

Keeping Rabbits for Meat

Contributed by lottie

Downsizer member lottie provides an introduction to rearing your own meat.

Anyone with even a small garden or backyard can produce their own meat if they keep rabbits. Two does and a buck can raise up to 50 offspring a year. They breed (fairly) easily; can be cheap to feed (if you forage or grow food for them); are quiet and won't cause problems with the neighbours; and, have a healthy, low-fat meat. Equipment Rabbit hutches come in various styles from - the simple oblong box with a sleeping compartment at one end; to, the triangular Morant hutch with an integral run; a two storey hutch with the run underneath; or (if space is at a premium), tiered hutches. All these can be seen at any pet superstore - and then, if you are halfway handy, you can pinch the design and make them for less than half the price. RSPCA minimum dimensions for a one rabbit hutch are: 4' x 2' x 2'. Where two does are housed together, the overall length should be 5'. These are minimum requirements and "bigger is better" wherever possible; otherwise, an exercise run to pop them in is a possibility. Because I have grass, I can keep rabbits in Morant type hutches that can be regularly moved onto fresh grazing. I previously kept rabbits in a standard type of hutch in tiers very successfully as well. Below is a picture of a doe in a Morant type hutch that has handles for easy moving - it is about 7' long and 3' wide. It is made from exterior grade plywood (the timber and wire cost about £25.00 last year). There is a small hay rack in the covered area made from chicken wire. You will also need a water bottle and a metal food bowl. It's a good idea to have a mesh floor in the run (although not all domestic rabbits seem to dig). I use straw in the sleeping compartment (but, if a standard type hutch is used - then wood shavings, shredded-paper or similar will be required on the hutch floor). Rabbits tend to use one corner as a toilet and a scraper for hutch cleaning is useful. Breeds Any large or medium breed of rabbit is suitable for meat. The bigger breeds, such as New Zealand White and Californian, have larger litters and the young grow fairly quickly. They are often advertised in Magazines, like Smallholder, for less than £20.00 each. They do, however, eat more and need more concentrate to raise the larger litters. When I had a large family at home, I kept commercial type New Zealand Whites: they were very prolific (occasionally having litters of 12-14) and had a very good meat to bone ratio. Now, I prefer to keep Old English rabbits as they are more attractive and are cheaper to feed but, while slower growing, still give a useable carcass that will be bigger than most shot or trapped bunnies. If you want to keep rabbits for fur as well as meat - then, Beverens or Rexes might be an idea. The best thing is to look at the different breeds available locally and go for one you like and would feel happy keeping. There is a lot of meat on a Continental Giant - but they are very slow growing and are heavy to handle. Feeding Rabbit mix or pellets can be bought from Pet Stores and Farm Shops. I pay £8.00 to £9.00 per sack at the local Farm Shop but aim to forage, grow or feed scraps for as much of their food as possible (but nursing does especially will need some concentrate). The advantage of pellets over rabbit mix is that the rabbits aren't able to "sort it". Most of the vegetables you grow (or peelings from the ones you buy) - outer leaves and cores - will be enjoyed by rabbits. They like both left over bread and potato peelings dried and crisp (bung'em in a cooling oven). If you grow potatoes, the ones too small to eat are ideal if boiled first. I always make porridge with warm milk for my does after they have kindled - just because they like it and it keeps them happy while I check the litter. Generally, they like a wide variety of wild (free) foods - just avoid things that are obviously poisonous (like bluebells, deadly nightshade and hemlock). They love bramble tips, cow parsnip, clover, comfrey, coltsfoot, chickweed, dandelion (not too much), groundsel, heather shoots, hedge parsley, knot grass, plantain, shepherd's purse, sow thistle and trefoil (fresh or dried). Dead nettles can be eaten fresh but stinging nettles must be dried (they can be cut and dried like hay as a winter food). Raspberry leaves are good for nursing does or as a cure for scouring. Never feed mouldy or mildewed food and provide them with a piece of chewing wood (so they will leave the hutch alone). Breeding The doe must be kept separate from the buck and put into the buck's hutch for mating (never the other way round or she may attack him). Breeding can start when rabbits are about 6 months old, depending on breed. If the female isn't receptive when put to the buck try again later in the day or on the next day. Mating is very quick. Sometimes the buck falls over with a little cry and that is a good sign of success. Does ovulate in response to mating (after about 10 hours), not before; on an 18 day cycle, they are receptive to the buck for 14 days then not for 4 days. She will thump her back feet and be aggressive if she doesn't want to mate. About 70% of matings result in pregnancy. After 12 days, it is possible to feel if embryos are present with gentle abdominal palpation (underneath the rabbit - they are like little pebbles, just in front of the pelvis). Alternatively, if you simply take her back to the buck she will make it very clear she is not interested. Sometimes, pseudo-pregnancy occurs and, about 18 days after mating, she'll start charging about with mouthfuls of fur - but it all comes to nothing. Gestation is about 31 days (but can range from 29 to 35 depending on litter size. On the 28th day, the hutch should be well cleaned and a nest box full of fine hay put in the sleeping part. The doe will make a nest from the hay and from fur plucked from her belly. Kits are usually born at night and she covers them with fur (which keeps them warm - even in winter). Give her a tit-bit in the main part of the hutch and close the nest box off from her while you check for dead or deformed babies. Make sure you feed the doe well and keep her quiet. The kits' eyes will open after about 2 weeks; the youngsters will gradually come out of the nest box and wean onto solid food. It is important that there is a water bottle at a level they can reach. The doe can be re-mated when the litter is 3 weeks old but I prefer to wait until the youngsters are moved to their own hutch at about 6 weeks (7 weeks in winter). If space is limited, the young can be kept in a large hutch with the doe until they are big enough to eat - but you get fewer litters per year. Rabbits fed on pellets will grow to killing weight quicker than if fed a (free) home-grown/foraged diet. If you have any questions or suggestions arising from this article please raise them on our forum.