

4-H MEAT/MARKET RABBIT PROJECT

LEADER START UP GUIDE

Raising meat/market rabbits to show and sell can be one of the most rewarding projects a youth can do. Meat rabbits is an ideal project for youth who want to do a 4-H market project but may not have the ability or the space to raise large animal market projects. Raising good quality meat rabbits can be done in a shorter time frame compared to raising large animal livestock for meat. Rabbits require smaller living spaces and less start up costs. However, a successful meat rabbit project takes just as much time and effort as any livestock market project.

Leader Objective

- Help 4-H members learn about breeding and/or raising, caring for, showing , and producing good quality meat rabbits.
- Share 4-H market rabbit project materials and other rabbit resources with members.
- Work with members to complete 4-H Market Rabbit Project requirements.
- Hold a minimum of 6 project specific club meetings.
- Promote personal development opportunities for members.

Project Length

- Ownership: minimum of 30 Days, unless raising commercial breeding stock which is year round.
- 4-H Project: 3-6 months
 - This will be determined by if you are raising a meat pen, single fryer, single roasters. More details below on these different categories.

Selection

Things to consider when selecting rabbits for meat:

- What commercial breed or breeds do you have the most interest in?
- Your commercial breeds will fit into one of the following categories:
 - Meat Pen - 3 animals of the same breed and variety(color), any sex, weighing between 3.5 to 5.5 pounds each and not over 12 weeks old
 - Meat pens are judged on the uniformity of body and weight of the three animals, the meat type, condition of flesh, and fur.
 - It is recommended, but not required, that meat pens be raised by the youth exhibitor. It is very difficult to buy three animals and have them match as needed by the time of the show.
 - Single Fryer - 1 animal, any sex, weighing between 3.5 to 5.5 pounds, not over 12 weeks old.
 - Single Fryers are judged on meat type, condition of flesh, and fur.

Common Breeds

- Any commercial breed (meat rabbit) will work for this project.

Recognized Commercial Breeds:

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| • American | • Cinnamon |
| • Argente Brun | • Creme D'Argent |
| • Blanc de Hotot | • Flemish Giant |
| • Californian | • New Zealand |
| • Champagne D'Argent | • Palomino |
| • Checkered Giant | • Satin |
| • American Chinchilla | • Silver Fox |
| • Giant Chinchilla | |



- Single Roaster - 1 animal, any sex, weighing 5.5 to 8 pounds, over 12 weeks, and less than six months old (not eligible for the auction).
- Single Roasters are judged on meat type, condition of flesh, and fur.
- Price- purchasing good quality market stock will be an investment up front. Do your research amongst the breeders that raise the commercial breed(s) you want. Look to see if their stock is proven and do price comparisons.

Avoid hobby breeders who are merely trying to breed rabbits for the fun of it, and often overlook basic rabbit husbandry needs. The term “backyard breeder” is sometimes used to describe these breeders, but the size or location of a breeder’s herd does not matter, as long as the breeder follows best practices. If you need help finding reputable breeders, reach out to your local Extension office. You can also find reputable breeders through ARBA’s website: <https://arba.net/recognized-breeds/> and through the Beehive State Rabbit Breeders Association.

If you find a commercial breed that catches your eye, you can do some more research to find out if that breed is a good fit for the market goals you are wanting to accomplish with your meat rabbit(s). When researching these breeds, keep in mind that some breeds are more common than others depending on where you live. Some of the most common commercial breeds in Utah are the Californian and New Zealand.

Nutrition/Daily Feed Care

Your rabbit needs a well-balanced diet of protein, fiber, fat, vitamins and minerals (American Rabbit Breeders Association, Inc., 2020). There are many options when it comes to selecting commercially prepared feed. To begin, it is always a good idea to read the label. When selecting feed, the protein levels should range from 14%-18%. Feed that contains 18% protein does not stay fresh as long and often times has to be special ordered. This is a guide to go by; however, this number also weighs heavily upon the purpose of your rabbit project. Doing research will enable you to make the best decision for your rabbit breed and what you want to accomplish with your rabbit(s). This is also why it is recommended you talk with other rabbit breeders that raise the same breed as yourself about their feeding program.

