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# RABBIT FITTING



# SHOWMANSHIP MEMBER'S GUIDE

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4-H—Youth Programs • Cooperative Extension Service • Michigan State University 204

by

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Fitting and showmanship of rabbits is a new area which provides 4-Her's with an opportunity to compete with other 4-H members in their county or from other parts of the state. In regular rabbit shows, the rabbits are judged rather than the 4-H member. However, in a fitting and showmanship contest, the judge evaluates the members on the various rabbit skills they demonstrate and their general knowledge of rabbits. The judges also consider each participant's preparation, attitude, and behavior.

## OBJECTIVES

The objectives of a rabbit fitting and showmanship contest are to develop:

- practical skills in members
- leadership qualities in members
- competition and sportsmanship in members
- a special interest in raising rabbits in the members
- a better image about rabbit raising in the minds of the people who attend showmanship contests
- an appreciation for rabbits and the knowledge of how to handle them in a humane way

## FITTING

Fitting is a word used to describe how a 4-H member selected a rabbit from a breed and how the member fed and cared for the rabbit prior to the contest so that the animal is neither over nor underweight. The term also encompasses any preparation of the rabbit prior to the contest such as treating for ear mites, trimming the toenails, removing dead fur,

cleaning the fur, etc. Fitting also includes the participant's general appearance.

## Guidelines for the Rabbit

There are many breeds of rabbits to choose from for a fitting and showmanship contest. If you are just starting a rabbit project, making a choice is not a difficult task. Check with your 4-H leader on which breed is best for your purpose. It is a good practice for a junior member to choose a smaller or medium breed rather than a large breed. It can be very frustrating for a novice 4-H member when trying to turn a large rabbit around during the examination section of the contest. As a rule, any rabbit is accepted for showmanship. The emphasis is on how you work with the animal to demonstrate your knowledge and your ability in the handling skills.

When selecting an animal, it is important to choose a rabbit over four months of age. Younger rabbits tend to get excited more easily than older ones. Either sex can be used in the contest. It is important that the rabbit you choose for the contest does not have any defects or disqualification points. Make your selection three to six weeks prior to the contest in order to have time to train for posing and other showmanship aspects.

## Feeding and Caring for the Rabbit

Once you decide which rabbit to enter in the contest, it is very important to give special attention to that rabbit in the areas of feeding and caring. You may want to separate the rabbit from your other rabbits to a place where more attention can be given and where it receives more exposure to people. By handling your rabbit often and providing exposure to other people, you can have an advantage during the actual contest. Quality feed and a balanced ration should be provided so that the rabbit will have excellent fur and meat quality and be free from any diseases.

If your rabbit has a disease problem such as a cold, weepy-eye, or ear mites, it should be treated immediately so it is completely free from such problems by the time of the contest.

Run the palm of your hand back and forth over the rabbit from head to tail just enough to remove loose fur. Be sure to keep the rabbit's hutch spotless, because hutch stain is practically impossible to remove.

Older rabbits may have large toenails. In such cases the toenails should be clipped. Use a nail cutter or a canine nail clipper to trim the nails. Make sure it is done properly. If you cut too close, the nail will bleed and the fur can be stained with blood. Take care of this condition early so that you will still have time to clean the fur if bleeding occurs.

## Guidelines for the Participant

The fitting and showmanship contest for rabbits is generally an annual event and may have several curious spectators. Remember that a rabbit fitting and showmanship contest is as important to the rabbit raiser as the horse, beef, swine, and sheep fitting and showmanship contests are to their respective producers. Therefore, your appearance is important. In a county level contest, the superintendent may recommend the dress code. In the state contest, it is recommended that boys wear a pair of dark pants, a white shirt, and a tie. It is recommended that girls wear a pair of dark pants, a white blouse, and a colored scarf. Hair should be properly combed. Wear appropriate shoes; bare feet are not allowed.

## SHOWMANSHIP

Even though the 4-H rabbit project has grown rapidly in Michigan, many members have problems carrying the rabbit from the cage to the judging table. If the rabbit is not carried properly, it may kick and scratch its

handler and may even fall and get hurt.

