

Housing Rabbits

Before purchasing any animals, you will need a place to house them. It will be necessary to make plans for the housing prior to acquiring your initial stock.

Visit a breeder in your area and see their construction and layout. Once construction is complete, it is costly to make changes or corrections, so it is best to study and plan out your project well in advance.

There are many different types of hutch or cage construction. The kind of housing needed will depend on the climate, location, and the amount of money you plan to spend. Regardless of the size of your operation, you should construct housing that will be protective and comfortable for the animals. In addition, you should plan for housing that allows for easy feeding, watering, breeding, and cleaning.

If outside hutches or cages will be used, be sure the animals are protected from direct sunlight, rain, snow, and predators. A wooden construction with wire floor and front is better than a cage or hutch of solid wood, as the sanitation and air circulation are much more adequate.

Rabbits can withstand cold weather better than hot weather. If possible, the temperature in the hutch should not exceed 85 degrees. In very hot weather, shade and a gentle breeze are very beneficial to the animals. If extremely hot, a bottle of frozen water in the cage will entice the animal to curl up by it, thus cooling body temperature. An electric fan may be necessary to circulate the air. Remember, however, not to have it blowing directly on the animal.

Although rabbits can tolerate low temperatures and excessive cold, they must be kept free from drafts or becoming wet. Both of these conditions will weaken their resistance to disease, and make them more susceptible. Try to position the hutch or cage so that rain or snow will not enter it. Facing it toward the south can help protect against drafts. Proper ventilation is important whether the animals are outside, or in a building. Signs of poor ventilation are condensation and an ammonia smell.

There are many kinds of wire available. A good wire for floor use is 1/2" x 1" - 14 gauge. Protection from predators is very important. If the animals are housed outside, it may be necessary to construct a protective fence around the hutches or cages. If they are inside, securing the building is advisable when you are not around. If metal material is used for the roof of an outside hutch, some sort of insulation should be used to combat the heat that could be experienced if in direct sunlight. As rabbits are easily frightened, the housing should be located where it will be least disturbed.

The hutch should be easily accessed by the breeder. The more difficult it is to see into, or work within a cage, the less likely the person is to do these chores. Even the self-cleaning type cages need attention at times. In the construction of your hutches or the layout of your building, try to make all surfaces of each hutch or cage as accessible as possible for burning or vacuuming of loose hair, scraping or brushing of sticking manure, or general sanitation.

CONSTRUCTING A CAGE

Most rabbit cages are made entirely of wire. This provides easy cleaning, and they are more durable than cages made of other materials. There are various types of wire around that can be used in cage construction, but having the proper size and weight will make the job easier, as well as permit the cages to last longer. A good 16 gauge wire should be used for the sides and tops, with a 14 gauge used for the floor. The normal floor wire is 1/2"x1", and the sides and top are 1"x2".

The size of the pen depends upon the breed of the rabbit. A rule of thumb is to allow 3/4 square foot (.075 sq. ft.) per pound of mature body weight. Thus a rabbit weighing 10 pounds would require a cage approximately 7.5 square feet of floor space. A 36"x30" would provide the required area.

An appropriate amount of J clips or hog rings should be used to ensure a well supported and adequately fasten cage. If 1/2"x1" wire is used for the flooring, it should be installed with the wire 1/2" apart (the stay wires) facing up. This gives the rabbits' feet excellent support.

It may be advisable to use partitions between cages, as many male rabbits will “spray” urine, thus creating a unsanitary condition. Metal or plastic partitions will last longer as wood can be chewed or will absorb the urine and rot.

Outdoor hutches are usually made of wood, or at least have a wooden frame. The legs should be treated for termites and rotting, as they will suffer quite a bit of moisture (urine and water) from both rabbits and the ground.

The most common outdoor hutch is a combination of wood frame and wire pens. This allows good ventilation, yet is strong enough to supply ample support. As rabbits are natural gnawers, the use of wood should be limited to the areas the rabbit cannot reach.

The roof is very important, as it keeps the animals dry and protects them from the sun. It may be necessary to cover the roof with plant material or insulate the underside of the roof in order to prevent heat buildup.

Proper ventilation is a necessity, but make sure the animals are not exposed to wet winds or drafts. An overhang of the roof should be provided on all sides of the hutch to prevent rains from beating in on the rabbits.

Remember, once your animals start to grow, they will need to be separated. If you have more than one bunny, it will be necessary to have separate cages for them as they mature. If you plan on breeding your rabbits, extra cages will be needed to separate the litter as it grows, so make sure you account for this when designing your hutches.

LOCATION

As odor may be evident, no matter how well you keep the sanitary conditions, the building or hutches should be kept at a distance from your home or neighbor’s home.

The drainage around the building or hutch should be adequate to prohibit stagnant pools of water from laying thus producing breeding grounds for insects or sanitary problems.

Check with your local government to insure there are no ordinances prohibiting you from raising rabbits. Also, the zoning specifications will have to be considered, as many towns or cities have territorial jurisdiction that must be followed.

VENTILATION

One of the most important features in raising healthy rabbits is proper ventilation. This is necessary to provide fresh air, reduce humidity, dilute or kill airborne disease causing organisms, and to help control temperature. If the animals are located in an area with good breezes most of the time, you may be able to rely on natural ventilation.

If you have an enclosed building, there should be adjustable side flaps that can be lowered or raised to accommodate the air circulation. In addition, exhaust and intake fans can be used to circulate air.

FEEDERS

Ceramic crocks or unbreakable vinyl crocks that cannot be easily tipped over are good. The metal self-feeder with a wire bottom is the most liked and very easy to use. It requires less maintenance and cleaning, and can be accessed without having to open the cage door. It also allows more floor space for the rabbit as it is mounted on the sides of the pen. The animals cannot foul the self-feeders with urine or manure as readily as they can a crock or bowl.

WATERERS

Clean, fresh water is vital in raising healthy rabbits. A lack of water will cause decreased food intake, which can result in a slower growth rate.

Crock water bowls with heavy bottoms to keep them from tipping work well, but have their disadvantages. They require regular cleaning and disinfecting, and in the winter can become frozen,

necessitating chipping ice out or thawing the bowls. Due to the expansion of water during freezing, they will often break. There are polyvinyl water crocks on the market that are preferred because there is less chance of them breaking due to freezing, they will not rust, their smooth surface makes them easier to clean, and they will not readily harbor bacteria.

Automatic watering systems offer clean, fresh water at all times in each cage. This plays a large part in the overall growth development of the herd. If located in an area that could possibly freeze, heat cables run inside the pipes will be necessary to keep the system functional.

All watering systems should be sanitized and cleaned on a regular basis. This can be done by purging the system with chlorine periodically.

It is recommended that when installing an automatic watering system you make sure that each line can be isolated from the others in case repairs are needed.

Many people also use water bottles that are hung on the outside of the pens. These bottles, for a small operation, can be very handy for the owner.

The water bottles can also be taken off the pens and used when transporting your animals. The main disadvantage to the water bottle is that it takes longer to fill them than regular crocks. In addition, like the crock water bowls, may become frozen in the winter, necessitating a second set of water bottle to be used while the original set is thawing. Regardless of the equipment used to water your animals, it is necessary that they have fresh water at all times.