



So You Think You Want a Pet Rabbit

~What to know before buying a pet rabbit

By Kelli Slack
April 2014

Easter seems to be a popular time for people to consider buying a pet rabbit. Before you take the leap into rabbit ownership, it is important to know what you are getting into with a live domestic animal.

Domestic rabbits descend from the European wild rabbit. They have been bred in captivity for approximately 1500-1800 years and are one of the most recently domesticated animals. Luckily for us they have a fast reproductive cycle and fast generational cycle which makes it easier to fix traits and create a calm domestic animal.

Rabbits in the wild have a short lifespan. They are, after all, prey animals and eaten by everything from foxes to hawks, weasels, and coyotes. They breed quickly, produce quickly, and die quickly. Their prey ancestry also means that they are easily frightened, easily injured, and easily killed.

When considering a rabbit as a pet it is important to consider the following:

- ~rabbits are easily stressed
- ~rabbits die more readily in hot weather than cold weather
- ~rabbits are sexually mature between 5 and 10 months depending on breed



- ~rabbits can breed in as little as 2 weeks
 - ~the gestation period (pregnancy) for a doe is 28-32 days
 - ~the doe will readily breed 3 days after kindling (giving birth)
 - ~does are territorial and will sometimes protect their cage by grunting and lunging with nails or teeth
 - ~bucks will often spray urine to mark their territory much like dogs and cats
 - ~a rabbit's teeth continually grow and must be worn down throughout its life
 - ~rabbits in captivity may live for 8-12 years, though the average age is 5
- Many pet websites will assure you that rabbits are social animals and that they should be housed together or "bonded" to be happy. What they neglect to tell you is that rabbits are territorial and when caged they cannot escape aggressive behavior.

Consider this: you buy 2 rabbits and place them together in a cage that should be adequate for their needs with ample food and water. One rabbit kills the other rabbit. What went wrong? Most likely, one rabbit was aggressive, biting, scratching, or mounting (humping) the other animal, and the dead rabbit could not escape this behavior because it was caged.

So, while rabbits may demonstrate some aspects of

social behavior, they should also be housed separately for their health. Rabbits housed together may chew on each other's fur, bite, scratch, exhibit aggressive behavior like peeing on each other, dominate by eating the other rabbit's food, chase the submissive rabbit around the cage, etc.

And, to be honest, some rabbits are aggressive. I have had my fair (and unfair) share of bites and scratches from my own rabbits and from others. I don't keep aggressive animals for breeding. If you bite me, I eat you (remember, rabbits are livestock). Some cage aggression and protection of their young is acceptable and expected.

Rabbits are also not cats or dogs. They may exhibit some signs of affection, but more often prefer their own company. They don't learn commands like a dog or cat, though some will exhibit knowledge of commands. You can't play fetch with a rabbit. They don't like to sit in your lap. Rabbits mostly eat their pellets, drink water, pee, poop, and mark their cage.

A veterinarian might also tell you that your rabbit should come in for a yearly check-up. What he or she neglected to tell you is that they have no formal train-



ing on rabbits, know very little about rabbits, and likely can't fix anything that goes wrong with your rabbit. The truth is that there are no vaccinations, monthly pills, or sterilizations needed for your rabbit.

You might also find that pet rabbit websites encourage you to spay or neuter your rabbit. What they don't tell you is the high percentage of rabbits who die under anesthesia. The pet rabbit websites will claim that 90% of female rabbits will present with uterine cancer. These numbers are based on 1 study of vastly inbred rabbits used for research purposes. The true percentage is closer to 1%. And let's be honest, we don't know that uterine cancers aren't normal for wild European rabbits (remember, they are the ancestors to our domestic rabbits) and contribute to their death.

Neutering a male might alter his behavior so that he stops spraying, but if he isn't spraying, why risk the anesthesia? You should consider all of these factors before making the decision to alter your rabbit.

Earlier I mentioned how easily injured a rabbit is, and the most common injury is a dislocation or break. I commonly see animals on the show table that have dislocated or broken a toe or leg. Remember, evolution built these animals as prey animals. They breed quickly and die quickly. If you plan to have a rabbit as a pet, it is very important that you learn how to properly handle your rabbit to prevent injuries. Don't ever handle the rabbit by the ears or the scruff of the neck. That's akin to grabbing a child by the hair or ear. It's painful and not an effective way to carry them.

You also need to provide adequate shelter for your pet.

The rabbit must have a roof, be housed in shade, kept from wind gusts, and be warm in the winter. Most breeds may be kept on wire cage floors which are more sanitary as they can be cleaned with a sterilizer such as bleach. Wire floors can wear the foot pads on certain breeds of rabbits such as Mini Rex, so it may be necessary to give them a resting mat. Wooden floors should only be used with the Giant breeds such as Flemish Giants and French Lops. Wooden floors are very difficult to clean and maintain, so should be cleaned frequently and allowed to dry completely at least twice a year for 10 days in the sunshine if possible. Sunlight (the UV rays in particular) will kill bacteria and viruses.

Water and food are also very important for your pet animal. Rabbits should have water available at all times. Fresh, clean water is vital for your rabbits health. You should also provide them with fresh nutritious pellets once a day. Rabbits are nocturnal and will eat 90% of their food at night. They are most active during the darkest hours.

Why pellets you ask? The pet rabbit websites say to avoid pellets. Well, let's think about pellets rationally. A rabbit pellet is created from a formula (recipe) written by a livestock nutritionist that accounts for all of a rabbits nutritional needs. Pellets incorporate necessary elements such as hay, protein, fat, trace vitamins, and minerals. Pellets have been designed by a nutritionist to account for all of a rabbits needs. Without becoming a rabbit nutritionist yourself, it would be very difficult to put together the right mix of ingredients to account for all of your rabbit's needs without using pellets.

Pellets come in different protein percentages and you should buy a pellet that matches your rabbits activity level and needs. Most pet rabbits will be fine on a 15% protein pellet. Small animals should be given less than large animals.

Grass hays may be fed free choice, but should not be necessary with a balanced pelleted diet. The pellets also encourage wear to the ever-growing teeth which can prevent malocclusion. Other treats should be limited to once per week and you should avoid all foods with high water content.

Hopefully you've reached a conclusion about whether

a pet rabbit is for you after reading my thoughts. You should consider if you are ready to care for an animal for 8-10 years, can provide adequate feed, care, water, and housing, and don't hold unreasonable expectations of what your rabbit will do. Rabbits are low maintenance, inexpensive to purchase, and inexpensive to maintain. So, if a pet rabbit is for you, then talk to breeders in your area and find the right pet animal for you.

And, remember, while you may think of this rabbit as a pet, your breeder likely thinks of them as livestock. Having a rabbit as a pet is a bit like having a sheep, pig, chicken, or cow as a pet.

Who knows, after trying a pet rabbit you might even be tempted to start breeding and showing rabbits yourself. Rabbits make great 4-H and adult projects and teach important life skills like time management, financial responsibility, team work, the importance of paperwork and details, breeder responsibility, and ethics. As well as exploring scientific disciplines such as biology, chemistry, sociology, animal behavior, and reproductive physiology, among others.

