



Raising Meat Rabbits

Revised 7/1/2005

Introduction

Rabbits are raised for pets, show, laboratory testing, pelts, Angora wool, and meat. Rabbit meat—considered a delicacy by many—is low in fat, high in protein, and delicately flavored.

A part-time operation consists of fewer than 100 rabbits, while the uncommon full-time operation would consist of at least 600 does and 60 bucks. Each productive doe can be expected to kindle (give birth to) 25 to 50 bunnies a year, yielding 125 to 250 pounds of meat.

Successful producers have a well-considered niche marketing strategy, selling to processors, wholesalers, restaurants, or individual buyers. The margin of profit on meat rabbits is slim, so potential producers are advised to start small and to regard raising rabbits as a source of supplemental income.

Breeds

The two best meat breeds in New York are the white New Zealand and Californian rabbits because they produce more rapid growth and a more uniform fryer (rabbit ready for sale at 8 weeks). Some producers crossbreed these two breeds to get vigorous hybrid offspring.



Californian



New Zealand

Feed Requirements

Care should be taken not to over feed rabbits, because overweight rabbits tend to have more difficulty mating and kindling. Feeding commercial rabbit pellets is the easiest, most complete approach to nutrition. Alfalfa hay contributes fiber and nutrition, provided it stays fresh and does not mold. Offering greens such as lettuce and cabbage is not advisable because it can cause diarrhea. Feeding rabbits in the evenings works well because it is their natural time to eat.

From the time she is bred through her nursing period, the doe should be allowed to eat as much high-protein feed as she desires, as should her young litter. A doe with her 8 young can consume 100-120 pounds of feed during the 8-week nursing period. Does without litters and bucks should be fed about 6 oz of pellets per day. Junior bucks and young does raised for breeding should be given 1 oz of feed per pound of body weight per day. Good quality alfalfa hay can consist of up to 40% of the diet.

Fresh water from an automatic watering system should be available in abundant supply, as a doe and her litter require a full gallon of water a day in warm weather.

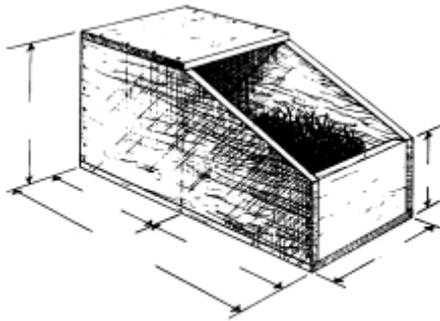
Facilities

The initial investment to build rabbit hutches can be substantial. Since rabbits do not tolerate extremes of temperature nor moldy feeds, the rabbitry must have adequate cooling, heating, and ventilation. Rabbits also require lighting 12 hours a day year-round for optimum breeding.

Individual hutches are frequently constructed from welded wire in ½" x 1" mesh, including mesh floors, which are more sanitary than wood or other material. Mature does and bucks need their own cages at least 20 inches tall and 30 inches wide and deep. Some producers find it helpful to suspend the cages at eye level, to minimize bending. A feed hopper and watering system should be attached to each cage.

Nest boxes made from scrap lumber, metal, or cardboard-lined metal will be needed for nesting does. Cages and nest boxes should be sanitized after each use. Hair should be burned off the cages with a propane torch to prevent disease spread.

Nest Box*



This simple nest box can be made from scrap lumber to fit right inside the cage.

- 24" total length
- 12" height back
- 6" height in front
- 12" wide
- 12" for both open front and closed back

*plans taken from Agricultural Alternative, Penn State Cooperative Extension.

Handling and Labor Requirements

I. Health

Rabbits are not routinely vaccinated for diseases as are larger livestock, but medicine can be added to their feed or water when necessary. Building a relationship with a local veterinarian will be most beneficial.

The most common disease among rabbits is intestinal coccidiosis, caused by parasitic protozoa. Signs include loss of appetite and diarrhea. Once an animal is host to coccidia, it is most difficult to eliminate, though sulfa drugs added to food or water may be helpful. The best treatment is prevention of fecal contamination of the food, water and housing area.

A second common disease is pasteurellosis, a respiratory infection that is contagious. Infected individuals will cough, sneeze and show signs of wet matted hair around their eyes and nose. One route is to treat these individuals with advice from your veterinarian. A second more practical solution should be to separate infected individuals from the herd and cull them, as they frequently continue to carry the responsible bacteria and develop marginal immunity at best.

Many diseases can be prevented by providing rabbits appropriate nutrition, temperature, ventilation, and sanitation.

