

Rabbit Cage and Nest Information

<http://www.crossroadsrabbitry.com/rabbit-cage-and-nest-information/>



Here at Crossroads Rabbitry, we have tried just about every kind of rabbit wire there is. One thing we have learned is don't go cheap. You might save a few bucks upfront but cheap wire will require more maintenance and your cages won't last very long. We always use an american made wire. Riverdale brand is our favorite. For the bottom of the cages we use a 14 gauge 1/2" x 1" galvanized after weld (gaw) wire.

This wire size allows the rabbits droppings to fall through and also helps prevent sore hocks as it is a heavier gauge wire. A (gaw) should be used for the bottoms of your cages, as it last much longer than your other types of rabbit wire. Stainless wire is the best for long

lasting and keeping your cages clean but it is very expensive and may not be cost effective. For the sides and tops of our cages we use a 14 gauge 2" x 1" galvanized before weld (gbw) wire. Many growers use a baby saver wire, which is a wire that is smaller at the bottom, to prevent any kits from crawling out of the cage if born on the wire. It too is expensive, so we sometimes use laminate stripping which is woven through the bottom of the sides and dividers of the cages.



Be sure to place your cages away from the sun, rain or wind. Sizes of rabbit cages will vary, but it is our opinion that its height should be 16" to 18" tall; a minimum would be 14". A good rule of thumb is to provide .75 sq. ft. per lb. of the adult rabbit to be housed in the cage. A good all around size is 18" tall x 24" deep x 36" wide.

Our cages are 18" tall x 24" deep x 30" or 36" wide. We don't go any deeper because collecting kits, cleaning and breeding's become more difficult. We learned this the hard way as our original cages were 36" deep; too deep for arm length. If you wish your rabbit to have a larger cage, go wider not deeper.



Our cages are always hung in a single layer and we prefer for our doors to open downward. You will need a large door. The door needs to be large enough for nesting boxes to fit through and to allow you the room to reach in for cleaning and catching the rabbits. You will also need to consider everything that needs to go in the cage; crocks, water bottles, feeders, hay racks, etc.

IT HELPS TO HAVE A SHUT-OFF VALVE AND DRAIN ON EVERY ROW FOR FUTURE PLUMBING PROBLEMS.

Our cages are hung at about 48" above the ground for easier clean out plus you can bend over and get to the other side with ease. Our cages are hung with 3/4" emt conduit thru the top corners of the cages and then suspended from the ceiling with chain. 3/4" conduit seems to work better than 1/2".

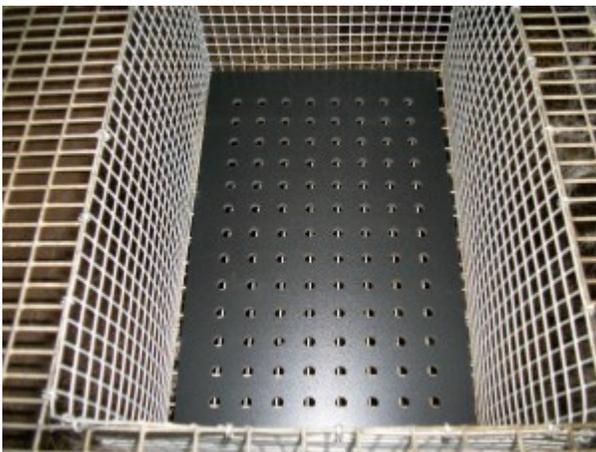
The cages need to be secure with little or no swinging. They can be braced off from the ceiling to make them more secure. Your does will do much better if the cages are always still. Your cages should be kept clean at all times. Each time the cage is cleaned, the feeder should also be cleaned. It is also better to have no wood under or near the cages as the wood will become urine soaked, causing odors and possibly respiratory problems with the rabbits.



Most growers use wooden or metal nest boxes with a sack or cardboard floor. Some use a perforated masonite or wood floor. We use wire drop nest boxes that have been cut into the cages. The main advantage to cut in boxes is no storage is needed and the pvc panels we use are easily sanitized.

Our drop nest boxes are offset and positioned in a certain pattern to prevent any adjacent rabbit from urinating on the nest or kits. Before kindling, we insert special made perforated pvc panels into the nest boxes. They just seem to work better than cardboard, masonite or wood.

We use a 14 gauge 1/2" x 1" gaw wire and the size of the nest box is 10" wide x 8" deep x 16" long. These special made panels are completely waterproof and have 3/8" round holes drilled in them. They also drain much better than cardboard or masonite panels. Again, they are easily sanitized for future use.



These special made pvc panels help save a lot of babies. They not only allow urine to pass through, but also help reduce leg injuries and prevent splaying. They also serve as an insulator and help with warmth in the winter and keep the kits cooler in the summer. We prefer to not use a larger size nest box as it leaves too much room for the doe to lie in.

