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How to Raise Meat Rabbits

By eHow Contributor

Rabbits are a nutritious and inexpensive meat to raise, and they don't take much space or time. Here are some tips on raising healthy meat rabbits.

Difficulty: Moderate

Instructions

- 1 First, you need to prepare your facilities. Rabbits need very little space. Banks of cages can be installed in a shed, or a barn. Covered hutches are all that is necessary. A cage that is 30 inches square is plenty of space for does even with unweaned kits. Smaller cages (24 inches square) are big enough for bucks. Decide how many rabbits you intend to keep as breeding stock, and prepare enough cages for them all. You will need at least a couple of cages for weaned kits, until they are ready for slaughter.
- 2 Next, you need to decide whether you want to raise pure bred rabbits or if you are more concerned with producing the most efficient rabbits. Good breeds for pure bred rabbits are New Zealand Whites, and Californians. Both are white, though the Californians have gray ear tips and noses. Cross breeding rabbits tends to produce larger, faster growing kits and therefore is more desirable if meat is the only concern.
- 3 Choose a high protein food that will sustain breeding stock, but also will lead to fast growth rates. 14-16% feed should be sufficient, and will cause kits to grow at their fastest rates. Do not change feeds once rabbits are acclimated to one particular brand. Rabbits have finicky digestive tracts that can be easily upset. Don't make any drastic changes that could disrupt their normal routines.
- 4 Breed rabbits regularly. Always take the doe to the buck's cage so that he will not be distracted by the new environment of the doe's cage. The gestation period for rabbits is about 30 days. After birthing, it takes about 6 weeks to weaning. Does can be re-bred soon after weaning, but it is good to give them a little bit of rest. Wait 30 days after weaning, and breed again.

- 5 Feed kits all that they will eat. You want the kits to grow as quickly as possible to butchering size. You can butcher kits at 8 weeks old, and they will be "fryer" size. Typically you want your kits to reach about 4-5 pounds by the time the kits are 8 weeks old. Older rabbits can be used as "stew" rabbits.
- 6 Keep rabbits healthy. Watch for diseases, and watch for bad teeth. Both of these can be detrimental to your herd. Bad teeth should be "bred out" of your herd by eliminating any rabbit that shows an unfavorable trait. If you are only concerned about producing meat for your family, undesirable traits are not such a big deal.

Tips & Warnings

- Breeding stock can be inexpensive. Unless you are planning to raise champion purebred rabbits, there is no reason to pay more than \$10-\$15 per head.

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How to Raise Earthworms With Rabbits

By Brenda Priddy, eHow Contributor

Worms and rabbits can co-exist well together because the nutrients in rabbit droppings and rabbit food contain the ideal mixture of nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium for optimal worm health. Many rabbit farmers use the space under their rabbit cages to grow and harvest worms and compost. The process of growing worms with rabbits is easy, and can help control the stench and insect attraction that commonly occurs around rabbit beds.

Difficulty: Moderate

Instructions

Things You'll Need

- Hose
- Leaf compost
- 2x12 boards
- Nails
- Shovel
- Pitchfork

- 1 Build worm beds underneath existing rabbit cages. The rabbit cages should be at least three feet above the worm beds. Dig a trench under the cage extending one foot out from the cage on all sides. Dig the trench 12 inches deep. You can also construct a square bed from 2x12s and nails to place on a surface that you cannot dig under (such as over cement).
- 2 Fill the beds with three to four inches of leaf compost. Moisten the leaves until they are wet enough to leak water when you squeeze them. Add another one to two inches of rabbit manure and mix with the shovel. Mix the bed once a day, and add enough water to keep the manure moist. The mixture should be wet enough to break down the rabbit droppings. Position the rabbit cages over the worm beds so that all new droppings fall into the worm beds.

- 3 Add 300 to 500 worms per square foot of manure bed. You can add less worms, but they will not be able to work as effectively at turning the manure into compost. If you are raising the worms to sell, you probably don't want to use more than 200 worms per square foot to allow the worms enough nutrients and food to grow large.
- 4 Maintain the worm beds. Add an additional inch of leaves two to three times a month and mix the beds with a shovel or pitchfork. Remove urine spots from the worm pile with the shovel about once a week. This prevents the mixture from getting too salty for the worms.
- 5 Move the compost into one half of the bed after four to six months. Fill the other side of the bed with new compost and rabbit droppings. Over the next couple of weeks the worms will move to the new compost, and the old compost can be removed and sold, spread over a garden, or set aside for future use.

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How to Tan Rabbit Hides

The small size, variable colors, patterns and textures of rabbit skins make them a perfect for the home tanner. Various tanning agents are available commercially in kits. For those wishing to make their own tanning solutions, Salt and Alum tanning is the least expensive method and probably the most common. Small pelt tanning is neither excessively time consuming, difficult, nor expensive. Home tanning costs very little and requires minimal equipment. You'll find the biggest investment will be your time and energy. However, the rewards are enjoyable and often profitable. If you have even the slightest inclination to make full use of your rabbit hobby, consider tanning hides!

