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4H Rabbit Project

Michigan State University Cooperative Extension Service

4-H Club Bulletin

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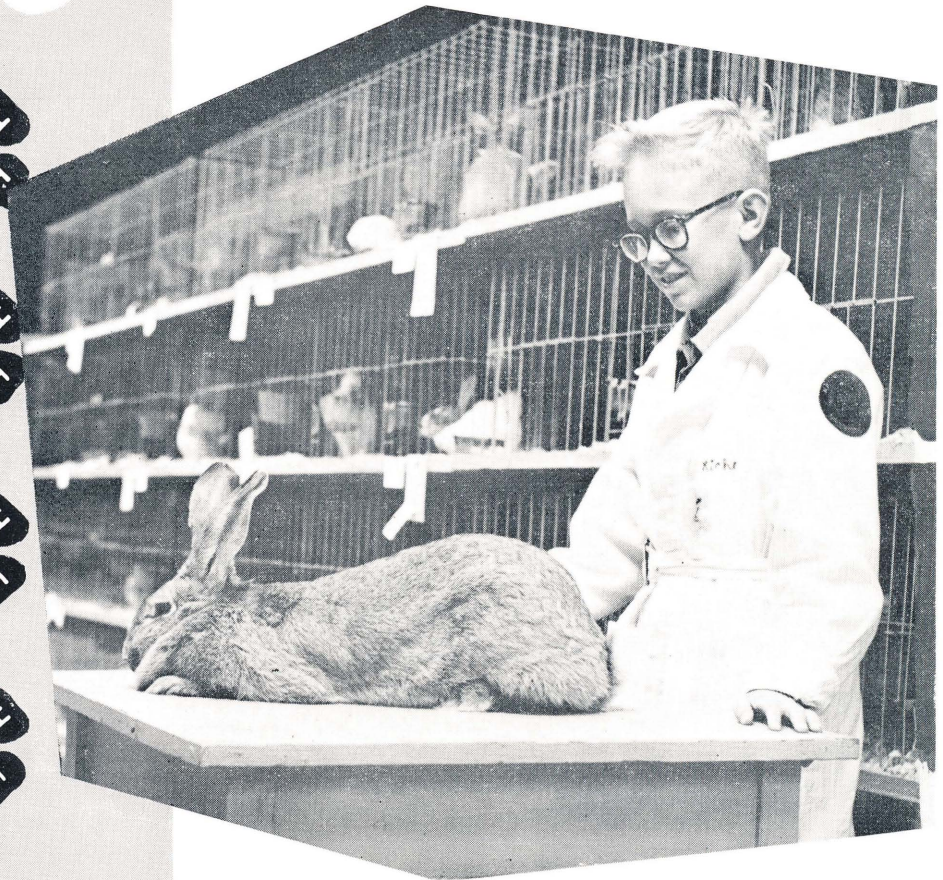
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# Rabbit Project



**MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY**  
**Cooperative Extension Service**  
East Lansing

# 4-H Rabbit Project

*By Keith Forbush, A.R.C.B.A. Licensed Judge and Registrar, Local 4-H Club Leader, Inkster, Mich.*

A 4-H rabbit project can be fun, challenging, and profitable to an interested boy or girl. Rabbit raising is a good 4-H project because rabbits produce meat quickly, they need little space, and it doesn't cost much to get started. Commercial uses of rabbits are for meat, fur, laboratory experiments, and fertilizer.

## WHO SHOULD DO THE RABBIT PROJECT?

Any boy or girl between 10 and 21 years old who:

1. Already raises rabbits or is interested in animals.
2. Is willing to invest some money in his business.
3. Has enough space for six or more hutch compartments.
4. Wants good quality stock and will continue to improve it.
5. Will raise rabbits as a business, not for pets.
6. Will want to use rabbit meat at home and be willing to sell the surplus to others.
7. Has ambition and likes to earn money.
8. Has parents who will support his project and who appreciate what the 4-H Club will do for him.
9. Is eager to learn.
10. Will be willing to help his fellow members when he can.
11. Will be glad to have advice from the leader and other members.