Nutrition Facts		
Fiber	Fat	Calcium
12%-22%, not less than 18%	3% or less	Less than 1%

Other Feeds

- Grass Hay: is considered a roughage that is a great treat for rabbits to munch on. It helps to reduce blockages and is great for their digestive track. It is recommended to give hay pellets at night and actual hay in the morning, 12 hours later. If you only give hay pellets at night, that will be just fine.
 - NOTE: It is not recommended to feed rabbits alfalfa hay due to it being too high in protein.
- Treats: Rabbits can be given treats from time to time. It is not something you want to do on a regular basis. Some treat ideas are: apples, oranges, carrots, grass clippings, etc. Do not feed iceberg lettuce and cabbage because they can cause diarrhea.
- See the Nutrition Guide for Rabbits for a complete list of foods that rabbits can – and cannot – eat. https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/extension_curall/2133/.



- Rabbits should also have access to salt licks and materials to chew, as teeth grow continually and are worn down with chewing. Pruned branches or store-bought wooden rabbit toys are good options. These items will help keep teeth at an appropriate length, and many rabbits find them entertaining as well.

Changing Feed

- Occasionally you may find it necessary to change the feed or introduce a different type of feed into your rabbit's diet. Introduce it slowly by mixing the new feed into the old feed. It is best to start with a $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ ration mixture. Then $\frac{1}{2}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$, then completely switch over to the new feed. Do each ration for about 3-4 days before switching the next ration. The whole period will be about 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ - 2 weeks. Rabbit digestive tracts are sensitive and will shut down if changes are introduced too rapidly.

How Much to Feed Your Rabbit
Commercial Breeds
4-8 ounces of pellets per day

How Often to Feed Your Rabbit

- A regular feeding schedule is important. Rabbits are a nocturnal animal so it is better to feed them in the evenings. Try to feed your rabbit the recommended amount of feed at the same time each day. Example: 6:00 p.m. each night. Remember to check your rabbit(s) at least morning and night.

Important Feed Reminders & Tips:

- Do not over feed your rabbit(s)
- Keep your feed dry and insect free
- Rabbits that are free fed tend to eat too much and become overweight.
- ARBA recommends that the amount of feed given is what your rabbit will consume 20-30 minutes after feeding.
- Meat rabbits need more pellets and less hay.
 - Pellets contain more protein
 - 18% protein is ideal

To determine if your rabbit is eating enough, check the flesh condition of the rabbit. This is done by feeling the hindquarters. The ribs and backbone should not be protruding and should be well rounded. Backbones and hips, which protrude out, indicate the rabbit is too thin. Adjust feed as needed to increase weight. You can also weigh your rabbit on a scale to see if it falls within the weight limits of its breed. Check this in the Standard of Perfection book (American Rabbit Breeders Association, Inc., 2020), under your specific breed.



Housing/Facility Preparation

When planning your rabbitry (housing facilities), you must evaluate the following: ventilation, temperature, humidity, lighting, cage size, materials, and protection (Dick, Mangione, Phares, & West, 2016).

Ventilation

Is the process in which the air is able to flow throughout your structure. If adequate ventilation is not provided, then you run a higher risk of exposing your rabbits to common respiratory problems such as pneumonia and “snuffles.” The only way to keep these problems from spreading to the rest of your colony or herd is to have a proper ventilation system. Your ventilation system can be Mother Nature herself or a manmade system.

