

Gathering Summary: Raising Rabbits with Nick & BrendaLee S., Feb. 24, 2010

Summary by Catherine Haug; Photos as noted.

This is part 2 of the Raising Chickens & Other Small Animals Panel Discussion, (see [Raising Chickens](#) for part 1)



Rabbits vs Chickens for meat

(Photo of "Myshi," a Broken Black Rex doe, by Nick S.)

Rabbits are clean animals and easy to raise. They are loving and lovable.

Their meat has less cholesterol than chicken, and is better for both economy and flavor. It can be prepared in much the same way as chicken. However, wild rabbit should be avoided, as they are wormy; during certain months they are not safe to consume.

Rabbit Cost

Average cost to buy a rabbit is \$5 - \$10, but a pedigreed rabbit can cost \$25 - \$125.



Recommended Breeds

(Photo of "Castor," a Castor Rex buck, by Nick S.)

Rex (see photos): Commercial breed that is good for meat and hides; fur is soft as velvet and needs little grooming. Many color varieties. Curious, lovable and highly social. Average weight males: 7.5 - 9.5 lb; females 8 - 10.5 lbs.

New Zealand: Meat producers; may need occasional grooming. Most common trait is white with pink eyes, but can be black or red in color. Curious and relaxed personality. Average weight males: 9 - 11 lb; females 10 - 12 lbs.

Flemish Giant: Meat and pet animal. Several color varieties. Relaxed and social personality. Average weight males: 13 - 20 lb; females 15 - 25 lbs; but can be large by far.

Checkered Giant: Meat and pet animal. Needs grooming. Colors: white with black or blue markings. Excitable, temperamental, and sometimes aggressive. Average weight males: 11+ lbs; females 12+ lbs.

Breeding

(Photo of "Nudge," a Black Otter Rex doe, by Nick S.)

An experienced breeder can tell the sex of a rabbit in about 6 - 12 weeks. At 4 months, the distinction is very obvious.

Does (females) come into heat every 30 days; kits are born in 31 days. Although a doe can get pregnant at 4 months or less, it's best to breed after 7 months, and they are good breeders for about 5 years.



Bucks (males) can breed after 4 months old. Their best breed buck was 11 years old when he died.

Breeding: Their proven breeding method: keep 2 bucks for 4 does, for breeding pairs or trios. The buck will let you know when the does are ready to breed, if he is caged next to the does.

Put the doe in the buck's cage, and watch when they are together. If the doe isn't ready, put her back in her cage and try again later. When she wants to breed, they will round around each other; then she will drop and raise her tail. After breeding, the buck falls over.

They can breed 4-times per year, but 2-times is optimum - it keeps does in better shape and they will be better mothers. They don't breed in winter.

Line Breeding

Line breeding (breeding cousin to cousin, or daughter to father, etc.), used by some to continue a specific trait, can also carry bad health traits and is to be avoided. It can also affect quality of the meat. Their best buck had been line-bred, and died early.

Keep track of your breeding and the generations, to avoid this problem; and ensure a newly purchased rabbit has not been line bred. See [Rabbit Breeding Worksheets](#) for a sample record-keeping system (refer to Additional Info section for complete url).

Care of Kits

(Photo of small cage, by Nick S.)

Smaller nesting box is better; theirs are 12" square, 15" high.

A week before a doe is ready to kit, place a nesting box into her cage, and do not disturb her after that; you can damage her kits and cause her to abort or to absorb the kits in her womb.

The doe will pull hair off her belly to expose the teats and make a soft bed for the kits about 12 hours before she kindles.

Weaning: The doe will wean her kits in 6 - 8 weeks; normally she doesn't need your help. Note that the more kits, it takes less time for her to wean them.



Cages

(Photo of 3-cage system, by Nick S.; see more photos, below)

Rabbits love to chew wood, and they are good at digging. Cages should be covered entirely with wire, such as hardware cloth.

