoid buying a rabbit which has had this problem because it doesn't go away once the animal has become sick with it).

In case of continued scratching of the ears and loud sneezes, consult your veterinarian. You can use commercially prepared powder to control external parasites such as fleas and lice.

If the dewlap or fold of skin under the rabbit's chin becomes sore from drinking water, place the water container on a board to raise it so the dewlap cannot get wet.

Some diseases of rabbits are chronic meaning that they cannot be completely cured and the disease is likely to come back. One such disease is snuffles, a disease that affects the rabbit's respiratory system. When the rabbit has a chronic health problem, it is usually a good idea to cull the rabbit (ie. butcher for meat or destroy), to prevent spread of the disease into healthy rabbits in the rabbitry.

Male rabbits may spray urine, bite, stamp their feet and have a strong odour. Castrating the rabbit will eliminate these problems.



Breeding

Male rabbits are called bucks, and females are called does. If you decide to raise a litter of rabbits, be sure to make prior arrangements to sell or give away the babies.

When breeding a doe, always take her to the buck's hutch. This is because the doe is very protective of her pen and she may attack and injure the buck. Female rabbits do not have a "heat cycle" like many other mammals. They will usually breed at any time. The buck takes no part in rearing the babies and must be separated from them.

The gestation period, or the period from mating to kindling, is only one month (29 - 35 days). The litters are usually 7 to 10 babies. Small breeds can be mated 4 to 5 months of age; medium weight breeds at 5 to 6 months and giant breeds at 8 to 12 months.

A few days before kindling, place a nest box in the hutch. The box should be well-bedded with clean excelsior or straw. When ready to kindle, the doe will pluck fur from her body to line the nest. Kindling is a critical period in a doe's life. At this time, and for a day or two afterward, the doe and kits should not be disturbed except for regular feeding and watering.

In around 10 days the baby rabbits open their eyes, and within 4 weeks they come out of the nest to feed with their mother. At 2 months of age the mother will wean them.

Economics

It is a very good idea to keep records for your rabbits. The information can be used to identify the most productive breeding stock, identify health problems, determine which feeds produce the best results, help to remind the manager about important dates and help keep track of expenses and income of the rabbitry.

Rabbit products may include sale of pets, fur, meat, shows, rabbit manure as a fertilizer and/or earthworms (in beds of rabbit manure), or the compost from the earthworms. Whatever product you produce, you will need customers to buy your products. You can advertise, visit stores that might purchase your product or participate in events that can help to promote your product. If you are going to be marketing fur or meat, it is a good idea to learn how to dress rabbits properly through watching a demonstration. Consult your leader to see if a demonstration can be arranged with someone experienced in slaughtering and skinning rabbits.

If you are interested in raising rabbits for meat production check Small Animals - Discover Small Livestock Animals, which has more information.



Project Resources



Pinterest - The Visual Discovery Tool

Pinterest is a social media bulletin board for you to virtually pin pictures of things that interest you to your own personal boards - Pin-Explore-Discover! 4-H Manitoba has a Pinterest account. Each project series has a board full of fun and interesting ideas. There are also boards for 4-H Awesome, Community Service, Volunteers, Communications and Building Blocks.

Check it out at www.pinterest.com/4hmanitoba/.

When you are doing a search for rabbit information on the internet be sure to be specific about what you want to find out - just entering "rabbit" will yield too many results for you to check and not all of them will relate to what you want to know. For example , try food for pet rabbits rather than rabbit food.

The following links may be of interest:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbit>

<http://rabbit.org/> House Rabbit Society

<https://pethelpful.com/rabbits/>

Sections of the Rabbit Fact Sheet were adapted with permission of Manitoba Agriculture from the Manitoba 4-H Project: Small Animals Leader's Manual - 1998. Portions of the fact sheet have been used with permission from Ontario 4-H and Saskatchewan 4-H Council.



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