Temperature & Humidity

Rabbits can be housed anywhere from being in a cage in a utility room, to being in a cage under a tree, to a climate controlled rabbitry. Wherever they are housed, you must be sure that they are not exposed to high temperatures or high humidity for long periods. If this happens, a rabbit will collapse and become weak. During the summer, there are ways to help keep your rabbits cool if they are not in a climate-controlled structure. You can take plastic bottles, fill them with water, and freeze them. During the hot parts of the day, place a frozen bottle in your rabbit’s cage. They will lay against it and use the bottle to help keep them cool. A rabbit’s ears are their air conditioning system. You can also place a wet rage in their cage for them to lay on. A wet rage will not last as long as a frozen water bottle. Even though a rabbit cannot handle hot weather, they can withstand very cold weather as long as they don’t get wet. If they get wet, they can get sick.

Lighting

Rabbits must also be exposed to the right amount of light. Sufficient lighting helps to prime a rabbits coat and is also needed for proper breeding. If a doe (female rabbit) is not exposed to 16 hours of light each day, her receptiveness to be bread decreases. In addition, you need sufficient lighting so that you can be sure to see your way around your rabbitry.

Cage Size & Quantity

The size of cage you will need, will depend on the breed of rabbit you have and its size (American Rabbit Breeders Association, Inc., 2020). You will need to be sure to have enough cages for all of your kits once they have been weaned off of their mom.

Minimum Space Requirements Based on an Adult Rabbit Weight			
Max Sr Weight in Pounds	Breeds	Required Cage Space	Required Cage Height
Rabbits 8.8-11.9 pounds	American, Argente Brun, Blanc De Hotot, Californian, Champagne D’Argent, American Chinchilla, Cinnamon, Crème D’Argent, New Zealand, Palomino, Rex, Satin, Silver Fox	4.0 ft x 4.0 ft	14 inches
Rabbits over 11.9 pounds	Giant Chinchilla, Checkered Giant, Flemish Giant	5.0 ft x 5.0 ft	14 inches



Materials & Protection

Your rabbit's size will also determine what type of material your cages need to be made out of. Giant rabbits need to have a solid floor so they do not get "sore hocks" which is an infection of the rabbit's footpads. Due to their large bodies' constantly placing pressure on their small feet, if they are on a wire floor their feet will continuously have "sore hocks". Your smaller breeds, on the other hand, can be on a wire floor that measures ½ x 1 inches. The half-inch side is the one that needs to be against the rabbit's feet as it will cause less irritation. The advantage to a wire flooring is that they are self-cleaning, provide better sanitation, and are typically easier to maintain. Whether your rabbit will be indoors or outdoors will also determine which materials are needed for their cage. Outdoor cages are usually a combination of plywood or pressed board, galvanized welded wire, and a roof to provide protection. While indoor cages are typically made out of the galvanized welded wire. One thing to keep in mind is that a rabbit's teeth will grow the duration of their life, which causes them to gnaw. Any portion of the cage that is made out of wood a rabbit will gnaw on. Therefore, you will be making more repair to your cage over the course of time.

Proper Care and Health

In terms of vaccinations and health, rabbits are usually a low-maintenance animal. There are no recommended vaccinations and very few medications that can be used on rabbits. In general, most veterinarians have limited experience treating rabbits, therefore, it is important for you to become familiar with your rabbits normal behavior and to know the signs of common diseases (Dick, Mangione, Phares, & West, 2016). The book, *Raising Better Rabbits & Cavies* (American Rabbit Breeders Association, Inc., 2020), has an entire section dedicated to the medical management of rabbits. In addition to this book, ARBA also has a Rabbit and Cavy Health committee that can help you with your rabbit medical questions.

Due to rabbits having a light skeletal structure, it is important that they be handled properly. Otherwise, they can be easily hurt. Rabbits should start being handled once they have been weaned, this way they can start getting used to humans. Depending on the breed of rabbit, with your dominant hand you either pick them up by one ear, both ears, or no ears, along with the nape of their neck. With your other hand, you will support the rabbit's rump and then lift them towards you. You always want to lift your rabbit, never pull them because if you do you could get their toenails caught on the wire of their cage. Once your rabbit is safely out of their cage hold them close to your body or tuck them under your arm so their eyes are covered. Rabbits are scared easily so holding them close and covering their eyes help them feel safe and protected.

Sources

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