Rabbit Age

The main problem you will face is what age to butcher the rabbits. Younger rabbits have small, thin pelts and most rabbit-raisers process their rabbits for meat at 8-12 weeks of age. A factor to consider is the seasonal cycle a rabbit's hide goes through. The skin (leather) is often depleted of nutrients to grow the plush winter coat, thus yielding thin leather; while the summer pelt will have thicker skin, but thinner fur. Thus the best skins are taken from fully mature rabbits in winter. We found a happy medium holding back young rabbits with the best coats to grow out into winter, until about 4 months of age. The result is both a larger fur and thicker leather easy to work with.

Preparing the Skins

Once a rabbit has been killed and the head removed, suspend it by both back legs to allow the blood to drain. The animal is then 'flayed', a term referring to the act of removing the hide from the carcass. To perform this, simply cut the skin around each hind foot and carefully slit the hide inside each leg from hock to anus. Strip the skin from the carcass by gently pulling downward toward the rabbit's head. Use your fingers or a sharp knife to loosen any difficult spots. The freshly flayed hide, also known as a 'green' skin, is now 'cased' with the fur on the inside and the flesh on the outside. Let the cased hide soak in cold water while you finish dressing out and storing the meat.

Take the soaking hides and thoroughly rinse them in cold water to cool. Don't worry about any remaining fat or flesh at this point. Concentrate on washing all the blood out of the skin, since any that remains will stain the leather dark brown after tanning. Soap or detergent is not needed. Carefully squeeze the excess water from the hide. *Never wring or twist the fur!*

Thoroughly rinsed green hides can be preserved for tanning at a later time. We store our hides in the freezer until we have enough to tan an entire batch. Make sure *all* body heat is cooled from the skins, and that excess water has been pressed out. Cut the skin in half from shoulders to rump. Then, fold in half lengthwise, skin-to-skin, and roll *with* the direction of hair growth. Seal in a Ziploc gallon size freezer bag (about four hides fit in each gallon bag) squeezing out as much air as possible to prevent freezer burn. When ready to tan, simply defrost and continue with tanning steps.

Salt and Alum Tanning

This is an old, widely used method for fur skin tanning. When properly carried out, it produces whiter, softer leather, with stretch and flexibility, and is easy to work with. The following recipe is enough 'pickle', the term for the tanning solution, to tan from six to nine skins.

Materials:

- 2 to 4, 5-gallon plastic buckets (depending on how many hides you have)
- 1 cup of common Alum (aluminum sulfate)--may be available at local pharmacy, farm supply store or through taxidermy supply catalogs
- 1 cup coarse or granulated Salt (not iodized)
- Knife

First Solution-

1. Pour two gallons of room temperature water (about 70 degrees F) into *each* bucket, add the correct amounts of salt and Alum for each very carefully, do not allow to splash. Stir to make sure the powders are completely dissolved before adding the skins.
2. Immerse the skins, one at a time, in the pickle and swish around with a stick or your gloved hand, working the solution into the fur and skin. Two days should be sufficient for a rabbit skin to remain in the solution, stirring them at least twice a day. Since a hide cannot easily be over-tanned using this process, it would be better to leave the hide in solution too long rather than not long enough. If the pelts tend to float, weight them down using a plate or jar filled with water.
3. After two days, squeeze out the excess pickle, *set aside for use in the Second Solution*, and rinse in cold water.

Fleshing

'Fleshing' is the process of removing the fatty tissue and flesh to expose the leather to the chemical action of the pickle. To us, fleshing is the most difficult part of the tanning process. The flesh separates more readily at the rump section, so start there and peel toward the neck. A knife can be used to scrape and loosen difficult areas on the belly and legs. *Be careful* not to peel too deep, this tears the leather and exposes the root hairs, but do try to get as much tissue off as possible. When finished, rinse the hides in cool water and squeeze out the excess.

Second Solution-

1. Add the same amount of Alum and salt to the First Solution you set aside. Follow the same mixing procedure.
2. Put the pelts in the solution, one at a time, working each hide to coat it with the pickle. Keep the skins soaking at room temperature for seven days, stirring at least twice per day.
3. If you'd like, test for doneness after a week by boiling a small piece of hide for a few minutes. A well-tanned skin will show little or no change, but return for another week if it curls up or becomes hard and rubbery.

Drying

After the pelts are done, remove them from the pickle and squeeze out the excess liquid. Take care to discard the mixture where animals can't drink it and it won't contaminate ground water. Next, wash each pelt thoroughly with a *mild* detergent, such as Eucalan Wool Wash made specifically for use with natural fibers. Then, rinse the pelt several times in lukewarm water, squeezing out the excess. Hang the pelts *in the shade* to dry. It will take from six hours to two days for the pelts to dry, depending on humidity, temperature and thickness of leather.

Breaking the Skin

Partially dried hides are stretched, or 'broken', to soften the leather. While the skin is still damp, pull the pelt in all directions, working a very small area at a time. You will see the leather begin to turn white and soften. If the skin becomes too dry, wet it with water and a sponge, called 'damping back', until pliable enough to stretch again. Be firm as you pull, but *do not* use too much force or the skin will tear. Continue working until the pelt remains soft as it dries. If you wish, the broken hide may be tacked to a board to encourage it to dry flat.