## CHOOSING A BREED

Think of rabbit breeding as a business. To succeed, consider these things:

- Size
- Rate of growth
- Choice of breed

### Size

A breed maturing at 10 pounds or more is best. You can get meat at the lowest cost with a breed which produces 4- to 5-pound fryers at 7 to 10 weeks of age. The younger the animals can be dressed, the cheaper each pound is produced. It is almost impossible to raise a 4- to 5-pound fryer if the mature weight is under 10 pounds.

### Rate of Growth

Fast growth means low-cost production. If you choose a breed maturing at 10 pounds or more, the rate of growth will depend on the strain or on each rabbit. Growth rate differs somewhat within each breed.

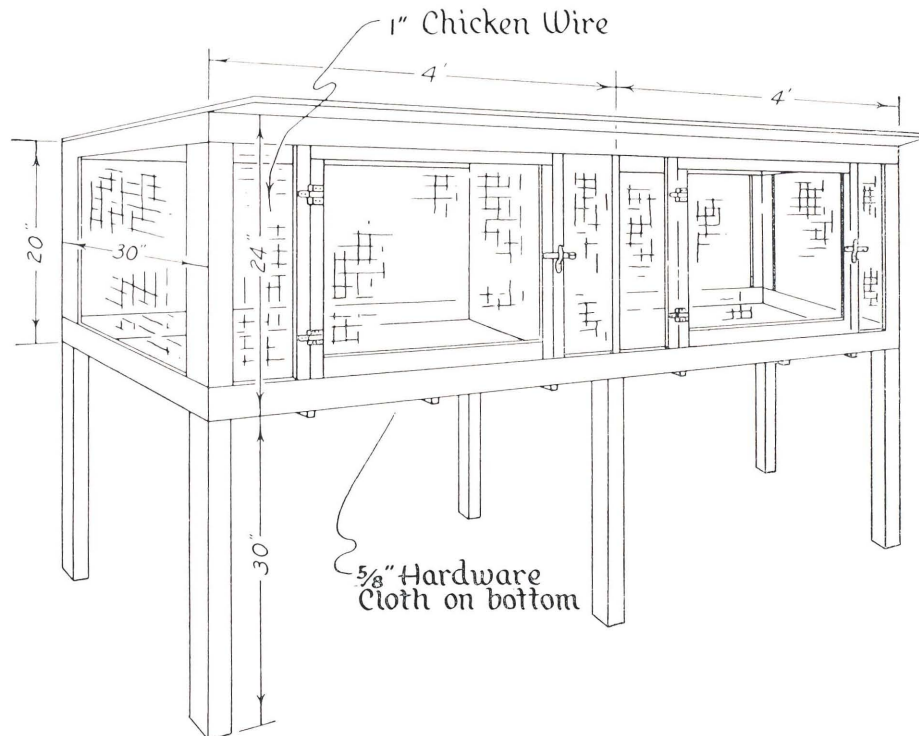
Growth rate has been stepped up greatly in the most popular commercial breeds. Select your breeding stock from large, fast-developing litters of a popular breed.

Choose a common breed. Having more rabbits from which to choose makes it easier for you to get good quality stock. You will have a better choice of breed production ability and individual record. If any out-breeding is needed, you will be better able to find the type you want.

Solid, well-filled sections of the body mean profit. Judges and buyers of all commercial breeds look for a well-filled body. If you choose a breed maturing at 10 pounds or more, then this quality will depend on the individual rabbit.

### Breeds

These breeds are suggested: American Chinchilla, Californian, Champagne de Argent, Checkered Giant, Flemish Giant, Giant Chinchilla, and New Zealand Red or White.



A good rabbit hutch should be airy, cool, comfortable, and easy to take care of. Above is a standard hutch for medium sized breeds. It is inexpensive to build.

## RABBIT HOUSING

Before you buy your breeding stock, you must arrange for housing. The most important things to remember are:

- Climate
- Ease of handling
- Cleanliness
- Comfort
- Wearing strength
- Cost

### Outdoors or Indoors?

You will have to decide which is more important, your own comfort or the health of the herd. For best results, locate the pens outdoors, or, at least in an open shelter.

Because of the cold winter weather in Michigan, hutches are often located in a closed building. Although domestic rabbits *can* be raised indoors, there are certain drawbacks.