The nest boxes are usually stuffed with wheat straw or hay for bedding. Try not to use sawdust as it absorbs water and becomes cold. Cedar, redwood or pine shavings are also very bad for your rabbit. The aromatic hydrocarbons produced from softwood bedding's can cause both respiratory and liver damage in rabbits.

Wheat straw, which is used by most growers, does work well but will sometimes cause eye problems as it is much stiffer than hay and can poke the eyes of kits.

At Crossroads Rabbitry, we prefer to use a Bermuda type hay or a hay as close to Bermuda as we can get. Our NZW rabbits just seem to make better nest with this hay than they do with wheat straw, meaning the babies do better. They can also eat or nibble on this type of hay which is good for them; they usually do not like eating wheat straw.

When newborn kits are born, it is very important to keep them warm. The "core temp" of the nest box should be around 100 degrees Fahrenheit for the first week of the kits life. This is achieved if the doe has made a good nest and the room temperature is 55-75 degrees.

After the kits are 10-14 days old they are pretty much safe from freezing. Avoid using heat lamps as top heat is not good for them and there is no way for the babies to get away from the heat if they are too warm. If any kits need warming we take them to a 12" x 24" heating blanket, which seems to work very well. Sunbeam makes a good heating blanket that is reasonably priced.

Many of our does have raised out 12 kits in these drop boxes. We, however, prefer to only leave 8 to 10 with a doe, as it is difficult for her to raise more than this. On average, the mortality rate between birth and weaning the kits is high (15 to 20 percent.) A mortality rate of less than 10% is very difficult to achieve. The nest, therefore, need to be inspected daily for dampness, waste and any dead babies. Strict preventive hygiene is very important during this period. Try to keep extra fur in feed bags or plastic buckets for those extra cold nights. You may need to add some fur or bedding to the nest if it gets below freezing. Always sanitize your nest boxes and perforated panels after each litter. Each time a doe gets a clean nest box, you should also give her a clean cage and feeder. Cleanliness goes a long way in preventing disease.

We can't stress how important cleanliness and hygiene in your rabbitry is. Keeping your rabbitry clean is difficult at times, especially if it is medium to large in size, but every effort should be made to try. Rabbits require fresh water at all times. We use 1/8" npt brass water nipple drinkers threaded into 3/4" pvc pipe. 3/4" pvc pipe seems to work better than 1/2" due to rabbits chewing on the smaller size. Depending on which building; our water "system" is supplied by using 220 (gallon) plastic tanks or 55 (gallon) barrels. We use thermostat controlled kerosene heaters or circulating pumps in the winter to prevent freezing.



Each individual cage will have its own water drinker and feeder. We use a brass type nipple drinker threaded into 3/4" pvc pipe. A drill bit, pipe thread tap and teflon tape are required for installation. The pvc pipe is attached to the cages by using 1" ridged pipe bat wings. We use 11.5" Fine-x feeders so feed dust can fall through. We prefer the largest size feeder available so feeding has to only be done once a day.

We do have buildings with the water supplied by rubber tubing which works fine, but this type of water supply makes it difficult to use a torch. We use a propane torch to burn all the rabbit hair off the tops and side of the cages. If you're not careful, the torch will sometimes hit the tubing meaning repairs are needed. We now only use nipples threaded into pvc pipe for this reason. We make sure every row gets its own shutoff valve and drain faucet for any future plumbing problems.

OTHER TYPES OF SETUPS:

- **Cages:** There are lots of companies that sell ready-made or easily assembled cage kits in just about any size you want. Many will even build custom sizes and design your cages for you. However, it's not that hard to build your own cages from scratch. Cages with wire floors are the easiest to maintain. Decide on the desired size and all you'll need are the wire, snips, rings and a hand crimping tool.
- **Stackers:** A stacked system is best for limited space. The cages are stacked either on legs, or directly on top of each other. Drop pans are below each cage to catch the waste. Cages designed to be stacked with legs have a sliding track for the pans. Some cages are designed with the pan space as part of the assembly, and these can be stacked directly. In this case, it's recommended to tie the cages together to prevent them from shifting.
- **Pans or Trays:** Pans catch the waste under stacked cages. They are available through many dealers. They will be made of galvanized steel or poly plastic. The plastic pans are a bit more

expensive but are lighter and last longer than the metal ones. The metal pans will eventually rust. If you are designing and building your own cages, use the pan sizes available to decide the dimensions of your cages. Bedding material is usually placed in the pan to help soak up urine. You can use newspapers or pine shavings. Try to avoid cedar shavings as the aromatic fumes can irritate your rabbits.