Finishing and Storage

After the pelt is soft and has dried, you can brush the fur with a small baby brush, if you'd like. Then, massage mink oil or a leather conditioner/preservative, like Lexol, into the leather. As a final and optional step, you may buff the leather with pumice or fine grit sandpaper to give it a velvety feel. Like all leather, rabbit fur breathes. Therefore, do not store your finished rabbit pelts in airtight containers. We keep ours in a cardboard box; add a lavender sachet for a pleasant aromatic bug repellent. Enjoy the many unique handicrafts possible with your beautifully tanned rabbit fur pelts!

Rudolph's Rabbit Ranch & Waterfowl Farm

is the name given to my small farm of raising meat rabbits, and ducks and geese for eggs, first for my family's personal consumption. A backyard meat rabbit operation can be a great idea for someone interested in producing their own healthful, drug-free meat. In addition to providing a family with a quality of meat/protein unparalleled by that found at the grocery store, such a project can involve all family members. Even children can help in chores from breeding to the dinner table. Only a basic understanding of rabbit raising practices is needed. After that the breeder will discover what works best for his or her particular situation. The information presented here is *not* meant to imply that this is the *only* way to run a small backyard rabbitry. Neither should one construe that a claim is made that this is even the *best* way. This is just *one* way; a way that works overall. Rudolph's Rabbit Ranch hasn't always done it the same way over the years and we learn something new everyday.

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Why Raise Rabbits?

Each family or individual considering raising rabbits does so for different reasons. Usually the prospective breeder desires to raise their own meat rather than buying it at the store. This has benefits in that a breeder knows the history of the meat; how the animal was treated, whether drugs were used, and how it was slaughtered, handled, and stored.

The issue remains: why raise *rabbits*? There are other choices. Questions to consider before settling on rabbits include, but are not limited to the following:

- Do you live in the country or a suburban setting?
- Do you want to raise meat to save money over that spent at the store?
- How much time do you have to dedicate to this project?
- Do you enjoy hand-raising animals?
- What about cholesterol or digestibility of the meat?
- Do you want a market for your animals?
- Do you want something that is easy to raise or do you enjoy challenges?
- How easy is butchering the animal?
- If noise is a concern, how much noise does the animal make?
- How much space is needed for the project?

Pros:

Rabbits are well-suited for *both* country and suburban areas. Since they are not considered livestock by many governmental agencies, they are permitted where other animals would not. It is still a good idea to check with local zoning authorities to determine if rabbits are allowed before making many plans. Rabbits make very little noise, making them better for suburbia than goats, chickens, squabs, turkeys, geese, or ducks. In fact, if odor and flies are kept to a minimum, and the cages are well hidden by vegetation (a good idea anyway to protect them from the elements) it is possible that neighbors might not even know rabbits are in the yard.

Rabbits are fairly easy to raise. The does take care of the young themselves, so no hand-raising or

special equipment, such as an incubator or brooder, is needed. There is rarely a need for intensive on-the-spot care.

Butchering is fairly simple and straight-forward. A skilled person can take a rabbit from the cage to oven freezer in 15 minutes or less. No plucking is needed.

Since rabbits are considered as pets by some people, pet sitters may take care of them if the owner desires to take a vacation, or must be away for business or family emergency. This probably would only apply to very small rabbitries.

Space is often not a problem because cages can be stacked. Especially when comparing to larger meat animals such as cattle or hogs, rabbits are much more efficient space users.

If high production is not a goal, they can be fed kitchen scraps and storage food. There are many stories of rabbits being raised during the Depression or in third world countries fed what people would normally discard or that which can be easily gathered from the surrounding area. Some food such as elm or apple branches, or some weeds such as dandelions may already be easily available.

Rabbit meat is extremely low in cholesterol and has an exceptionally high percentage of digestible protein. It is lower in fat than any other meat typically found in the grocery store (chicken, turkey, beef, pork, etc.), and its mild flavor can be enhanced to suit almost any palate.

Cons:

Rabbits might not be the best choice if one desires to make substantial money from selling the meat. It can be fairly difficult to find a market for rabbit meat. Individuals are permitted to process their own meat for their own use, but maybe not for anyone else (check regulations). Some folks can get around this problem by selling the fryer live and butcher the animal as a free service. This can work for friends or relatives, but not for any commercial endeavour. Processors in the US are few and far between. There also might not be a "bunny runner" available to take the fryers to a processor. Even if a processor is nearby, there is no guarantee it will accept shipment from a new source.

Rabbits do not thrive in hot weather. Therefore, they are much better suited for temperate or cooler climates.

It is more expensive to produce one pound of meat from a rabbit than other small meat animals. Likewise, on a small scale, as most backyard setups are, the meat is often *more expensive* than if it were purchased in the store.

