Producing Rabbits For Meat

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The meat problem as a part of the war emergency brings many people in towns to consider the production of animals for meat. The rabbit is well adapted for such production because neither an abundance of grain nor large areas are required. But guidance for the inexperienced in the production of rabbits should increase the chances of success.

Buying Foundation Breeding Animals

1. Breed.—The breed of rabbits is unimportant so long as one of the large, rapid growing breeds is selected. The common breeds of rabbits useful in meat production in Missouri are New Zealand, Flemish Giant, Belgian Hare, and Chinchilla. One can usually find breeding stock for sale in his own neighborhood and save the expense and risk of transportation. In case no breeding stock is available locally, sources may be found in pet stock journals. The beginner need not pay exorbitant prices for breeding animals. It may be more economical to buy some young rabbits and grow them to breeding age rather than buy older animals.

2. Productivity.—In selecting breeding animals the ability of the strain to raise large litters of fast growing young should be considered. Good does should raise six young per litter and the young should be plump and growthy, indicating desirable and economical meat producers.

3. Health.—It is essential that healthy breeding stock be secured from a rabbitry that is well kept and free from disease. Sickly animals will prove unproductive and most of the diseases brought in by unhealthy breeding stock are extremely difficult to eradicate. There is often less risk from disease when healthy young rabbits rather than older animals are purchased by the beginner.

Housing Problems

Each mature rabbit should have about ten square feet of floor space; young rabbits require less space per animal, depending upon size. Overcrowding should be avoided.

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Fig. 1.—Front and back view of hutch with solid sloping floors which allow droppings to roll out. The droppings from the compartment above do not soil the animal or compartment below.
The floor of the hutch may be made of wooden slats one inch wide and one-half inch thick, spaced one-half inch apart. This permits droppings to fall through the floor. Perforated metal and galvanized hardware cloth are excellent for floors but may not be available during the war emergency. By placing a solid floor that slopes to the back of the hutch under the perforated floor, the droppings will fall down the sloping floor. This permits tiers of hutches without droppings from the hutches above soiling the rabbits and hutches below. The floor also may be made solid with a slope to the front or to the back. The droppings will tend to roll outside the hutch with this type of floor (Figure 1).

1. Hutches inside a building.—If the building can be made sufficiently tight to prevent drafts, the hutches for inside use may be cheaply constructed with wooden framework and one inch mesh poultry netting (Figure 2).

Fig. 2.—Hutch for growing rabbits inside a building. Wooden framework would be as good as the metal frame shown.
2. Outdoor hutches.—The outdoor hutch may be made solid with boards at the back and sides and the front enclosed with one inch mesh poultry netting (Figure 3). A roof which keeps the animals dry is necessary. It may be more economical to make a small, tightly constructed shed with outdoor runs constructed of wooden framework and one inch mesh poultry netting.

3. Central house with outdoor runs.—A garage or similar building can be converted into a rabbitry by making outdoor runways and partitioning the interior of the building to provide a shelter. The animals may be fed inside or in the runways. The runways are more easily kept sanitary if floors similar to those previously described for the hutches are provided rather than letting the rabbits come in contact with the droppings.

4. The nest box.—A box 12 inches deep, 12 inches wide and 16 inches long, which is completely enclosed except for the opening (six inches square) through which the rabbit enters, is simple in its construction and will provide a suitable nest for the breeding doe. The top and bottom of the box should be removable to make cleaning easier.

5. Cleaning and bedding.—Hutches and all the feeding and watering equipment should be kept clean at all times. The feeding and watering equipment may be washed with soap and water. If disease is present much care is needed to prevent spread through contaminated feeding and watering places.

The manure in the hutches should be removed frequently and regularly and used for fertilizer for the garden and flowers. It
may he helpful to wash the hutches with hot lye water once or twice monthly. They should be rinsed after use of the lye water.

Any bedding which has great absorbing properties such as shavings, straw, dry sawdust, etc. may be used. Only a small amount of bedding is required and cleaning should be frequent. The nest box may be bedded with shavings, straw or excelsior.

**Feeding**

1. **Hay.**—Rabbits should be fed all the good quality legume hay such as lespedeza, alfalfa, clover, soybeans, etc., they will consume without waste. If timothy, prairie, or similar hays are used, additional protein in the form of oil meal should be supplied in the grain. Hays should be cut into three or four inch lengths (a handsaw may be used for this purpose) to prevent the rabbits from wasting by pulling out of the feeding racks onto the floor.

2. **Table refuse, garden waste and lawn clippings.**—It is usually safe to feed table refuse, bread, and left-over vegetables if they are not moldy or soured. Maximum use should be made of garden wastes such as beet, carrot, turnip and radish tops, when possible. If the animals are accustomed to fresh green feeds, they may be allowed all they will eat of these providing they also have all the dry hay they will consume, or are fed a limited grain ration. Incidentally, dandelions make excellent green feed for rabbits. Young rabbits may scour if given too much green feed. The amount of green feed supplied should therefore be regulated to avoid such a disturbance.