It is hard to keep the hutches clean at all times. Large amounts of moisture and ammonia are always present. You must watch doors and windows carefully to keep enough air circulating without drafts. One mistake can lessen the herd's resistance to colds and other diseases.

### What Style?

Build the hutch so that it will be comfortable in the warmer months and protect (with enough ventilation) the rabbits during the colder months. Don't worry about cold temperatures. Protect against strong winds, heavy snow, and rain. Make the hutch solid on three sides. Put vents near the ceiling of each pen to open on warm days to help relieve heat. Very warm weather is more dangerous to your herd than cold weather.

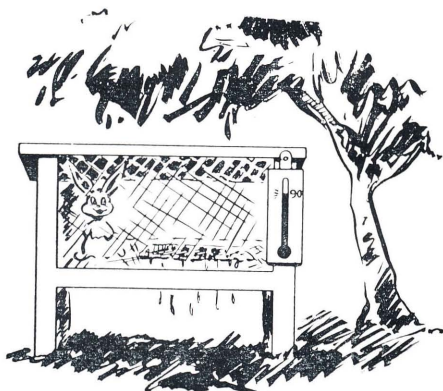
## How Many Pens Per Unit?

Many pens per unit mean low-cost construction. On the other hand, fewer pens per unit are better for the rabbits' health. You may want to move your units; it will be easier with just a few pens.

With fewer pens, it is easier to feed, clean, and in general, care for your herd. In trying to save on hutch cost, it is easy to forget upkeep and the rabbit's health. Rabbit raising is not a "packing box" business. To get a fair profit, you must make a fair investment.

## Why a Portable Pen?

Sometimes, there is a good reason to move part or all of the hutches. For example, if the design is somewhat self-cleaning, it takes less work to move the unit under the apple tree than to haul the manure to the apple tree. Smaller units are easier to move.



When the temperature is above 90 degrees, always keep a wet sack in the rabbit hutch. Keep the hutches under shade if possible.

## What Kind of Material?

Your housing must be durable. On the roof and solid sides, use any kind of permanent, water-proof material.

A good grade of garage siding is tight and neat-looking. Knotholes, thin mismatched lumber, cracks, or other weak spots may let the rabbit chew its way out or let enemies in. Use wire strong enough to keep out rats and dogs. Tack it tightly to the *inside* to discourage chewing by the rabbits.

## Floors

Choose the floor you think will be the easiest to keep clean and which will save the most money and work. Take your pick:

KIND	GOOD POINTS	BAD POINTS
1. Solid (usually tongue and groove wood).	Bedding material may be the most comfortable. Easiest to build.	Harder to keep clean. Bedding costs money.
2. Part wire - part wood (tongue and groove with $\frac{5}{8}$ inch hardware cloth).	Some waste drops through floor. Saves bedding and some work.	Waste often collects on wood parts. Little harder to build.
3. All wire ( $\frac{5}{8}$ or $\frac{3}{4}$ inch hardware cloth).	Lot of waste drops through floor. Saves much work and cost of bedding.	Sometimes the floor sags from weight of rabbit. Rabbit might be uncomfortable.
4. Wood slat (1 by 2, 1 by 3, 1 by 4, pine or hardwood).	Cleans itself. More comfortable than wire. No bedding cost. Easy to build.	Rabbit sometimes chews wood.
5. Perforated metal (galvanized with $\frac{5}{8}$ inch holes not over 1 inch apart).	Cleans itself. Long lasting.	Expensive to build.

## HANDLING YOUR RABBITS

Grasp the loin gently but firmly with the heel of the hand towards the rear of the animal when handling animals of fryer size and smaller.

For larger animals, use the right hand to grasp a fold of skin over the shoulders and place the left hand under the rump to support its weight. If you are left handed, reverse the position of your hands.



Be sure not to overfeed your rabbits.

## FEEDING

The cost of feed is a large item. A clean, well balanced ration is necessary to maintain health and produce good meat and fur.

### What to Feed?

There are many commercially prepared complete pelleted rations on the market. If you choose one of them guard against using feed with too much dust, and it should be free from any sign of mold. It should contain approximately 15 to 18% protein.