Raising rabbits for meat presents several problems for the backyard breeder. If high production is a concern, it can be difficult to find good quality breeding stock. See [Choosing the Right Breed and Purchasing Tips](#) for hints on locating stock. Additionally, very few veterinarians are very knowledgeable about rabbits. So, if a problem arises, getting valuable information can be troublesome. Also, most likely any rabbit breeders in the area are probably "show" breeders. A meat breeder might not be familiar with any show rabbit folks. Likewise, those he does know might not be familiar with problems found predominantly in a high production situation, or feel uncomfortable with the idea of using rabbits for meat.

In some parts of the world, especially the United States, rabbits are not commonly considered a

meat animal. Consequently, a prospective breeder needs to be selective when choosing with whom he discusses his avocation. He must be sensitive to those who view rabbits as a pet. Pets are beloved members of a family, and most people would never consider eating their dog or cat. Rabbits are cute and furry, so many people are repulsed at the thought of killing and eating them. This is called the "Easter Bunny Syndrome."

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Choosing the Right Breed and Purchasing Tips

Californian and **New Zealand White** rabbits are, by far, the most popular breed for a meat operation. Both are also shown, but beware that show rabbits don't necessarily have all the traits, such as high milk production, frequent breedings, and large litter size needed for a successful meat operation. RRR has also used American Chinchilla, New Zealand Red, Silver Fox, Champagne D'Argent, Blanc d'Hotot, and Satin rabbits for variety. Using crossbreds is generally not recommended for commercial operations, but can be perfectly acceptable for a backyard hobby if the breeder desires to experiment. Only breeds such as those listed should be crossed. Crossing Flemish Giant with the listed breeds is also acceptable. Generally RRR uses a purebred CA or NZW buck to either a purebred or crossbred doe.

Beware of rabbit breeders who want to sell Flemish Giants or other large breeds (with the possible exception of the French Lop) for use in a backyard meat operation. While Flemish Giants were used to produce some of the present day medium sized breeds like the New Zealand White, they should not be used by the casual breeder for meat. These breeds do produce larger fryers faster, but their meat-to-bone ratio is not as favorable since the large breeds have bigger bones. Sometimes a Flemish Giant cross (Californian or New Zealand White) can be used successfully as a sire. Another possible sire is a B-10 meat rabbit (Giant Chinchilla/New Zealand White cross). A third crossbred-type rabbit, the Altex is excellent for commercial purposes with a NZW doe. However, since it is not recommended to save offspring for breeding, it might not be the best choice for a small family herd.

Based on information from various sources the following table was designed to help choose appropriate breeds for a backyard operation. All the breeds listed have the commercial body type and medium size necessary for reasonable meat production. The group has been broken into four tiers based on how well the breed performs in general, strength of genetics, and size. The top performers, of course, are the Californian and New Zealand. The bottom group consists of breeds that are a little smaller.

Breed	Senior Buck Weight	Senior Doe Weight
New Zealand	9 – 11 lbs.	10 – 12 lbs.
Californian	8 – 10 lbs.	8.5 – 10.5 lbs.
Palomino	8 – 10 lbs.	9 – 11 lbs.
Satin	8.5 – 10.5 lbs.	9 – 11 lbs.
American Chinchilla	9 – 11 lbs.	10 – 12 lbs.
Blanc de Hotot	8 – 10 lbs.	9 – 11 lbs.

Champagne d'Argent	9 – 11 lbs.	9.5 – 12 lbs.
Cinnamon	8.5 – 10.5 lbs.	9 – 11 lbs.
Creme d'Argent	8 – 10.5 lbs.	8.5 – 11 lbs.
French Lop	10.5 lbs. and up	11 lbs. and up
Silver Fox	9 – 11 lbs.	10 – 12 lbs.
American Sable	7 – 9 lbs.	8 – 10 lbs.
Harlequin	6.5 – 9 lbs.	7 – 9.5 lbs.
Rex	7.5 – 9.5 lbs.	8 – 10.5 lbs.
Silver Marten	6 – 8.5 lbs.	7 – 9.5 lbs.

It is always best for the prospective purchaser to tour the rabbitry of a breeder from whom he or she is considering buying breeding stock. This way the buyer can see the conditions under which the rabbits are raised. Are the cages clean? Does the stock appear healthy? Do the rabbits have sufficient food and water? Is there much of an odor? Are flies under control? Given this suggestion, a breeder that bars access to visitors doesn't necessarily have something to hide. Some breeders do not allow outsiders in the rabbitry out of concern that said guests can act as vectors for disease. This is becoming more common in North America since there have been several outbreaks of Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease. Another problem breeders increasingly face is that of an animal rights activist posing as a prospective buyer. Such a visit is often followed by a group that comes to seize the animals.

Since rabbits endure cold better than heat, those in warmer climates need to purchase stock already accustomed to such weather. A rabbit from Minnesota is not likely to thrive in southern Texas.

