

Market Rabbit Breeding 101

El Dorado County

Pre-Breeding Preparation

1. Select Breeding Stock

- Ensure breeding pairs are healthy, of good conformation, and free from diseases and disqualifications.
- Choose breeds that are suitable for market purposes (e.g., New Zealand, California), color correct, and meet ARBA standards. Do not cross breed rabbits.

2. Health Check

- Thoroughly examine all rabbits to ensure they are free from signs of illness or disease.
- Verify that the rabbits are at a healthy weight.
- Inspect the rabbits' reproductive organs to prevent any urinary tract infections (UTIs) or sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).
- Only breed rabbits who are clean and healthy.

3. Breeding Setup

- Provide a clean and low-stress breeding area for the rabbits.
- It is recommended to place the doe in the buck's pen for breeding, as does are more territorial and more likely to act aggressively towards a buck introduced to the doe's own pen. The doe will typically be more receptive to breeding when introduced to the buck's territory.

4. Timeline

- Day 1: Breeding, recommended 3 connections or fall offs.
- Day 15: Check for pregnancy through "teasing" or external palpation.
- Day 21: Place the nest box in the doe's enclosure in preparation for kindling.
- Days 28-35: The doe will kindle (give birth) to the litter if pregnancy was successful.
- Days 48-52: Wean the kits from the doe. The kits should be picked up by their showmen at this time.
 - Conduct weekly weight checks from day 52 to day 100 to ensure the kits are on track to reach market size by the fair.
- Day 100 Market rabbits will be shown at the fair.
 - Maintain detailed records throughout the process to track litter sizes, success rates, weaning weights, and identification/tattoos of the kits.

Breeding Process

5. Breeding Date

- Record the identities of the breeding pair and the date(s) of breeding.
- Aim for 3 successful "connections" or "fall offs" during the breeding process. Excessive breeding attempts can lead to larger litters, lower growth rates, and high stress for the does.

6. Pregnancy Monitoring

- Closely monitor the doe's behavior for signs of pregnancy, such as nesting instincts and weight gain.

- If you notice any signs of illness, such as lethargy, diarrhea, mucus discharge, or if your rabbit is not eating or drinking, contact your veterinarian or project leader immediately for guidance.

7. Nesting Box Preparation

- Ensure you provide your rabbit with the correct size nest box. Nest boxes should be enclosed on at least 5 sides.
- Fill the nest box with shavings on the bottom for insulation, and a soft, clean grass hay as the bedding. Stiff-stemmed hay like straw or alfalfa may injure or kill the newborn kits.
- Prepare the nesting box 1 week (7 days) before the expected due date.

8. Monitoring

- Keep a close watch on the doe as the due date approaches.
- Make sure she has a quiet and safe environment.
- If you notice any signs of illness, such as lethargy, diarrhea, mucus discharge, or if your rabbit is not eating or drinking, contact your veterinarian or project leader immediately for guidance.

Kindling (Birthing)

9. Kindling Observation

- Check on the doe regularly to monitor her progress, but avoid unnecessary disruptions. Regular or excessive human involvement may lead to unnecessary birthing complications.
- Contact your veterinarian or project leader immediately for guidance if necessary.

10. Post-Kindling Care

- The doe should make a nest of her own fur within the first 12-24 hours to help keep the kits warm. Contact your 4-H/FFA project leader if you have any concerns about the nest or nursing kits.
- Check the kits within the first 12 hours to ensure they are eating and have full, distended stomachs.
- Remove any stillborn kits or soiled/bloody bedding from the nest box, and replace with fresh, clean hay and/or shavings as needed.
- Document the number of kits and their coat colors/varieties at this time.
- Refrain from touching or handling the kits and the doe for at least 7 days after to avoid unnecessary complications.
- Continue monitoring the doe and kits closely, and contact your 4-H/FFA project leader if you have any questions or concerns about their health.

Weaning

11. Weaning Timeframe

- Wean kits at 5-6 weeks old (35-42 days post-kindling).
- Separate the kits from the doe to avoid stress on both.

12. Health Care for Kits

- Weaning Gastritis Prevention:
 - Ensure clean grass hay, fresh water, and a dry complete pelleted feed are available at all times.

- Refrain from giving any rabbit treats or snacks until the kits are at least 12-14 weeks old.
- Provide rabbit probiotics and electrolytes as recommended.
- Administer coccidia prevention medication if necessary.
- Conduct thorough health checks on all kits before transferring them to their new homes. Ensure kits are free from any illness, disease, or disqualifications.

Pre-Fair Preparation

14. Growing Period

- Ensure the kits are fed a complete pelleted feed, clean grass hay, and provided with clean water to promote healthy growth until they reach 100 days old.
- Monitor the kits' weight and overall health regularly during this period.
- If the kits are becoming too heavy, start limiting their pelleted feed intake, but always ensure they have access to grass hay and water.
- If a kit needs to gain more weight, you can offer small amounts of raw, unsweetened pumpkin or bananas as a treat. You can also try adding a small amount of rolled oats, wheat, or barley to their feed, but introduce these slowly to prevent any stomach upset.
- Maintain a close eye on the kits' development and make adjustments to their diet and care as needed to ensure they continue growing at a healthy rate.