There are several methods to use when handling the rabbit. Each breed of rabbit may need an individual handling method for showmanship. The method is to encourage the rabbit to resemble the perfect specimen for its breed. If you take a fancy rabbit to the contest rather than a common meat-type rabbit, you may choose the handling method which most enhances it in accordance with its breed. If you are really hoping to take first place in the competition, then you may want to use the method described here.

## Handling the Rabbit in Showmanship Competition

This section of the competition will be held after all the participants are asked to bring their rabbits to the table at the assigned area. As a participant, you will then stand behind the table with the rabbit in front of you facing sideways with the head to your left. When the judge gives the command "handle your rabbits," you should follow the steps below to score maximum points.\*

## Carrying Your Rabbit

- Step 1.** Put your right palm on the shoulders of the rabbit over the ears. Take a good grip on the shoulder skin. The ears should be held lightly inside your palm (fig. 1).
- Step 2.** Lift the rabbit's front legs by raising your right hand (fig. 2).
- Step 3.** Use your left hand to support the rabbit's hindquarters (fig. 3).
- Step 4.** Lift the rabbit and bring it in at an angle so its head is under your left armpit. Lower your left arm and bring your left arm toward your abdomen so that the head of the rabbit is hidden in your armpit and the weight of the rabbit is completely resting on your left hand (fig. 4).
- Step 5.** Lower your right hand to your side and stand in a position of attention (fig. 5). Remember that these steps can be completed in a matter of a couple minutes.

\* These directions are for right-handed contestants. Left-handed contestants should use the opposite hand from that noted in the steps.

The important thing is not how fast you pick up the rabbit, but whether the judge sees the various steps you try to show and how well you perform them.

## Posing the Rabbit

Posing the rabbit on the table for the showmanship contest can be done in several ways (for example, sideways, facing the contestant, or facing the judge). However, the recommended method of posing the rabbit for the State Contest is facing the judge. Be sure to follow all instructions.

Posing the rabbit is done in such a way that the animal is neither stretched out too much nor tucked in too much depending on breed description. By properly posing your animal, you can give a good impression of the "type" of the breed.

When practicing posing your rabbit, make sure you have a table and a rug or a piece of carpet upon which to set the animal. Never try to set up the animal on a smooth surface since it may slip and will not get a good grip, and this action would affect the pose negatively.

When posing the rabbit, cover its eyes with the palm of your hand so that it will sit calmly rather than struggle (fig. 6). With your other hand, set the forelegs in alignment with the eyes (fig. 7) and the hind legs in alignment with the hips (fig. 8). Gently stroke the rabbit on the back when the positioning is finished so that the animal will sit calmly in the posing position (fig. 9). Keep your movements to a minimum; the less you have to do to secure the proper response from your animal, the better your performance will be judged.

Posing the rabbit to the front facing the judge is important in the State Contest, because several people will be working side-by-side behind the table and the rabbits will be positioned close together. If they are posed sideways, a rabbit (especially a buck) may be tempted to mount an adjacent rabbit. Posing straight ahead should diminish this problem. It is important that the rabbits are posed at least two feet apart.

When the judge gives the command "pose," you will have two to three minutes to place the animal in the proper pose. You should then take a step back and stand at attention (fig. 10).

## Examining the Rabbit

In the showmanship part of the rabbit contest, the judge attempts to determine each participant's practical knowledge by checking the rabbit for defects and disqualifications. Hence, you need to demonstrate that practical skill, and the judge will evaluate you on how smoothly, systematically, and confidently you perform each of the examination sections. In the State Contest, it is very important that you conduct this examination in a systematic, smooth, and consistent way with ease and confidence. Always keep in mind that the judge should see every step you conduct.

The examination can be broken down into the following steps. The rabbit is already on the table since this is a continuation of the posing activity; however, you should turn the rabbit sideways with its head to your left.