A question often asked by the novice is, "**Where do I find rabbit breeders in my area?**" Unfortunately it can be difficult to find true meat rabbits. Nevertheless, a person might want try any or all of the following:

- Check RRR's [Meat Rabbit Breeder List](#).
- Check the classified ads in local newspapers. Do not neglect "freebie" papers.
- Call or visit feed stores and ask if they know of any rabbit breeders, specifically of meat breeds. Some have "community bulletin boards" where customers may post "for sale" signs.
- Check [ARBA's website](#) and look at the "Local Clubs" section to see what groups are near the prospective breeder's home. This website also lists specialty club links under "National Club Links." These clubs would have information on breeders specific to a particular breed. A [master list of specialty clubs](#), whether they are on the Web or not, is also available. Contacting a specialty club can be a good way to find breeders of a particular breed. Some are even willing to share their membership lists with persons interested in raising that breed.
- In the United States: Call the local county extension office and ask for a (4-H) rabbit contact.
- Write to Bob Bennet and ask for his free list of recommended breeders. He also publishes a quarterly newsletter for rabbit breeders called "\$\$&Dough." (bucks and doe). The address is One Governors Lane, Shelburne, VT 05482
- Use [Rudolph's Rabbit Ranch "Rabbits Wanted" Classified Ad Service](#). This will be available as long as it is not abused.
- *With caution* try other online sources such as [Craigslist](#), [BestFarmBuys](#), [Hoobly](#), or other online breeder lists or classified services

One option to obtaining breeding stock from a distance is the use of a rabbit railroad. A "railroad" consists of volunteers who are willing to help transport animals so they can more easily get from seller to buyer. Though fairly successful with dogs, "rabbit railroads" have had difficulties getting started and flourishing. One possible "railroad" is the [Rabbit Relay and Transportation group on Facebook](#).

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How Many Rabbits to Start and How Old Should They Be?

Those just starting in rabbits need to examine their reasons for getting into the hobby and what goals one hopes to achieve. A common mistake is to start with too many rabbits. A reasonable starting point might be one buck and three does. It is recommended that these rabbits be purchased while they are still young. This way they will have a chance to become acclimated to their new surroundings prior to breeding. Also, *beware of breeders selling older animals*. A valid concern would be why he or she is selling an older animal. It costs money to feed animals and it is not cost effective for a meat breeder to keep it past the time it reaches slaughter weight. They might be culls which do not perform well. On the other hand, culls from a show breeder with meat-type goals may be satisfactory.

As the new breeder gets accustomed to the rabbit hobby, then, and *only then*, should he or she decide to increase the size of the herd, and then slowly. A common error is to grow too big too fast.

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Housing

There are different approaches to housing rabbits. RKR recommends individual cages for each breeding rabbit and separate growout cages depending on whether the raiser's breedback schedule necessitates them. Wire cages of at least six square feet in area are preferable for breeding does and weaned litters. Bucks' cages should have at least five square feet of floor space. Cage height should be about 18 inches. All cages should be cleaned on a regular basis and those kept outside should be well protected from the weather. The use of older style all-wood hutches is discouraged because of the difficulty in thoroughly cleaning and disinfecting them. A benefit of older hutches is that they are easier on rabbits' feet, especially that of pregnant does. To help combat this problem with wire cages a small hard plastic mat may be placed on the cage floor.

Using commercially made feeders with either perforated, slotted, or screen bottoms are recommended (screen bottomed ones tend to not hold up as well in higher humidity areas). Rabbits will not eat feed with a lot of "fines." Perforated, slotted, or screened feeders allow the fines to fall through. Water bottles may be used when temperatures are above freezing. Metal pans or crocks are better suited for cold temperatures. Automatic waterers are also available. While they simplify day-to-day watering, they have drawbacks as well. They require careful cleaning and maintenance. Because of time and cost considerations, they might not be best for smaller rabbitries. Their use can also make it difficult to ascertain if an individual rabbit is not drinking due to either illness or a clogged water line as well. The do-it-yourself breeder might try [building his own](#) automatic waterer.

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Climate

As mentioned earlier, cold weather is not usually much of a problem for rabbits. As long as it is **well protected from drafts** and has a constant supply of liquid water a rabbit (and even newborn kits in a well-made nest) can withstand temperatures to -20° F without additional heat. On the other hand, temperatures above 90° F, or 85° in high humidity can cause death. It is vital that rabbits be cooled on hot days. RRR utilizes two liter plastic bottles of ice for this purpose. Sometimes a wet towel topped by ice cubes is employed. Lastly, the rabbits themselves may be placed in a bucket of water or gently sprayed with a hose. This last recommendation should *only* be used in a dry climate, as flystrike could result if the rabbit does not dry within an hour or so.

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Performance Goals

In order for the cost of the meat produced by a backyard operation to be equal to or possibly better than what would be spent at the supermarket, each doe should successfully raise 36 fryers per year (six litters of six fryers each). Any doe that does not perform properly should be culled. Ideally fryers should reach "market weight" of 4.5 to 5 lbs. by eight weeks of age, and most certainly by 11 weeks. If the fryers will be sold to a meat processor it should be noted that some facilities will not accept fryers over 11 weeks old. Meat processors also generally prefer white over colored rabbits. For this purpose the Californian, though having dark brown "points", is considered white.