Their cages come in threes; a center cage for the buck; two outer cages for does. Each is about 30" square and 18" high.

You can also provide a run for the rabbits. Nick can provide instructions to guild your own at about \$125 per cage with pull-out tray for wastes (or about \$350 for a set of 3). See photos below for more detail of cages.

Raising Rabbits



Outer cage



Center cage

Winter care: Keep wire cages under cover. Rabbits' metabolism slows down, and they do well in cold.

Feed

Feed pellets once a day, with lukewarm water twice a day. Also grass hay for roughage in their stomachs. Alfalfa hay is not recommended because the pellets are alfalfa-based, and you don't want to give them too much.

Health Issues

(Photo of small cage, by Nick S.)

Dr Markellis of All Creatures Veterinary Clinic is the top vet for rabbits: 524 West Reserve Drive, Kalispell, 756-6513.

From tNick & BrendaLee, "Vet care cost is very high; that is why clean cages, good quality food, and ethical rabbit treatment/good husbandry is so important. By practicing what we believe are the 'Best' practices, we have never had to take a rabbit to the vet until the issue of line breeding came up."

Potential problems:

- Watch a breed doe for her first breeding; there is a 50% chance she won't take care of her kits. If this persists with the 2nd breeding, something is wrong, and you should cull her out of your breeding program.
- Rabbits are prey animals; to show sickness is to show weakness. Therefore be vigilant for signs of illness such as: licking too much, runny eyes, constant scratching of their heads, head tilt, runny nose and behavioral changes. are signs of a problem. Isolate the rabbit to observe him/her before taking to the vet.
- Stress.

Predators

Most common predators:

- Raccoons.
- Skunks like to live under chicken coops, will go after rabbits, and also bees.
- Domestic dogs and cats.

Foxes are not as much of a problem

Butchering

Rabbits stop growing after 1 year (large breeds); while you can butcher between 6 and 12 months for tender meat, you get the best cost benefit by butchering at 6 months.

Killing:

- The most humane method: Grab hind legs with one hand; grasp the head with the other hand behind the rabbit's ears. Push and twist the head down very quickly to break the neck.
- Or hang upside down by hind legs and smack head behind ears with a bat. The nose bleeds. Some will scream before you hit them.

Cleaning: avoid cutting the organs - could contaminate the meat and taint the flavor.

See Additional Info below, for links to amateur video on YouTube in 4 parts: [How to Butcher \(Dress\) a Rabbit](#).

Recipes

See [Rabbit Recipes](#) (complete link shown in Additional Info section) for

Braised Rabbit, Fried Rabbit, Baked Fried Rabbit, Roast Rabbit, Sauteed Rabbit, and Rabbit Pie recipes.

Butchered Rabbit Meat

Nick & BrendaLee sell butchered rabbit: 3.5 - 4.5 lbs for Rex; 7 lbs for New Zealand (\$10/pound, 2010 price)



Contact Info

Nick & BrendaLee S.: 257-6808, kalispellkinders.webs.com/contact-us
2850 Farm to Market Road in West Valley, 1.5 miles north of
W. Valley School.

Additional Information

from Nick & BrendaLee:

- [Rabbit Breeding Worksheets](#)
(essentialstuff.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Breeding.pdf)
- [31-Day Gestation Table for Rabbits](#)
(essentialstuff.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/31-Day-Gestation-Table.pdf)
- [Rabbit Diseases](#) (essentialstuff.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Rabbit-Diseases.pdf)
- [Common Diseases of Rabbits](#)
(essentialstuff.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Common-Diseases.pdf)
- [Rabbit Recipes](#) (essentialstuff.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Rabbit-Recipes.pdf)
- How to Dress a Rabbit (YouTube in 4 parts): **Part I:** youtu.be/m383fmSogk8,
II: youtu.be/IEyLDs9Ve-Y, **III:** youtu.be/8EGvoQFnjy8, & **IV:** youtu.be/YKeMECEYnd4.