

Selecting A Rabbit

By Jane Burt

As you begin your 4-H Rabbit Project one of the most important decisions you will make is which breed is correct for you. There are many things to consider when you make this decision like: the size of the breed especially at mature age, fur type, breed temperament, housing requirements, management requirements, and availability of good foundation stock. If you plan to exhibit your rabbit at your county fair, you should also check their rules to make sure you can show the breed you choose. A good learning experience would be to visit a rabbit show and see the different breeds available.

Your first consideration should be the size of the rabbit and not when you purchase the rabbit but when it is a mature adult. You should also consider your size compared to the size of the breed you select. Most likely you will purchase a rabbit in the junior age category which would be between 3 months and six months of age. At that time, no matter which breed you select, the rabbit will be smaller and easier to handle. As a mature rabbit or over 6 to 8 months of age, in many cases the rabbit will be much larger and it may be difficult for you to safely handle and care for your rabbit which could result in you becoming frightened and discouraged with your rabbit project. If you are smaller in physical size or younger in age you might want to consider the smaller breeds that have an ideal senior weight of no more than 7 lbs. These breeds include, but are not limited to: Dutch, Netherland Dwarf, Himalayan, Mini Satin, Thrianta, Mini Lop, Holland Lop, Polish, Havana, Florida White, American Fuzzy Lop, Jersey Wooly, Dwarf Hotot, Lilac and Mini Rex. Older youth, or those who have a larger physique may be very comfortable with a larger breed that has an ideal senior weight of over 7 lbs. These breeds might include: Satin, Californian, American Sable, New Zealand, Rex, Cinnamon, Crème D'Argent, Champagne D'Argent, Harlequin, Palomino and Silver Marten. There are also several breeds that will have an ideal senior weight of more than 10 lbs. Those breeds include: Giant Chinchilla, Flemish Giant, American Chinchilla, Beveran, Silver Fox and French Lop.

As well as the consideration of your size in relationship to your rabbit, you must also consider the housing and feed requirements. The larger the rabbit, the more they will eat and their cage will also need to be larger. Smaller rabbits can comfortably live in cages that are 18" X 18" – or ideally for a doe that you will breed you should have a cage at least 24" X 24" or even 24" X 30". The larger breeds will need cages 30" x 30" or even as large as 36" X 36". If you plan on expanding your project to more than just one or two rabbits, do you have the space for the number of cages you plan to have in your rabbitry? You should also consider that larger breeds will have more waste or manure so you need to clean the cages more frequently. Make sure you have a means to dispose of the manure.

The third item you should consider is the amount of time it will take to care for your rabbit or rabbits. Some breeds take more time than just feeding and cleaning the cages. The wool breeds, like the Jersey Wooly, Angoras or American Fuzzy Lop need daily or weekly grooming so that the wool does not become matted and tangled. The longer length to the wool coat causes the fibers to cling to the cage wire which will require frequently wire brushing your cages. You will also need to make sure you keep them away from direct contact with the wood chip bedding as the chips can become embedded into the wool and are very hard to remove. If you have many other activities that involve a lot of your free time, these breeds may not be a perfect match for you. Your rabbit project should be a pleasant experience and if you cannot properly care for your rabbits, you may become discouraged with the project.

Once you have decided on which breed you would like to have for your project, you should also consider the different fur colors or varieties. The lighter varieties such as the white, sable point, lilac, himalayan, broken, ruby eyed white or blue eyed white will more readily show urine stains or orange/yellow coloring to the fur if the cages are not kept clean – again more time consuming to properly care for your rabbit. Some of the breeds,

like the Florida White have only the white variety. The darker varieties such as chocolate, siamese sable, tortoise and black may not readily show any urine stains but can become discolored if the rabbits are exposed to direct sunlight. Some of the shaded varieties like the tortoise, can have toe nails that lighten as the rabbit ages which could cause your rabbit to be disqualified.

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Another consideration is the temperament of the breed of rabbit. Some breeds are higher spirited and may be difficult to handle and pose. Other breeds are very docile and will be easy to work with and pose. Also there are several breeds that are considered “running breed” and are not posed. These breeds include the English Spot, Tan, Rhinelander and Checkered Giant. Raising and exhibiting the higher spirited breeds can be a rewarding experience if you understand the challenges ahead. If you have only one breed – a running breed - and want to participate in Rabbit Showmanship classes, you should be aware that your rabbit does not pose which is part of the total showmanship score.

Which breed you choose may also be determined by what you want to do with your rabbits – just have a few for show or raise for meat purposes. If you plan to have a meat project, you will need a meat type breed such as the Californian. If you plan on breeding your rabbits to expand your herd, you should also have an outlet for your cull rabbits.

Now that you have decided on which breed you would like for your project, you should try to find the best possible foundation stock for your rabbitry. Understand that good quality stock does not necessarily mean a very high price – but having a good, quality start will certainly help you as you start your project. It does not cost you any more to feed a good, quality rabbit nor does it take any more time for you to care for that rabbit. There are several good sources of information pertaining to the 47 different breeds of rabbits – one is the American Rabbit Breeders Association or ARBA. Their “Standard of Perfection” has all the show information you will need for your desired breed. Your state rabbit association is also a good source for finding when and where there may be a rabbit show as well as a listing of local breeders. The state associations may also have a listing of the breed point winners for their specific show circuit. You should not consider entirely just the high point breeders, but also look at the quality point winners. Quality points are awarded for winning a Best In Show, a Best 4 or 6 Class, Best of Breed and Best Opposite Sex Breed. Attend a show and talk to the breeders. Those breeders who have been raising a breed for a long time will generally have improved their stock and are breeding closer to the standard for their breed.

Before you buy any rabbit, you should do a complete exam of that rabbit – just as you would for showmanship – checking for any signs of disease or disqualifications. Some breeds have disqualification specific only to their breed. Doing research before you buy will help you to recognize these disqualifications. Many good experiences have turned negative because the new breeder later discovered their beloved rabbit had a disqualification and could not be shown at their 4-H Fair or 4-H show.

Being a part of the 4-H Rabbit Project can be a very rewarding experience, teaching you not only life skills but will open doors to other 4-H activities and opportunities. Following this guideline will help you to make an educated decision when you select your beginning breed. I hope your experience is rewarding.