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Disease and Drug Use

Common rabbit diseases include *snuffles*, *weepy eye*, *enteritis*, *coccidiosis*, *mastitis*, *sore hocks*, [wry neck](#), and *malocclusion*. The novice rabbit raiser sometimes becomes alarmed when he or she notices one or more rabbits with *red urine*. This is perfectly normal and is not indicative of disease. Breeders in areas with mosquitoes should also watch for *myxomatosis*. [Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease](#) (aka Viral Hemorrhagic Disease and Rabbit Calicivirus), a highly contagious and deadly illness, is endemic in Europe, Asia, and Australia. Though not a large concern in North and South America, it has been diagnosed several times in the past decade or so.

It is beyond the scope of this page to discuss rabbit diseases in any detail. The reader is referred to the [recommended reading list](#). It should be noted that most rabbit diseases cannot be transmitted to man. It has been the experience of RRR that it is best to simply dispose of diseased animals. This is because often the disease is incurable (i.e. snuffles) or compromises the animal's performance (i.e. coccidiosis). Also, the removal of one animal can save the entire herd as disease can spread quickly. Most of the time a rabbit culled for reason of disease is perfectly fine to eat

There is no substitute for good husbandry practices. Providing clean wire cages, feed, and water at all times goes a long way to prevent disease. Stressed rabbits are more likely to become ill than nonstressed ones. Drug use should be kept at a minimum to keep drug-resistant organisms from developing. Since very few drugs have actually been approved for use in rabbits, information on how to treat any given ailment is often oral tradition. Though not exactly following practices at RRR, [this web site](#) has good material on treatments of several common disorders.

As a general practice Rudolph's Rabbit Ranch & Waterfowl Farm uses drugs only on an "as needed" basis. This minimalistic approach has helped provide the family with drug-free meat.

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Other Animals and Children

When KKK started out, it had a dog, cat, and three young children. Since then, and after a move to a semi-rural area, three geese and a bevy of ducks have been added. Only farm working dogs should be near rabbits. The instinct to kill small animals has been nearly bred out of these breeds. Both the herding (i.e. Australian Shepherd, Border Collie) and guardian (i.e. Great Pyrenees, Anatolian Shepherd) dogs are suitable. It is important that these dogs be exposed to the rabbits and taught not to hurt them while they are puppies. Whether or not to have cats near rabbits is controversial. Some breeders shun cats. KKK has had no problems with the "barn cat" who keeps the Ranch mouse-free. Ducks, especially good foraging breeds, can be a healthy addition to the rabbitry, as they can help keep the fly population in check.

Young children should be taught not to "play" with the rabbits. Until they have been trained how to properly care for rabbits, children should also not be permitted near the cages as their presence can frighten, thus injure, the rabbits. Once instructed, children may perform the day-to-day chores. This makes a backyard meat rabbit operation an excellent family activity.

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By-Products and Other Markets

A backyard meat rabbit hobbyist can make a little money if he or she is resourceful and hard-working. Pelts may be saved at slaughter time. They can be tanned and made into trinkets, clothes, etc. to be sold. (Please note that fryer pelts are best suited for craft-type projects, while stewer pelts are better suited for use in hats, coats, etc.) The manure is excellent and is the *only* manure that does not need to be aged before using as fertilizer. Gardeners may be willing to pay for manure. Several species of worms, most notably night crawlers and redworms, can be grown in the manure. The worms help keep the manure from smelling bad and could be sold to gardeners or fishermen. Attractive bunnies could be sold for pets. **Note:** Pet bunnies should *only* be sold to responsible individuals and with an information packet and small supply of feed. For that matter, a small supply of feed should accompany *any* live rabbit sold. Those that sell rabbits, especially for pets, might consider having a "take back" policy whereby they will "take back" any rabbit sold no-questions-asked. This can help prevent the practice of "dumping" unwanted animals.

Since the goal of KKK is to use as much of the rabbit as possible, we were very pleased when we found that a local raptor (hawks, eagles, falcons, and owls) organisation was very interested in receiving donations of deceased rabbits (death due to disease, heat, or other causes) and some products of slaughter. Heads in particular are a real treat for birds of prey. Donated animals or animal parts **MUST** be drug-free as even trace amounts are deleterious to raptors.

Another market would be pet owners that feed their animals the BARF (BONES AND RAW FOOD) diet. BARFers, as they are called, aim to provide their cats and dogs a more natural diet than kibbles. A newer, and more inclusive, term for BARF is "raw feeding." Sometimes a variety of meat sources for this diet are scarce, so these pet owners are more than happy to discover a meat

rabbit breeder near them. There are numerous raw feeding groups on Yahoo Groups, so it should not be difficult to locate someone nearby.

These are only a few suggestions. The possibilities are endless.

Advertizing rabbit availability may be done through word-of-mouth and often is the most successful of all methods. [Business cards](#) placed strategically at the feed store or rabbit barn at the county fair can also generate interest. The local grocery store community bulletin board, if there is one, is another location where business cards can be put. Ads can be placed in the local paper, but often is fairly expensive. The backyard breeder often does not have a large supply of rabbits. Therefor it might be beneficial to "network" with other local small-time breeders so that larger demands might be adaquately met through the cooperation of a group of breeders.