- **Suspended:** This setup eliminates the need for pans, and provides less work in cleaning. A suspended system will need more space, and a dirt floor is best. The cages are hung from the ceiling, or in some cases supported on legs. The waste then falls to the ground underneath. The urine is absorbed by the ground but the manure will pile up. However, the manure is an active composting system and doesn't cause too much odor. The barn or shed will need to be cleaned out periodically. Some breeders have found a way to make this work for them is by growing worms in the manure pits.
- **Flush Clean:** This is every breeder's dream. This is a suspended system that involves a gutter system. It can be more than one tier, and there will be an angled shelf that directs the waste to the gutter without falling on the lower tiers. It's usually designed to be hosed out. The gutter channels the waste to a catch bin or drain, usually outside. It could be connected to a septic system. This system is custom made by a couple of manufacturers, and will be expensive. A homemade flush-clean system is not that hard to build if you do your research.

ITEMS NEEDED TO GET STARTED:

Your cage furnishings: Your rabbits will need water and food. There are different ways to provide for this. They're also some miscellaneous items you may need.

- **Water:** A dish, crock, or water bottle. Crockers are heavier and harder for the rabbit to tip over. A water bottle will keep the water clean and the water supply will last longer. An automatic watering system is an option for a large rabbitry. This is the system we use. It is a system of hoses and nozzles that are connected to a water source such as a barrel or tank. The hoses are routed to each individual cage and only the barrel needs to be filled with water.
- **Food:** A dish or crock may be used. Dishes that clamp to the cage wall are available. A hopper-style feeder is good when more feed needs to be available for litters. We use fine-x feeders that attach to the outside of the cage.
- **Hay Rack:** This is optional, but it is nice to keep the hay off the floor of the cage. Hayracks can be bought, or you can make one for nothing out of scrap cage wire. A feed hopper is available with a built-in space for hay. Some breeders like a space between cages that holds a large amount of hay at all times. This way rabbits on both sides can pull the hay through the cage wall.
- **Chew Toys:** Rabbits need to chew. This keeps their teeth in good condition and relieves boredom. A clean, dried out block of oak or white pine is easily replaced as it becomes soiled or chewed up. Never use cedar or treated wood, as this could kill a rabbit. Apple trees or wood are a fine source of chewing wood and the rabbits enjoy it.
- **Cage Cards:** Cards or tags help identify the rabbit. These can be bought through dealers, or you can make your own. Each card should have a space for the rabbit's name, breed, birth date, parents name, breeding and litter information and for notes.

FURNITURE and EQUIPMENT: Here's some things that will make your life easier.

- **Food Storage:** A plastic trash can with a lid is great for storing pelleted feed. It will keep the feed dry and keep rodents and insects out. A 30 gallon trash can will hold up to 100 lbs of feed.
- **Water Supply:** Plumbing would be awesome, but a hose run from the outside water tap is fine. Always flush the hose out before you give it to the rabbits. Keep several gallon bottles filled for emergency water, or quick watering chores. A garden watering can with a long spout is an easy way to fill water crocks.
- **Electricity:** It's great if your building is wired. Lights and outlets for heaters or fans make life easier. Extension cords from another source can be used but make sure it's a heavy gauge wire.
- **Work Table:** A table is useful for grooming, palpating, medicating etc. It helps if the table is carpeted..

- **Shelves:** Trust me; you'll need shelving. The shelves can be built onto the walls, around or over the cages.
- **Nest Boxes:** If you'll be breeding your rabbits, you'll need some metal or wood nest boxes. Metal boxes are easier to sanitize than wooden ones. If storage will be a problem you might want to use drop boxes cut into the cage like we do.
- **Scales:** Weighing your rabbits should be a regular routine as their weight is important. A battery operated digital scale is nice.
- **Carriers:** You may need them for transport, plus they are useful for holding rabbits if you're sanitizing or cleaning the cages.
- **Holding Cage:** A carrier can be also be used for a temporary holding cage. This is useful for holding an active litter while examining them or cleaning their nest box, or controlling a single rabbit.

CLEANING TOOLS YOU MAY NEED:

- Wheel barrow, or large bucket.
- Shovel, rake or scrape blade
- Broom and dustpan
- Bin for your shavings or hay
- Paint scraper or stiff wire brush
- Pressure washer
- Propane torch

MISCELLANEOUS EQUIPMENT:

- Paper towel dispenser
- Fly control
- Odor control
- Calendar
- Notepads, pen or pencils
- Calculator
- Extra wire, rings and snips for repairs
- Large coffee cans for counting kits
- Gloves or sleeve coverings
- Oils for ear mites
- Gallon water jugs
- Spare water bottles and feed dishes
- Extra chewing wood
- Chair or stool
- Fan and heater
- Waste basket
- Cleaning, sanitizing, ammonia agents
- Hand sanitizer gel