

Raising Rabbits for Meat: Getting Started

*Living on
The Land*

Why rabbits?

In the world of meat production, little attention is given to rabbits. Most people think of them as pets and don't want to put them on the dinner table. But, there are several traits that make rabbit meat highly sought after in their growing market.

One major selling point for rabbits is the healthy properties of the meat. When compared to more conventional livestock species, rabbit meat is high in protein and B-vitamins and low in fat, sodium, and cholesterol.

Rabbits also have a high feed conversion rate, meaning they require less feed per pound of meat produced. Butchering ages depend on the market you are trying to reach. Most rabbits are butchered by 10 weeks, which falls

in the fryer class. A roaster is butchered at a higher weight before 6 months. Since the meat toughens as they age, there is a smaller market for rabbits older than 6 months, called stewers. The young age for butchering plus the efficient feed conversion results in low feed and labor inputs to convert feed to meat.

The markets for pelts and manure leave little waste in rabbit production, although only mature rabbit pelts are harvested. Breed choice is important for pelt marketing. There are two main white-furred rabbit meat breeds whose pelts are desirable because they can be dyed easily. There are other meat breeds with unique coat colors that may also be desirable, depending on local markets.

Location is not a huge concern for rabbit production. Rabbits are allowed within city limits and their cages often take little room. This makes them an ideal production option for those with a small property who want to produce food for their family and/or for sale.

Breed choices

The American Rabbit Breeders Association (ARBA), the leading authority on rabbit production in the United States, currently recognizes 49 breeds of rabbits. These breeds are divided into five "type groups": Full-Arch, Semi-Arch, Compact, Commercial, and Cylindrical. Most meat rabbit breeds are in the Commercial group, but not all breeds in this group are high quality for meat or easy to obtain. Californians and New Zealands are by far the leading breeds due to their consistent color and growth rate. Palominos, American Chinchillas, and Satins are unique in their color varieties but have a slower growth rate and will require more time to develop.

Crossbreeds have started to grow in popularity due to their hybrid vigor from the positive attributes of multiple breeds. However, gaining a reputation as a producer may be more difficult, as crossbreeds can't be exhibited in rabbit show breed classes.

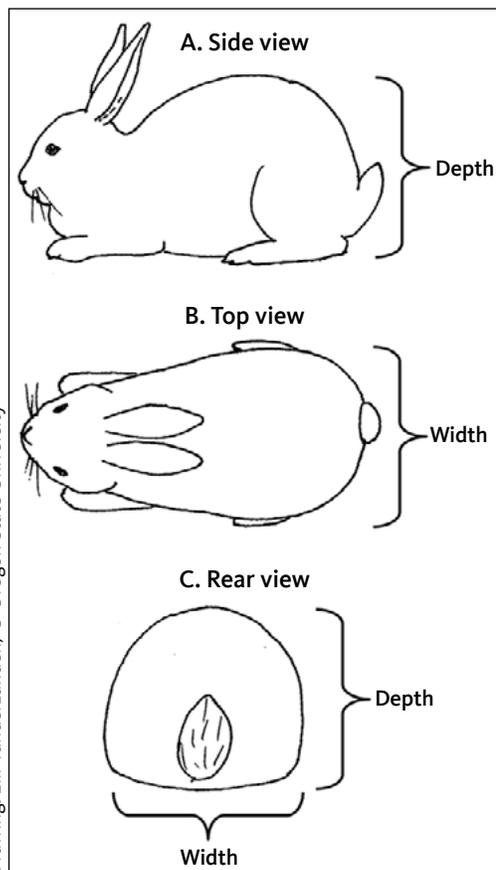
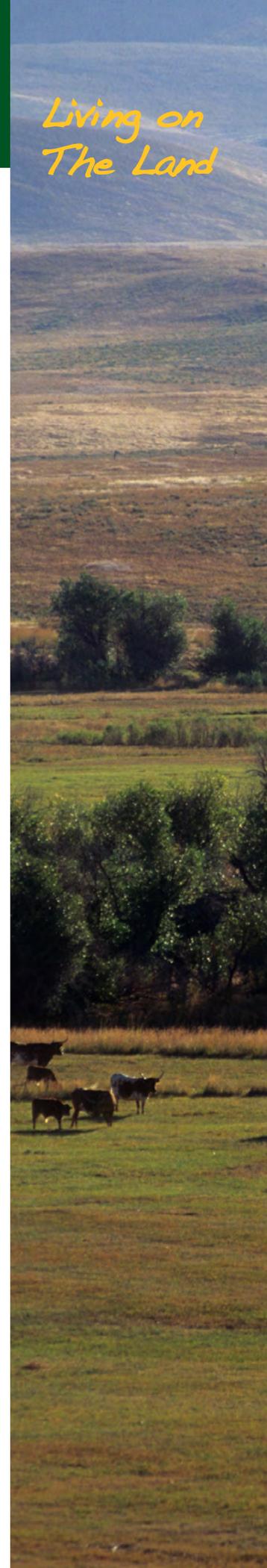