II. Management

Producers exploring rabbit production are encouraged to start small, with 10 to 20 breeding does, and one buck for every 10 does. The rabbitry can be expanded if the producer finds rabbit keeping to his or her liking.

Record keeping is essential in raising rabbits. It's suggested that producers attach cards to hutches noting the rabbit's name or number, the name or number of the buck to which the doe was bred, the breeding date, the date of last

kindling, number of young born, number of young weaned, and weight of young at weaning time. Breeding animals can also be identified with ear tattoos.

When healthy does reach 6 to 7 months, they are ready for breeding. Does should always be taken to the bucks cage, since does will protect their home territory from intruders and fighting may ensue. Mating should occur immediately. If the doe is not receptive to the buck, remove her and try again in day or so.

Rabbit gestation takes 31 days. Producers should introduce nest boxes to the hutch at 28 days, so the doe can prepare to birth and nurse her litter. The average litter will be 8 to 10 young. The nest box should be removed 15 to 21 days after birth, and the young should be weaned in about 30 days. Fryers are sold to markets at about 8 weeks.

| Reproductive Statistics for Rabbits | |
|---|---|
| FEMALE | |
| Age of puberty | 4 to 9 months (breed dependent) |
| Breeding weight | New Zealand & Californian at 7 lbs |
| Estrous cycle | |
| Signs | Restlessness, nervousness and rubbing chin on equipment |
| Ovulation | 10 to 13 hours after first breeding |
| Gestation length | 30 to 33 days |
| Breeding season | Year around |
| MALE | |
| Age of puberty | 6 to 10 months (breed dependent) |
| Breeding season | Year around |
| Breeding ratio | 1 buck : 10 to 20 does |
| Adapted from. Washington State University Cooperative Extension | |

Level of Skill

Pros:

- Source of supplemental income in spare time, 200 hours/yr for 20 does
- Very little land needed
- Less physically demanding than raising larger livestock

Cons:

- Moderate initial investment in rabbit stock and facilities
- Establishing market location
- Slim profit margins
- Requires daily chores, year-round
- Management learning curve

Animal Source

To locate rabbit suppliers in NY State go to:

Finger Lakes Rabbit Breeders Assoc
<http://flrba.tsunnybarn.com/>

Average prices received for breeding does is \$10-\$15 each and breeding bucks are \$15-\$25 each.

Market Availability

Meat rabbit web listserve sign up at:
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Meatrabbits/>

New York R&CBA
 Deborah Vecchio
 PO BOX 33
 Parish, NY 13131
<http://www.nyrcba.com/>

Budget

| Income | amount/doe | General estimate | Your estimate |
|--|---------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| Young sold per doe (5 litters/yr with 7 kits for sale/litter) | | | |
| ❖ 35 fryers@ 5 lbs x \$0.80/lb | | \$140 | _____ |
| | Gross income/doe | \$140 | _____ |
| Expenses | | | |
| ❖ Grain (500 lbs x \$220/ton) (includes feed for doe & kits, 5 litters) | | \$55 | _____ |
| ❖ Alfalfa hay (100 lbs x \$120/ton) | | \$12 | _____ |
| ❖ Veterinary medications | | \$2 | _____ |
| ❖ Buildings, cages and facilities | | \$30 | _____ |
| ❖ Marketing | | \$5 | _____ |
| ❖ Supplies and misc. | | \$2 | _____ |
| | Operating cost/doe | \$106 | _____ |
| | Net receipts/doe | \$34 | _____ |

For More Information

Small Farms Program
135c Plant Science Building
Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853
www.smallfarms.cornell.edu

Mississippi State University Extension Service –
Commercial Rabbit Production
<http://www.msstate.edu/dept/poultry/rabbits.htm>

American Rabbit Breeders Association
PO Box 426 Bloomington, IL 61702
<http://www.arba.net/>

New York R&CBA
Deborah Vecciho
PO BOX 33
Parish, NY 13131
<http://www.nyrcba.com/>

Finger Lakes Rabbit Breeders Assoc
<http://flrba.tsunnybarn.com/>

American Federation of New Zealand Rabbit Breeders
<http://www.geocities.com/newzealandrba/>

Maryland Small Ruminant Page
www.sheepandgoat.com/lvstk.html

New York State 4-H Rabbit Project
<http://www.ansci.cornell.edu/4H/rabbits.html>

Professional Rabbit Meat Association
<http://www.pрма.org/>
<http://www.pрма.org/freenews/jan-feb04journal.pdf>

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