No backyard meat rabbit breeder should start the hobby/business with the idea of getting rich quickly. There are many **scams** such as offers to **buy back fryers** from stock purchased from the swindler. Sometimes he refuses to buy the fryers. Even if he does pay for the rabbits, the grower is responsible for shipping costs, which can exceed the amount received for the animals. Though rabbits can be prolific, kit mortality can easily be 25% or more. Profits are really only possible with hard and steady work.

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Recommended Reading

The following list of helpful books are the ones the page author used when first starting out raising rabbits. Since that time many have gone out of print and/or been superceded by newer publications. Where there is a newer source Amazon will indicate so. For additional **excellent resource books** check out the [Rudolph's Rabbit Ranch Bookstore!](#)

- [The Biology and Medicine of Rabbits and Rodents](#) by John Harkness and Joseph Wagner - probably more appropriate as a textbook in veterinary school.
- **Official Guidebook to Raising Better Rabbits and Cavies** by the American Rabbit Breeders Association, Inc. - Includes info on raising rabbits, ARBA, as well as a complete list of accepted breeds with brief descriptions and black and white photos.
- [Rabbit Production](#) (8th Edition) by Cheeke, Patton, Lukefahr, and McNitt - **Excellent**, a "must have"! This newest edition includes *color photos* of various *breeds* as well as information pertaining to *family* and *small farms*. »If you can only afford **one** book, this one is it!« Well worth every penny.
- [Raising Rabbits](#) by Ann Kanable - a good book on raising rabbits inexpensively and with as little drug use as possible. (20% discount here through [Amazon.Com](#))
- [Raising Rabbits the Modern Way](#) by Bob Bennet - a good book for the beginner. (20% discount here through [Amazon.Com](#))
- [Raising Small Meat Animals](#) by Victor M. Giammattei - out-of-date, but a helpful introduction on how to raise Cornish game hens, chickens, turkeys, and squabs, in addition to rabbits. The book is out-of-print but [Amazon.Com](#) can sometimes locate older books in used book stores.
- [Tan Your Hide](#) by Phyllis Hobson - good information on tanning methods, includes several home projects. (20% discount through [Amazon.Com](#))

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Rabbit-related Links on the Web

(Roughly grouped in order of value to a backyard meat breeder)

If you know of a great rabbit-related link that you think would be appropriate to list here, please [e-mail me](#) and let me know!

[Commercial Rabbit Industries](#) - Provided by Pat Lamar, formerly of ARBA's Commercial Department. Written in 1998 and now hosted by Homesteading Today, it remains a good source of information on commercial rabbit raising. Also includes some information on show and pet rabbits.

[Backyard Production of Meat Rabbits in Texas](#) - Great for a "second opinion" on how things can be done. Also includes more information on diseases and slaughter techniques as well as *nutritional value* of the meat. **More...** This is a PDF file, so you'll need [Adobe Reader](#) to read it.

[Rabbits: Grazing Systems and Alternative Livestock Breeds](#) - USDA site, collection of resources on animal management, health, disease, housing, feed, meat preparation fact sheet, reproduction, economics, etc.

[Raising Rabbits in the Pacific Northwest](#) - Basic rabbitry management for home or commercial meat, production, *excellent* resource.

[Merck Veterinary Manual](#) - Rabbits are listed under "Exotic and Laboratory Animals," has information on husbandry and disease.

[The Rabbit - Husbandry, Health and Production](#) - Online book from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, contains much more information than that needed by a backyard raiser but good to skim

[Missouri Alternatives Center - Rabbits Listing](#) - Rabbit links list of Extension Guidesheets from university research centers. Includes barn plans and info on raising meat rabbits, running commercial rabbitries, nutrition, and slaughter methods.

[Slaughtering Rabbits](#) - From Mississippi State University Extension Service, gives a more detailed discussion on slaughter, dressing, and tanning than is detailed here.

[Rabbit Project Planning Strategies for Developing Countries](#) - Introduction to raising meat rabbits in tropical conditions. Includes nutritional information of some forages.

[American Rabbit Breeders Association](#) - concerned mainly with show rabbits, but does have a commercial division.

Rabbit Breed National (USA) Specialty Clubs for some meat breeds (The primary focus for these clubs would be for show, but some members might concentrate in meat qualities) -

- [National Californian Rabbit Specialty Club](#)
- [American Federation of New Zealand](#)
- [Hotot Rabbit Breeders International](#)
- [American Satin Rabbit Breeders Association](#)

- [Rabbit Breeders](#)
- [National Silver Fox Rabbit Club](#)
- [Creme D' Argent Federation](#)
- [Palomino Rabbit Co-Breeders Association](#)
- [American Chinchilla Rabbit Breeders Association](#)
- [Cinnamon Rabbit Breeders Association](#)

[The Rabbit Web](#) - while promoting all uses of rabbits with chat rooms, discussion board, does have definite slant towards pet use.