Feed costs may be less if you mix your own. Here is a suggested mix:

#### For Does and Litters:

- 3 parts oats, wheat, or barley (oats preferred)
- 2 parts soybean meal (pellet or pea size)
- 5 parts legume hay
- salt

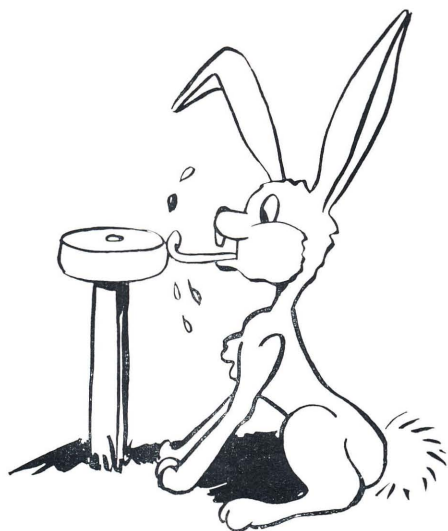
#### For all other rabbits:

- 1 part oats, barley, or wheat (oats preferred)
- 1 part legume hay
- salt

### How to Feed

Use crocks that won't tip over, and are designed so that feed is not easily scratched out.

Give does and litters all they will eat—keep feed before them at all times.



Rabbit pool salt should be in every hutch at all times.

To all others give only enough grain so that it will be cleaned up hours before the feeding next day.

You may keep hay, salt, and water before them at all times.



Wash water crocks and other feeding equipment often with good, hot, soapy water. Keep hutches clean.

## MARKETING

### When to Dress Out

You cannot make money from your domestic rabbits unless you sell them at:

- 7 to 10 weeks of age
- 4 to 5 pounds

If possible, quick freeze right away; do not wait for a customer to show up at the right moment.

### How to Sell

Besides adding to your family food supply, you can sell to neighbors and other friends. Domestic rabbit should be cut up, boxed, and quick-frozen. The meat must be attractive. One trial usually results in a steady retail customer.

In a rabbitry with just a few breeding does, you will probably have to buy feed at retail prices. Therefore, you should try to sell your surplus at retail prices to make a profit.

## ADVANTAGES OF DOMESTIC RABBITS

1. They produce meat quickly. A doe should produce at least twice her weight in each litter of 8-week-old fryers.
2. Pound for pound, domestic rabbits need less space than other types.
3. Disease control is very simple. Only ordinary care is needed.

4. The percent of edible meat in the carcass is high.
5. The percent of protein rates among the highest.
6. The percent of fat in the carcass is very low. This is important to people who have diabetes or who are overweight.
7. Many commercial uses: (a) meat, (b) fur, (c) laboratory experiments, (d) fertilizer.

## JUDGING THE 4-H RABBIT EXHIBIT

To produce domestic rabbits of good quality, the 4-H Rabbit Project stresses:

- Meat quality
- Health and appearance
- Fur
- Breed standards

Meat quality and health and appearance are very important, because the main purpose of the domestic rabbit is to produce food at the least cost.



Do not leave more than 8 baby rabbits with the mother.

## Meat Quality

These are the things that mean good meat quality. Look for them in meat-purpose breeds:

1. General—Only the body is important. It should be *solid*, *smooth*, and *well-filled*. There must be no loose fat or loose flesh. The stomach must not be too large.
2. Shoulders—Must be firm, wide enough (depending on the breed), and meaty.
3. Saddle—Should be smooth, not bony. Ribs should be springy. The loin especially must be well-filled (even in domestic rabbits, the loin is a choice cut).
4. Hips—This section is important because more meat is found here than in any other section. Hips must be smooth, solid and rounded. Avoid squareness, flat, cut-off or pinched rear quarters, and bony hips.

Special credit should be given animals which come the *closest* to the breed standards.

