

## Rabbit Essentials

**Overview.** Meat pens and single fryers are the primary way rabbits are shown at county shows. At the major stock shows, there are meat pen classes as well as breeder classes. If you are going to feed a meat pen, you need to consult the show rules to see if you can purchase a meat pen from a breeder or if you have to raise the meat pen. If you have to order a meat pen, it is recommended to order four rabbits so you have a spare in case one dies. If you are ordering a meat pen from a breeder, you also need to contact that breeder at least four to five months before the show so they will breed enough does to fill the order because chances are the breeder will be taking orders from other feeders and they can only produce so many. Contrary to popular belief, rabbits do not multiply rapidly. Therefore, if you order a pen of rabbits and the breeder is not able to fill your order, it was not the breeder's fault.

**Selection.** There are certain breeds that are best utilized for meat pens and they are the commercial breeds, which are considered to be the ideal meat type. They are medium in length with depth equaling width, showing roundness of body and firmness of flesh. The most common used of these breeds are Champagne d' Argent, Satin, Palomino, New Zealand, and Californian. The New Zealand and Californian breeds are the most popular.

When you are putting your meat pen together, they need to be the same breed, but do not have to be of the same sex. They do need to be mirror images of each other in appearance as well as weight. When showing meat pens, weight is one of the most important things to consider when putting a meat pen together, because if they are not balanced in weight, they will not match as well, and that aspect will hurt the competitiveness of the meat pen greatly.

Keep in mind that most shows have a five pound per rabbit weight limit for meat pens. Also, most shows have age limits for the meat pen they can vary from sixty to ninety days of age. Be sure and read the show rules in which you are planning to exhibit.

**Validation.** There is no state validation for the rabbit project. See your county show rules for county validation dates. Not all county shows will have a validation date. If you are planning to show a meat pen at the Houston Livestock Show, there is a validation date as well as a rule that the exhibitor must own the parents of the meat pen. In other words, the exhibitor must raise their meat pen and not purchase one from another breeder.

**Facilities and Equipment.** Rabbit hutches need to be protected from the elements for the good of the rabbits. Each adult rabbit will require its own hutch. If you are feeding out a meat pen you need two to four cages. This will aid in the feeding of the meat pen so you can more closely monitor their feed intake. As we have discussed weight is very important to a meat pen's success. A meat pen sized rabbit needs a 24 inch x 24 inch wire mesh cage. Commercial breeder rabbits need at least a 24 inch x 30 inch cage for does and bucks need a 24 inch x 24 inch cage. The does require larger cages so they can raise a litter. The sides of cages should be made out of two inch x one inch wire mesh and the bottoms should be made out of ½ inch x one inch wire mesh. All of the hutches will need to be under some sort of roof for protection from sun, snow, and rain. Sidewalls will be needed in most rabbitries, at least for part of the year. It is not important to keep rabbits warm, as long as they are kept dry and out of the wind. It is very important to keep them well ventilated and clean, which is what wire mesh hutches do best.

You need to use j-feeders to feed your rabbits in. To water your rabbits, you can use heavy crock bowls, water bottles, or an automatic watering system.

**Feeding.** There are many feeds on the market that one can choose from to feed a rabbit and they are all complete feeds. You need to select one and feed it. It is recommended to use a 16 percent protein feed. This works well for all stages of development for a rabbit. An adult commercial breed rabbit needs eight ounces of feed a day. This will maintain their proper weight without them becoming too fat. When feeding meat pen rabbits you need to start out feeding them all they will eat, but you will adjust their feed as you get closer to your

show. That is why you need to get a set of scales so you can maintain daily weight on your rabbits. By doing this you can chart their rate of gain and adjust their feed accordingly throughout the feeding period. This is also why you will need multiple cages so you can separate the rabbits you are feeding. When it gets to a point that you need to adjust feed, you can use steamed rolled oats or steamed rolled barley to act as filler as you decrease the amount of rabbit feed. These feed stuffs also do a good job of hardening muscle on rabbits. The most important thing that you need to know about feeding rabbits is always provide fresh, clean water because a rabbit will not eat if water is not available.

***Health.*** The most important thing you can do to keep a rabbit healthy is to provide a proper, clean environment for them to live in with plenty of feed and water. Rabbits do not need vaccinations.. If a health problem does upraise, you need to consult your local veterinarian to diagnose and treat the problem.

***Rules.*** The Exhibitors' Handbook contains the rules for a particular show. Each show is different and the rules change from year to year. Each year, take the time to review the rules of each show and keep a copy of the rules on hand while at the show. Ignorance of the rules is not a valid excuse for breaking them. One key section in all Exhibitors' Handbooks is the "Animal Health Regulations." Most major livestock shows (and some county shows) require a current set of health papers on an animal before entry onto the show grounds. Review the health requirements outlined in the Exhibitors' Handbook at least a month before the show because some tests required by the Texas Animal Health Commission take a week or more to perform.