

## Grow Your Own Rabbit Food

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Turn your yard into rabbit food and start growing oats, wheat, beets and other tasty rabbit treats.

By Bob Bennett

2012 Guide to Backyard Rabbits

I can't blame it all on wild rabbits. There were raccoons, woodchucks, opossums, skunks, mice, moles, voles, deer, crows and who knows what else, but my garden last year fed critters more than it did me, and I am fed up. So this year my garden is going to help feed my domestic rabbits and cut my feed costs. You can grow your own rabbit food for your domestic rabbits, too, and here are some ways to do it.

First, and very easy, are mangel beets. I have grown the large red roots in the past, but a friend says the Golden Eckendorf variety is even better. You plant them early in the spring. About 110 days later you can dig them out and store them for winter feed. Rabbits love them, especially if their water freezes up during winter.

Also a cinch to grow is oats - and boy, do rabbits love oats. Back before there were rabbit pellets, oats made up the majority of many rabbits' diets. One feed mixture included six quarts of oats to a quart each of wheat, sunflower seeds, barley and corn. You can grow them all.

Plant oats in the spring as soon as the ground can be worked in a preferably loamy soil. They will germinate even if the soil is cold. Try broadcasting them like grass seed in broad bands, a foot or so wide. Just rake the seeds in a couple of inches deep. At harvest time, cut the oats with a sickle, and, if you wish, you can thresh them by flailing inside a large metal garbage can, or you can just dry the straw, seed heads and all, and feed it that way.

You can do just about the same thing with wheat, but it's easy to just pick the seed heads and feed them that way. Barley, buckwheat and rye are easy to grow, too, and, of course, there is alfalfa.

Alfalfa is high in protein, and in some places, such as my area, it is difficult to buy it baled because the farmers chop it and put in the silo. Rabbits love the stuff, and you can grow it just as easily as planting grass. The same goes for red clover; again, plant it in the spring and let it grow until the red blossoms appear. Cut it down and dry it, and your rabbits will love the clover hay.

I like to feed dried corn, right on the cob. A few ears always "goes by" when you grow sweet corn, and that's great for rabbits.

Those giant or mammoth Russian sunflowers are terrific for rabbits, too, but you have to watch out for birds. I keep an eye on the heads when they get close to ripening and put a plastic bag on them for protection.

So I'm going to have a small garden for myself this year and a big one for my rabbits - just not those cottontails that invade my premises. The feeds that I grow for my rabbits are not as tempting to those wild ones. They prefer the lettuce, carrots and beets, but I'm going to have a good fence around them. It'd better be good.