



# DEVELOPING A RABBIT HABIT

Rabbits aren't rascally. They require owners who know proper care and maintenance

*Rebecca Moncur*

Rabbits have a number of uses – exhibition, meat, fur, wool, companionship, therapy animals, and as a manure source.

All rabbits require quality food and clean water, which can present challenges for the Wyoming rabbit producer.

### **Feed Me, Please**

Rabbit feeds are available at most co-ops and feed stores, but accessibility varies around the state. Some feeds are better than others. Feed comes in complete, show, and professional formulas and have between 16 and 18 percent protein. Show formulas have more oils for better coats.

Many of the higher protein, professional feeds are too rich for young

rabbits to digest. Enteritis is common and deadly in kits just beginning to eat solid foods and those newly weaned from their mothers. Many dwarf breeds cannot tolerate high protein feeds. Our family raises Mini Rex show rabbits, and we have raised Holland Lops in the past. Experience has taught us to feed 16 percent protein feeds to all our stock.

Rabbits do not adjust well to feed changes. Plan ahead so the

feed dealer will have the specific feed in stock. Rabbits also need grass hay. Grass hay helps a rabbit avoid fur block in their digestive systems. Many people give their bunnies treats, shredded wheat, oat cereals, or carrots, but our rabbits are crazy about hay. We also have dried oak leaves for travel to shows and for digestive upsets to keep our rabbits eating and healthy.

### **Care for a Drink?**

Wyoming's environment and water for the rabbit are closely linked. Frozen water is a headache for cattlemen as well as rabbit breeders. Rabbits can withstand very cold temperatures as long as they are protected from wind. Many breeders in Wyoming and Montana do not heat their barns. Because of our automatic



water system and the babies we raise for national shows, we keep our barn at 45 to 50 degrees F during winter. Putting water cups in their cages is best if in an unheated barn. The ice needs to be removed from the cups twice per day and refilled. Rabbits soon learn to drink their fill immediately after water is replenished to avoid ice. Even small breeds drink 8 to 16 ounces of water a day in the winter and more in the summer.

Summers in the Big Horn Basin are hot! Rabbits do not tolerate high temperatures well. They need shade, ventilation, and plenty of water to get through the summer. Many breeders freeze plastic pop bottles and put them in cages. Because we raise fur

rabbits, we have a swamp cooler and large fans to move the air.

### **Ventilation and Vermin**

Sanitation is a major concern in a rabbit barn. A clean barn is one of the best ways to keep stock healthy. Cages may have drop pans or they may be hanging cages where the urine and feces drop directly to the barn floor. There are even flush-clean systems that allow droppings to be washed down a drain to outside the building. Regardless of the system, it must be kept clean through biweekly or weekly cleaning.

Removing droppings reduces ammonia fumes that cause illness and keeps flies under control. There is a silver lining to all that housekeeping – the best gardens you ever grew! Composted rabbit manure is one of the best fertilizers.

Have a plan to keep mice, rats, birds, and spiders out of your barn. Mice and rats spread filth and cause stress to rabbits. Rats can attack kits and stress the nursing does so much does abandon their nests. Cats are good for pest control but make sure they respect the cages and leave the babies alone. Mouse bait held in long tubes along the walls allows the vermin in but keeps rabbits out.

Clean barn floors to remove food sources and nesting sites for vermin.

### **Dogs and Raccoons**

Most rabbit breeders have experienced the heartbreak of predation by dogs or raccoons. Raccoons will literally shred rabbits by pulling them through cage wire. One year we lost five valuable and adorable Holland Lop litters to a

raccoon. I came out to the barn and found nothing but traumatized does and fur where baby bunnies once thrived. The only way to deal with the dog and raccoon problem is to keep them out of the rabbitry. In the summer when the doors are open for ventilation, have screen doors in place strong enough to deter determined predators. Keep an eye out for stray dogs.

Dogs and rabbits don't mix.

### **Disease**

Many rabbit diseases are communicable, so illness allowed in the barn leads to sick bunnies. Sick animals should be isolated. We have a policy to never allow any rabbit with the respiratory disease snuffles on our property. This illness can be treated with antibiotics, but it cannot be cured. Wry neck also goes in this category. It is not worth having the entire herd sick for the sake of one rabbit. We have treated rabbits for enteritis. Lactated Ringer's solution, given subcutaneously, can be used in emergencies to help a sick, dehydrated rabbit survive.

### **To Market, To Market**

If raising rabbits for market purposes, have clear breeding goals and knowledge of the market for rabbits in your area. The pet market in our state is fair to poor outside the larger cities. Meat raisers require a well-developed market for their production. The fur and wool market can be strong but is best when paired with a value-added product.



*Chocolate lionhead*



# QUALITY MATTERS, BUY THE BEST

There is a tendency for first-time rabbit buyers to buy a cute bunny here and a cute bunny there without consideration of how they will work together.

1. Choose a breed that fits your interest. There are 47 American Rabbit Breeders Association (ARBA) recognized breeds ranging from rabbits prized for fur, wool, beauty, and/or utility value to those most suitable as pets due to size and/or temperament. Go to an ARBA show, talk to breeders, handle the rabbits, and inquire into their temperaments. Some breeds are easy-going and make great youth rabbits, while others are not for first-time owners. Running breeds need to run, and giant breeds need special accommodations because of their weight.

2. After choosing a breed, ask around for reputable breeders. Make sure they keep disease-free stock. Shows are a good place to make connections.
3. Staying within the same breeding lines is important when starting. Many lines don't cross well requiring a lot of time and work to get the desired quality. Buy the best trio a breeder can sell. If breeders can only spare a pair, contact them in a few months and ask for another doe or contact another breeder carrying the same lines.
4. Other tips:
  - a. Mothering ability is genetic, so buy good mothers.
  - b. A great buck is worth his weight in gold. He will have more influence on a herd or project than a doe. Spend as much money as your budget allows on a buck.
  - c. Many top breeders make special deals to youth to give them a good start.



*Rex*

## Have fun and make new friends

This hobby can be fun, and nothing relieves stress like grooming a friendly rabbit. Some of the best friends I have live in different states, and we meet at shows. We bought our first rabbit 12 years ago for my daughter to show in 4-H. Now we only have a senior in high school left at home who helps with the herd, but Momma has developed a lifelong rabbit habit!



As noted in the article, **Rebecca Moncur** knows a thing or two about raising rabbits. She can be reached at [rebecca.moncur@nwx.edu](mailto:rebecca.moncur@nwx.edu).