

Raising Your Own Rabbits

<http://www.crossroadsrabbitry.com/raising-your-own-rabbits/>



Please keep in mind that the following is what we have found that works best for Crossroads Rabbitry and for our rabbits. By no means, are we implying that this is the best or the only way to raise rabbits. Growers should discover what works best for them, as something new and better may be learned each and every day.

So, you're interested in raising rabbits? If so, the first thing you want to do is check with your local zoning authorities to make sure rabbits are even allowed in your area. The USDA does not currently classify rabbits as livestock, so there is usually no special license required to raise them, but you still want to be sure. A USDA license is usually required to process rabbits when the

meat is to be sold to the public. A license may also be required to sell and transport them depending on the annual revenue earned and the number of rabbits sold. Do this before making any plans or spending any money.



Regardless of the reasons, you'll need 3 essentials to have quality producing rabbits:

- GENETICS are the most important; you'll need to find very good stock to begin with.
- HOUSING, cages and proper set-up. Your rabbits need to be comfortable and happy.
- CONDITIONING of the rabbits. They must be

taken care of, fed and watered properly.

For the backyard grower.....

We first encourage you to do some research. Talk with other breeders who raises the breed(s) you're interested in. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Get their opinions and suggestions, but don't be afraid to experiment on your own. Your own experiences may be your best teacher. Find the answers to these questions:

- What is the exact age of the rabbits you may be purchasing?
- What is the breeding history of the stock your interested in?
- Does the grower have records you can look at?
- Do the rabbits appear healthy? Are there any signs of disease?
- Do the rabbits live in a clean environment?
- Does the grower have any references you may contact?
- Are the rabbits used for shows or are they being bred year-round; producing fryers for the commercial market?

You should start small at first. A common mistake is to start with too many rabbits. You can always expand if you see fit. Most people always start with 1 buck and 2-3 does. However, if affordable, it is

recommend you start with a minimum of 2 bucks and 6 does. The reason this is advised is that you may want to continue to develop a breeding herd and you may need some genetic diversity.

If you begin with only 3 rabbits you will be limited in this area and this will result with in-breeding. You never know, you may wish to sell or provide breeding stock to other growers and some genetic diversity would be nice to offer. However, if your rabbits will be raised strictly for the dinner table then 2-3 does and 1 buck should provide 2-3 fryers per week year-round. It is estimated that 4 does and 1 buck can produce more live meat per year than one beef cow on less feed and in a much smaller space.



The fryers should reach 5lbs. in 8-10 weeks so by the age of 2-3 months, a litter of rabbits can be ready for the dinner table. One New Zealand White fryer is just the right amount of meat to feed a family of four. New Zealand White rabbits taste similar to chicken, with very little flavor of their own, so you can use them in all sorts of recipes. Rabbits are also very easy to butcher and clean since there are no feathers to pluck.

Your rabbits should be purchased at a young age like 8-12 weeks old. This way they'll get use to their surroundings before you try to breed them, plus you'll actually know what you're getting. Don't buy any older rabbits as they may have already seen their better days.

It's sad, but certain growers are out there that will sell you older does, knowing that they are not producing good numbers anymore.

Have your barn or building set up completely before purchasing any rabbits. Make sure your cages are the correct size and are secure. They should not be moving or swinging. Make sure the rabbits will have access to fresh water at all times. Your housing should also have good ventilation. Make sure you have a good quality feed on site. When purchasing your stock, it may be beneficial to use the same feed as the grower uses and then gradually change it over to your feed.

NOTE: If you do purchase new rabbits, they should be quarantined for a minimum of 14 days prior to being housed near any currently owned rabbits. It's better to be safe than sorry. You don't want to place a sick rabbit near yours. Many choose to quarantine purchased rabbits for 30 days because moving causes large amounts of stress.

This 30 day period is not only used to watch for any illnesses, but also allows the rabbit time to adjust to its new surroundings and handlers. Before placing a purchased rabbit into a previously used hutch or cage, the used housing should be thoroughly sanitized with bleach and water.

Raising rabbits can be fun but you must realize that, even though minimal, there is work involved. It takes approximately 16 to 20 hours on average per year to care for a breeding doe. There will be feeding, cage cleaning, breeding etc. involved. In our opinion, in order for your backyard rabbit operation to be financially beneficial, each doe should successfully raise 50 fryers per year.

The does that do not should be replaced. At Crossroads Rabbitry, we expect our does to produce 50-80 plus fryers per year. Ideally fryers should reach a "market weight" of 5 lbs. by 8-10 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 6lbs. or over 11 weeks old.

For the commercial grower.....

If you are considering raising rabbits on a "commercial" level you need to be sure that you are capable of doing so. You need to know if you have the time, skills and determination to be successful. It would be

beneficial to again, start small and allow the business to grow as your knowledge and experience grows. Many growers make the mistake of trying to grow too big too fast.

Try raising rabbits for several years and gain some experience before increasing the size of your herd and going commercial. ***There's a reason why commercial meat rabbit production has been called the "eighteen month business"***. It's because most people who get into it, full of hope and determination, give up before the end of the second year

Finding a market for your rabbits can also be difficult depending on the area you live in. There's no need to raise them if you're not going to be able to sell them. There are very few processors in the United States that deal with rabbits; probably less than 100. Most of these processors do, however, need new growers as the demand for rabbit meat and laboratory research continues to grow.

Your location and breed of rabbit will determine if you find a processor. Still, there's no guarantee this processor will accept rabbits from a new grower, so do your research. Make sure the market is there before even considering becoming a commercial grower. Make sure the processor will purchase the type of breed you are raising. Also, make sure the processor will get you your money in a timely fashion. The rabbits have to be fed and you don't want to be waiting on the needed funds.

The most popular breed of rabbit for meat production is the New Zealand White. In fact, it is estimated that 90% of rabbit raised for meat are of this breed. The Californian is also a very popular breed for a commercial meat operation. Most processors will purchase these two breeds, however, research clinics, laboratory facilities and universities usually want New Zealand Whites.

Most processors prefer the New Zealand White and Californian breeds, as they are said to be the best for consumption and they both produce a high meat to bone ratio. Other larger breeds can produce large fryers at a fast rate, however, their meat to bone ratio will be lower since they have larger bones. Most all of your meat processors, prefer white rabbits over colored rabbits for its easy dyeing of the fur.

At Crossroads Rabbitry we only raise New Zealand White Rabbits, as we discovered from the beginning that all processors will purchase this breed. Our processor prefers the New Zealand White breed over the Californian and will not purchase the Altex Breed or any colored rabbits, so please double check before starting or purchasing any stock.

If possible, set up a verbal contract with the processor to produce whatever you feel you are able to do, ***but do not sign anything***. Remember they are making more money than you and their profit is higher as they have no rabbits to feed. They buy them as cheap as possible and sell them as high as they can. There are lots of swindlers in the meat market so be careful.

They will wait and offer you less if they know you are sitting on rabbits. Plus you do not want to be locked into a contract if you need to go elsewhere. You want the ability of going to another processor if you are having difficulties getting your money from your current one. So, again just be sure to do your homework if your thinking about raising rabbits on a commercial level.