Figure 1. (See page 2.)



Choosing your breeding stock

After deciding on a particular breed to raise, it is time to choose your initial breeding stock. It is wise to have a 2:1 or 3:1 ratio of does to bucks. Having more than one buck allows for higher genetic diversity and correction of any breeding flaws that may occur. For a beginning operation, a producer would most likely have 6 does and 2 bucks.

When choosing rabbits, seek out an established, reputable breeder. The rabbits may cost more initially, but the breeder will have detailed records for you to examine. Also, they are more likely to have bred out imperfections that detract from meat quality. Ask to see the parents of any litter you are considering for purchase—the parents will give some insight on what young stock may look like when they mature. Although a female rabbit that has a large litter looks appealing, the kits in a small litter will generally grow larger and more steadily. Look for a doe that has either had small litters or comes from a line that produces smaller litters.

For better genetic diversity, go to several breeders to get your stock. This will lessen the risk of inbreeding and genetic flaws that cause health concerns or poor meat production.

Choose individual breeding stock with thick and sturdy bones. A thicker-boned rabbit will be able to support more muscle weight. The body should be as deep as it is wide, as shown in Figure 1 (page 1). Hips and shoulders should be similar in width, though the hips will generally taper down to the shoulders in width. In a well-conditioned rabbit, your hands should run smoothly over the body and not catch on bones that are protruding due to insufficient muscle cover. Remember that a young rabbit will not have the same muscle development as a mature rabbit and bones will slightly protrude. Most of the meat will come from the hindquarters,

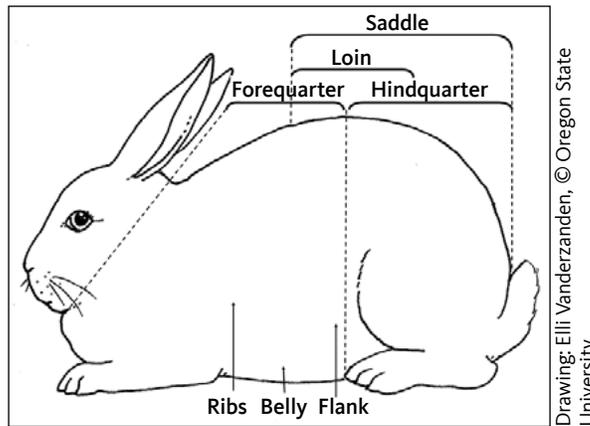


Figure 2.

including the saddle, loin, and hind leg, as seen in Figure 2.

Get connected

There are local, regional, and national groups that focus on meat rabbit production. The ARBA is a good place to start (www.arba.net). Farmers' markets and swap meets often have rabbit breeders that would be happy to help a budding producer, but sellers at these venues are less likely to have purebred stock. These venues also aren't held to certain standards of breeding quality. But, they are a tremendous source of knowledge when paired with more credible sources such as sanctioned breeding operations or ARBA resources.

Learn more

Standard of Perfection 2016–2020. American Rabbit Breeders Association (ARBA).

Contact ARBA for print copies.

Penn State Extension Ag Alternatives: Rabbit Production. <http://extension.psu.edu/business/ag-alternatives/livestock/additional-livestock-options/rabbit-production>

Mississippi State University Extension Service: Commercial Rabbit Production. http://www.poultry.msstate.edu/pdf/extension/rabbit_production.pdf

For more information on raising rabbits for meat, contact your local OSU Extension Service agent, or the American Rabbit Breeders Association (ARBA). The phrase "Living on The Land" is used with permission from Living on The Land Stewardship for Small Acreage, © 2008, UNCE/WSARE.

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