Listservers (AKA Reflectors or Mailing Lists)

Subscribe to Meatrabbits

enter email



enter email

Powered by groups.yahoo.com

Subscribe to rabbitmeatproducers



Powered by groups.yahoo.com

Subscribe to RabbitVet

enter email



Powered by groups.yahoo.com

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Toys

Rabbits are somewhat intelligent creatures and can get bored. Rabbits purchased for pets often get stimulation that rabbits in a backyard meat operation lack. It is recommended that single rabbits be given "toys." Simple things such as a used tuna can or plastic bottle lid may suffice. Some books mention using soda pop cans as toys. KKK does not recommend this because the first time it was tried the rabbits chewed through the cans, exposing themselves to sharp edges. Odd behaviors, such as fur chewing, may occur without proper entertainment.

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Slaughtering and Butchering

Warning: Graphic Depictions Follow

It should be understood that dispatching rabbits is *never* a pleasant task. Even after many years of processing, many, if not most, breeders still dread the job. That said, it is still a necessary chore.

To facilitate butchering, feed should be withheld from the animal for 24 hours prior to slaughter. This helps clear out the digestive system. Since rabbits practice coprophagy the intestines will still not be completely clear. For this reason some people choose to withhold feed for 48 hours. Rudolph's Rabbit Ranch opts for the first choice.

There are several methods that can be used to dispatch a rabbit. It is the opinion of the writer that *top consideration* should be given to methods that cause the animal the *least stress* and are *safe* for the breeder to use.

One method entails holding the back legs up and, with the dominant hand, quickly pulling the neck down while firmly tilting the head up, dislocating the skull from the spine. This method, sometimes called "twist and crunch," requires skill and is not recommended unless the person is experienced and has sufficient strength to perform it properly.

Many people hit the rabbit on the back of the head with a bat or similar object either at or just above the base of the skull. With both these techniques the rabbit is hung by its back legs and the head removed for proper bleeding. Some people slit the throat right after hanging to bleed the animal.

A third way to slaughter a fryer is simple decapitation on a hard surface, similar to chopping a chicken's head off, prior to hanging. Previously, RRR preferred this method because it is quick and there is no question as to whether the animal has been killed or not. Drawbacks include having a bruised shoulder area on the carcass, the possibility of losing a finger or worse, and needing at least two persons to do the act. Lastly, recently it has been found that this method is not the most humane because the brain continues to be aware for several seconds after severing.

Now RRR uses the "broomstick method." With this method the rabbit is placed on a firm surface, preferably the ground. A treat may be given to the rabbit. A sturdy broomstick or rake handle is laid across the rabbit's neck while positioning its front legs out of the way. The dispatcher then steps on the broomstick on either side of the rabbit and quickly grasps the hind legs and firmly pulls them straight upward. The person should pull until he feels the neck break. Two simple clues indicate that the rabbit is indeed dead --- one is that the head easily swings back and forth, the other is bleeding through the nose, ears, or mouth. A definite plus to this method is that it can be done by only one person and avoids the possibly difficulties encountered with a swinging axe. A drawback is that it, too, can produce a bruised shoulder area. [Here may be found photos and another description of the method.](#)

Once hung the front feet may be cut off with small pruning shears. Spraying the carcass with water helps keep loose fur down. A knife is used to cut around the back legs below the hocks. A cut is then made along the inside of the back legs from one foot to the other. After cutting through the base of the tail the skin may be peeled off like a sweater. A slit is then made down the front from near the anus to the sternum along a visible "seam." Special care should be taken not to nick the bladder in the process. The entrails are removed; the kidneys and liver saved if desired. The sternum is cut and lungs, heart, and trachea removed. The heart may also be saved. Lastly, the pubic bone is cut and rectum removed.

After the carcass is rinsed of stray fur and blood it is then dropped in a bucket of ice water. After about five minutes it can be placed in another bucket of ice water. RRR uses two buckets of ice water. Some people prefer three. Each subsequent bucket cools the meat further, completing the bleeding process and making it easier to cut into pieces. Pamela Alley, Registered Veterinary Technician, has prepared a [carcass chart](#) showing how the carcass appears prior to cutting. Lastly, the carcass is cut up as desired, usually into seven to nine pieces, placed in a "ziplock" freezer bag, and into the freezer. A fryer rabbit may be placed in one gallon- or two pint-sized freezer bags.

County extension offices may have copies of publications that explain butchering in greater detail, and with photographs. Some of the books on the [recommended reading list](#) and [rabbit-related links](#) list also have additional information.

Sample Supply List for Slaughtering and Butchering

- refuse bucket
- 2 or 3 buckets for ice water (ask for old frosting buckets from the
- skinning or boning knife
- small pruning shears
- scissors for cutting meat and

- bakery at the local grocery store --- they're often free)
- cutting board

- done
- "Ziplock" freezer bags, either pint or gallon size

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The Dinner Table

Rabbit meat from fryers may be used in many of the same ways as chicken. One caution is needed, though. Because rabbit meat is so low in fat, it is easy to dry out in the cooking process, even by those who are accustomed to preparing it. Lower temperatures and longer cooking times are needed. For baking, a temperature of 250° F for 1½ hours is suggested. Roasters and stewers are better suited for soup, sausage, or chili. Anyone interested in recipes can visit [A Terrific Collection of Rabbit Recipes](#).

Comments, corrections, or suggestions may be directed to the page author, [Mary-Frances Bartels](#)

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