- Step 1.** Start with the head area. Squeeze the base of each ear to determine whether the animal has any ear mites (fig. 11). If the animal struggles, you can suspect it has ear mites.
- Step 2.** Open and examine each ear to ascertain that the rabbit does not have ear mites (fig. 12).
- Step 3.** Check the rabbit's eyes by pointing your index finger at each eye to make sure the animal is not blind (fig. 13). Also check each eye to make sure that the rabbit does not have weepy-eye, a disease problem.
- Step 4.** Turn your rabbit smoothly on its back. This is a very important step. Judges will be closely observing whether the rabbit is under your control. Make sure you provide enough support on the table for the rabbit when you turn it around. Don't allow the animal to struggle or kick you in the face. Try to accomplish the turn in your initial attempt. The turning should be done in a very smooth way. Practice turning the rabbit on its back by getting a firm hold of the shoulder skin over the ears (as you do when beginning to handle your animal) (fig. 14). Keep the hindquarters resting on the table and use your right hand to make a swing to the right so that the animal is completely on its back (fig. 15). Keep a firm grip with your right hand while supporting the weight of the animal on the table.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

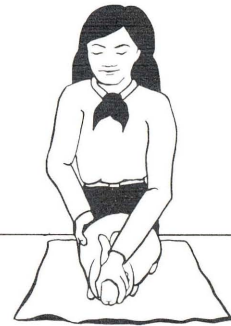


Figure 6

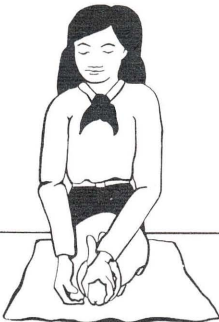


Figure 7



Figure 8

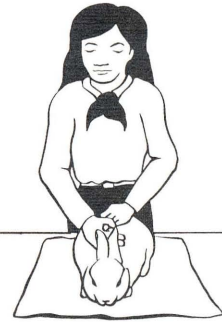


Figure 9

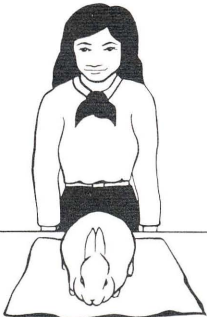


Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21



Figure 22



Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25



Figure 26



Figure 27



Figure 28



Figure 29



Figure 30

- Step 5.** Point your left index finger to the rabbit's nose area and look for any white discharge (a sign of a cold) (fig. 16).
- Step 6.** With your left thumb and index finger, pull back the animal's lips (first the upper and then the lower) to check the condition of the teeth (fig. 17). Carefully check for any problems with buck teeth, a hereditary condition which is a disqualification.
- Step 7.** Pull each front leg toward you to see if the legs are straight, crooked, or bowed (fig. 18).
- Step 8.** Press the palm of each foreleg to examine the color of the toenails and to look for missing toenails (fig. 19).
- Step 9.** Run your left hand over the chest and abdomen areas to check for any abscesses, tumors, or other abnormalities (fig. 20).
- Step 10.** As you come to the end of the abdomen area, grasp the thigh area of the hind legs and push it straight downward with the palm of your left hand to determine the straightness of the hind legs (fig. 21). Note whether or not they are parallel.
- Step 11.** Release your hand from the thigh area and check the hock area for any sign of sore hock (fig. 22). If a scab is visible, press it to see whether it is an old scab or if it is fresh. If it is fresh, it will bleed and the animal may struggle. This would then be an elimination.
- Step 12.** Examine the color of the toenails on the hind legs; also check for missing nails (fig. 23).
- Step 13.** Check the sex area of the animal to determine the sex and to locate any obvious disease problem (fig. 24). To check the sex, hold the tail between your left index and middle fingers and press down on the sex area with

your thumb. Apply a slight pressure.

- Step 14.** Feel the tail to see whether it is broken (fig. 25).
- Step 15.** Turn the rabbit back to the original position (its head facing your left) (fig. 26).
- Step 16.** Check the balance of the tail to see whether the rabbit has a wry tail or any other tail deformity (fig. 27).
- Step 17.** Set the ears of the rabbit properly (fig. 28). Check to see if they are carried in a position which is normal for its breed.
- Step 18.** Check the meat quality of the animal by feeling the meat on the shoulders, ribs, loins, rump, etc. (fig. 29).
- Step 19.** Examine the fur quality by running your hand from the tail to the head and back (fig. 30). Look at the guard hairs. You may also blow on the fur to examine the density of the fur.