3. **Grain feeds.**—Good quality grains such as corn, oats, barley, wheat and grain sorghums, supplemented with protein feeds such as soybean, linseed, cottonseed or peanut oil meals, make excellent growing and fattening rations. Two satisfactory mixtures are listed below:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Ration 1</th>
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<tr>
<td>Crushed or rolled wheat</td>
<td>25 lbs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crushed or rolled oats</td>
<td>25 lbs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coarsely ground yellow corn</td>
<td>25 lbs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soybean, cottonseed, or peanut oil meal (or a combination of these)</td>
<td>25 lbs.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100 lbs.</td>
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<th>Ration 2</th>
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<tr>
<td>Wheat bran</td>
<td>25 lbs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crushed or rolled oats</td>
<td>35 lbs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coarsely ground yellow corn</td>
<td>20 lbs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soybean, cottonseed, or peanut oil meal (or a combination of these)</td>
<td>20 lbs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100 lbs.</td>
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If linseed oil meal is used to replace soybean, cottonseed or peanut oil meal, then 60% more of it should be fed than the amount of oil meal suggested in the above mixtures. Pregnant and suckling
does may do better if bran and linseed oil meal are included in the ration. If it is impossible to secure the oil meals, one can raise rabbits by feeding legume hay, green feeds and whole oats, but maximum results will not be obtained.

Crock make excellent water and grain containers. Troughs may also be used for feeding the grain. Hay racks can be made in the shape of a basket from poultry netting.

It is advisable to limit the grain for breeding animals because they may become excessively fat. Besides, full feeding grain to these animals is unnecessary and unprofitable. Young animals destined for meat should be full fed grain and hay.

A mineral mixture of equal parts finely ground limestone, bone meal and salt should be available to all rabbits. Good clean water must be accessible at all times. If animals do not have sunlight, cod liver oil may be added to the grain mixture to supply needed vitamin D especially for young rabbits.

**Breeding**

1. **Care and management of the buck.**—It is best to keep the stud buck in a pen to himself and hand breed rather than to allow him to run with the does. The buck should be fed to keep him thrifty but not excessively fat. It may be necessary to limit the grain except during the heavy breeding season. A mature buck will eat two to six ounces of hay and two ounces of grain daily.

2. **The breeding operations.**—Does will usually be ready to breed when they are seven or eight months old and will usually become unproductive at about four years of age, but this depends upon the breed of rabbits and their care. Well developed does may be bred at a younger age than those grown more slowly. During breeding age, does should produce four litters per year, which allows one month for pregnancy and two months for raising each litter. Only does of high fertility and good suckling ability should be kept for breeding.

When ready for breeding put the doe in with the buck and observe if she is receptive. The doe should be removed as soon as she is bred. Handle rabbits by picking them up by the loose skin of the back, never by the ears or hind legs (Figure 4). If does do not take the buck in five minutes they should be removed to their hutch. Breeding records should be kept because the doe should be isolated from other rabbits and have a nest box available several days before the young are due. The gestation period in rabbits is 31 days; hence, preparations for the litter should be made 28 days or four weeks after breeding.

3. **Management practices when litter comes.**—Pregnant does should gain in weight throughout the gestation period so that they will deliver strong young and have reserves for suckling the litter. No change in the diet of the doe is necessary at the time the young
are born if she has previously been fed a good ration. If the diet has been lacking in protein, then the addition of bran and oil meal to the grain ration may be advisable.

Fig. 4.—The rabbit should be handled by the loose skin on the back—never by the ears or hind legs.

The number in the litter should be reduced to six or seven by transferring some from larger litters to small ones, or destroying the smaller young within the litters of large size.

The hutch and nest box should be thoroughly cleaned and straw or some other suitable bedding provided. The doe will make her own nest and will line it with hair which she pulls from her abdominal region.

4. Feeding and care of suckling doe and her litter.—The greatest factor in raising young rabbits is cleanliness. The hutches and the feeding and watering utensils should be kept clean. It is not advisable to have more than one doe and litter per pen because fighting of the does may injure the young, and young of larger size may rob the smaller ones of feed and milk.

Young rabbits may be weaned at six to eight weeks of age depending upon their size. It is well to allow the young plenty of hutch space after weaning (figure 5) rather than crowd several
litters together. Small rabbits should not be fed with large rabbits because the large ones will get more than their proportion of the feed.

Fig. 5.—Young rabbits weaned but a short time and having ample hutch space. This runway was made from a discarded showcase.

5. Castration.—Young male rabbits may be allowed to run together but they will begin fighting when they reach sexual maturity. It is best to castrate all bucks not needed for breeding as soon as the testes descend into the scrotum. Two can castrate young males if one person sitting down holds the animal by the rear legs while the other does the operation. Two incisions should be made, one for each testis, and the testes pulled out. The testis cord may be cut with scissors or broken by pulling. Before and after the operation the scrotum should be washed with a good disinfectant. The instruments should be cleaned and disinfected before using.

