

Rabbits

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Although it doesn't feel like spring, the season of baby animals is upon us. Besides the chicks that have begun filling the local farm and feed stores, baby rabbits have also become a popular sight. Personally, there is nothing cuter than a baby bunny. There's no wonder they find new homes quickly! But as quickly as these rabbits find a home this spring, in a few months' time, many of these rabbits are turned loose or surrendered to animal shelters. Contrary to what you may have been told, rabbits are not an easy, low maintenance pet. Many new owners are caught unprepared for the commitment a pet rabbit requires.

Before you buy a rabbit, make sure you know the basics of their needs. Rabbits in Utah are primarily used for three main things: companionship, showing, and meat/fiber. Although many rabbits can be well suited for multiple areas of the industry, it's important to know the history of your new pet to know what you are bringing home. An animal primarily bred to be a pet should have a good temperament, be low maintenance, and healthy. If you think you may want to show your rabbit or breed him/her down the road, you should select a rabbit from a reputable and ethical breeder with experience and high standards for their rabbits. Likewise, if you want to buy rabbits and use them for their meat or fiber, make sure you are selecting a rabbit that has been selected and bred for that purpose.

Rabbits as pets may be appealing because they can live outside, they are quiet, require a relatively small habitat, and are easy to care for. Although they are cute and fluffy now, adult rabbits can be hard to handle for young children and require routine care such as nail trimming. It's important to remember that rabbits can live for 8 or more years, so unlike fish or a hamster, they are a long-term commitment. If you've decided you are ready for that commitment, then it's time to make sure you are prepared.

Key Terms

Buck – male rabbit

Doe – female rabbit

Kit – baby rabbit

Life Cycle

Although some rabbits will bond with litter mates and can be happily housed together, unaltered rabbits should be kept in individual cages for their health and safety. Rabbits reach maturity as early as 5 months, meaning that your rabbits could reproduce if bucks and does are not separated.

Nutrition

Of all the animals on the farm, you may be surprised to know that rabbits and horses are the most similar in their digestive tracts and nutritional needs. Rabbits can't vomit, so gas buildup and bloat can be a real concern. They also have both feces (hard dry pellets) and cecal pellets (soft cecotropes). The cecal flora produces essential nutrients that the rabbit cannot produce on their own. The rabbit will then consume the cecal pellets to utilize those nutrients. When picking your rabbit's food, select a complete feed from your local feed store to make sure your rabbit has access to a balanced food source with all their nutritional needs. Avoid feeds that have dried fruits and seeds mixed in. The best rabbit feeds are those that are consistent and primarily made from forage. Fruits and veggies should be given sparingly or as a daily treat. As with all our pets, a fresh clean water source should always be available.

Care and Handling

There are lots of resources available through USU Extension on taking care of your rabbits including nail trimming, a general health exam, and handling. The most important thing to remember is that rabbits, especially babies, are fragile. Young children should not be left unsupervised. In fact, it's recommended that rabbits are not picked up to be held by children at all. Instead, set up a small play area for the rabbits and have children sit on the floor. Allow the rabbits to sniff and play. You will enjoy seeing them binky – a spurt of energy where rabbits will jump and dart. This means your rabbit is comfortable and happy.

Opportunities in 4-H

If you have, or are planning to get, pet rabbits, you can be involved in 4-H! There are many different opportunities to benefit from the 4-H program with a rabbit project.

Visit the website for Rabbit Rank Advancements and to learn more about the Small Animal Showmanship Showdown coming up this month.

<https://extension.usu.edu/utah4h/programs/companion-animals>

<https://extension.usu.edu/utah4h/programs/spring-small-animal-showdown>

Hopefully this gives you a brief overview of rabbits as pets. If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to your local extension office or send me an email.

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