At this point, the examination is complete. Make sure the sequence of examination is carried out systematically, confidently, and smoothly. Take time to make sure the judge sees most of what you are doing.

### Condition of the Rabbit

The condition of the rabbit in this case denotes its health, meat, and fur qualities. The breed characteristics should also be considered. The judge will examine each rabbit on the table in a general way, and this may not be a very detailed examination due to the time factor. However, the judge will thoroughly examine the fitting of the animal.

### Attitude and Behavior of the Participant

Every eye will be on the participants; therefore, it is absolutely necessary for you to act properly.

Remember that this is also a time of fun for you. You have the opportunity to show the audience and the judge that you are competent and proud to be a part of the contest. Be alert and put on a smile as you complete the various steps. Look at the judge from time to time to make sure you have his/her attention.

Be on your best behavior and be courteous. If the judge asks you questions, answer them politely. Use the word "sir" or "madam" when asking or answering questions. Remember, if all contestants know what to do and how to perform the various steps, the judge will then have to make a decision based on the minor points. Display sportsmanship and congratulate your peers on their achievements.

### Quiz

At the state level, the rabbit quiz is part of a separate option of the Michigan Rabbit Expo. In the county, the quiz is generally given to each participant in each division at the end of the contest to test his/her general knowledge about rabbits. There are several ways this can be done. If there are only a few contestants, the judge may decide to call each participant to an area to answer a set of questions on a one-to-one basis. Each contestant will be instructed not to talk to the other contestants about the quiz. Everyone will be given the same quiz to allow for consistency within each division.

The number of questions asked will depend on the age division, the time allowed, etc. The quiz will usually consist of questions of general knowledge of rabbits. The quiz may be oral or written. The advantage of a written test is that every participant can take the test at the same time and thus time is saved. The written quiz requires prior planning; however, the oral quiz gives each participant a chance to experience the interview process.



Fig. 31. These 4-H members are at various stages of examining their rabbits.

# SCORECARD

	County Points Allowed	State Points Allowed
<b>I. Handling of rabbit (5 steps)</b>	10	15
<b>II. Posing rabbit on table</b>	20	20
<b>III. Examination of rabbit</b>	30	30
<b>IV. Condition of rabbit</b>	20	20
— fitting of rabbit (10)		
— meat condition (3)		
— fur condition (3)		
— general health (4)		
<b>V. Rabbit quiz*</b>	10	—
<b>VI. Appearance, attitude, and behavior of participant</b>		
— appearance	5	9
— attitude	2	3
— behavior	3	3
<b>TOTAL POINTS</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

\* At the state level, the rabbit quiz is part of a separate option of the Michigan Rabbit Expo.

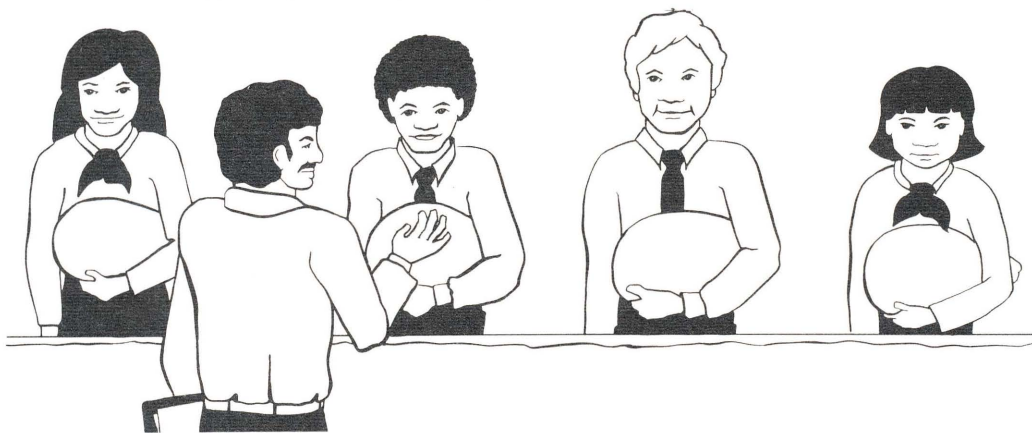


Fig. 32. These 4-H members are demonstrating handling their rabbits.

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