Dressing Rabbits

Rabbits may be killed for meat as young as two months of age, but the best age is four to five months at a weight of 5 to 8 pounds. At this weight they will dress approximately 50%. The rabbit is killed by holding by the hind legs, head downward and by striking a sharp blow just behind the ears. A piece of broom stick eighteen inches long is useful for this purpose. Immediately the throat of the animal should be cut to insure proper bleeding. The animal is suspended head down by using a wooden or wire gambrel inserted between the tendon and bone at the heel.

The animal should be skinned as soon as dead. Cut the skin from the heel to the base of the tail, remove the skin from the muscles of the hind legs, cut through the tail (figure 6) and then pull the skin down over the head. The forelegs can be pulled out (figure 7) and the skin cut loose at the feet and the head may be skinned or cut off.

The entrails are removed by cutting through the mid-ventral body wall from the pelvic region between the hind legs through the sternum of the chest (figure 8). The bung is removed by
Fig. 6.—Skinning a rabbit. The skin has been removed from the hind legs and the tail has been cut. It is ready now for pulling the skin down.

Fig. 7.—The skin has been pulled down over the head and the forelegs pulled out. The head may be skinned or cut off and the forelegs are cut off near the foot.

Fig. 8.—The body wall has been opened and the bung has been cut around. The entrails are ready to be drawn.
cutting around it and then the intestines are pulled down and out through the slit just made. The kidneys and the fatty layer should not be taken out with the entrails. The liver, after the gall bladder is removed, and the heart are good meat.

After dressing, the carcass should be washed with cold, clean water and the water drained off or the carcass dried with a clean cloth. The carcass should be chilled for a day or two before eating. If a frozen locker is in regular use, the carcass may be frozen and stored for six months to a year.

A carcass from a four to six month old animal will serve four to six persons. The carcass is cut up to yield the following: each hind leg is cut into two pieces, the saddle (back) into three pieces, each front leg and shoulder into one piece. These cuts are excellent for frying, etc. The remaining rib and neck cuts are used for soup.

Rabbit meat is very nutritious; but since it is somewhat dry, methods of cooking which will maintain as much juiciness as possible should be used.

Meat from young rabbits may be fried southern style. Carcasses from older animals respond well to roasting with a low heat, parboiling and then roasting or frying, or pressure cooking.
Disease Control

A rabbit in good health has a bright eye, alert ear, smooth coat and is active. The droppings of a healthy rabbit are round and hard, and the region of the vent shows no soiling or evidence of scours. Normal temperature for the rabbit is 101°F.

1. Coccidiosis.—Coccidiosis is perhaps the worst disease of rabbits since it is so fatal to the young and so difficult to eliminate. The affected young rabbits are dull, have a rough coat, may show signs of scouring and may be pot bellied or very thin. Another symptom is snuffles, a discharge from the nose and hard breathing with frequent sneezing. Young rabbits contracting the disease usually die quickly, though they may linger for some time.

Sanitation with an attempt at prevention is the best means of control since there is no good treatment. Clean hutches, water and feed jars and other sanitary measures should follow the purchase of rabbits from a healthy rabbitry. The animals that are infected should be isolated from others and dead animals should be removed from the hutch and burned. A few drops of tincture of iron, or a few crystals of copperas added to the drinking water once or twice a week may help. Also making the water a light pink with potassium permanganate may benefit the animals and help control the spread of the disease to the normal rabbits.

2. Ear canker.—The affected animal shakes its head and its ear may lop over. A brown crust is seen inside the external ear.

The best treatment is 5% phenol (carbolic acid) in glycerine. A few drops should be put into each ear of all rabbits about three or four times a year, and every few days in the affected animals.

3. Colds, pneumonia, etc.—These diseases are usually caused by improper ventilation, inadequate housing or poor sanitation. Leaky
hutches, unclean quarters, stuffy or drafty houses all are conducive to colds and pneumonia. The use of medicines when the fundamental cause is not changed will do little good. If the cause of colds is corrected, medicines for them are unnecessary.

4. **External parasites.**—Fleas and lice are controlled by keeping the hutches and equipment cleaned and by dusting the animals with pyrethrum powder.

Mange usually causes the fur to fall out, exposing a crusty bare skin. Besides isolating the affected animals and cleaning and disinfecting the hutches to prevent its spread, the following treatment may be used.

Wash the bare regions with soap and water and clip hair that is left. Apply sulfur ointment to affected regions every four days until cured.

5. **Sore hocks.**—The ammonia from rabbit manure will cause sore hocks if the animal is kept in a dirty hutch. The hutches should, therefore, be cleaned regularly and bedded with straw, sawdust, or some other material. Sore hocks should be washed with soap and water and then zinc oxide applied.

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