## Health and Appearance

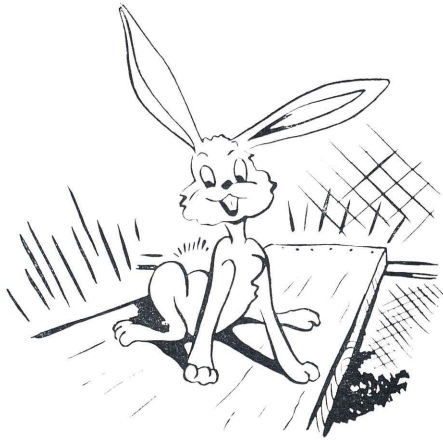
Naturally, the rabbit's food value is much less if the animal is sick or deformed. Fortunately, domestic rabbits resist most diseases. The list below will help you spot signs of disease and other defects.

1. Check inside *ears* for scab and redness. If the animal seems sensitive when you pinch the ear base, it may have canker. Look carefully. A parasitic mite is the cause; the cure is simple.
2. A normal *eye* will be free from spots or evidence of blindness.
3. Check for crooked *front legs* by lifting the front of the body by the ears so that the toes barely touch the ground or table. The legs should be perfectly straight. They are sometimes bowed, or, more often, spraddled. This deformity can appear in one or both legs.
4. Turn the rabbit on its back and press down on its lower lip to check for "buck" or broken *teeth*. Run your hand from chin along belly to tail to feel any unusual growth or rupture.
5. Press *hind legs* to rear to check for deformed bones. Check also for missing toenails or toes. With the rabbit in this position, you can see the pads on the bottom of the feet. Bare, red spots mean "Sore Hocks".
6. *Tail*—move your fingers from base of tail to its tip to check for deformities.
7. Let the animal hop freely; check for weak ankles or flat feet in front.
8. Among the less serious conditions are wet eyes, moult, and poor tail carriage.



Look for ear canker if a rabbit scratches inside its ear.

## AT THE SHOW



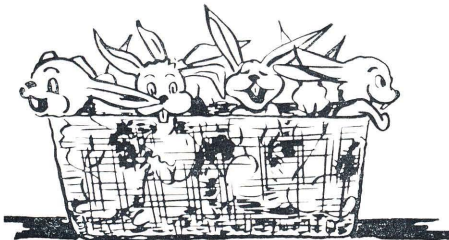
If your rabbit gets sore hocks, put a board over part of the wire floor in the pen.

### Fur

The pelt is the rabbit's most important by-product; don't overlook it. Three things decide fur quality:

1. *Length*—Usually, the larger the animal, the longer the fur, which grows from 1 inch to 1¾ inches. To check length, blow into the fur and measure with a ruler. Length of fur should be quite even over the whole body.
2. *Texture*—Some furs are too harsh, coarse, or wiry. Some are too soft and silky. Either is poor in a garment. The best is in between.
3. *Thickness*—Most breeds call for as thick fur as possible. You can tell the thickness or density of fur by how easily you can move your hand through it.

Judging fur is an art. It is hard to describe the ideal quality. Only practice and experience with judges or growers will help you learn the fine points in fur quality.



In the summertime, newly born rabbits should be placed in a wire basket where it is cool.

Pay special attention to the comfort of your animals at the show. Strange noises, new surroundings, a different pen, all mean that your rabbits will be a bit scared for a while. They should be cooped in regular welded wire exhibition pens with plenty of straw bedding on a solid floor (except Angoras). Be sure they are kept well bedded throughout the show.

Also, every morning and night be sure they have enough fresh water. Follow the same feeding schedule that you do at home.

Be present on judging day. You can learn a great deal by watching the judging of your exhibit, and all of the others. Judging day can be a day you learn much more about rabbits.

Be a good sport and congratulate the winner. This is easy if you have an "A" exhibit. But if you are given a "B" or "C", find out why; then you will know how to work for the "Blue" award next year.

## PLACING 4-H EXHIBITS

Judges of 4-H exhibits will follow this suggested procedure in general. The standards for group rating are:

**"A" Exhibit**—All animals in the pen should be about the same age and same size and color, with no sign of illness. All animals should have good flesh and fur and they should be up to breed standards.

**"B" Exhibit**—Animals should show no sign of illness. They should be in good condition, be alike, and look somewhat like breed standards.

**"C" Exhibit**—Animals are very different in size and age. There are signs of illness and poor condition. There are not enough animals in the show pen. Animals show little likeness to breed standards.



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