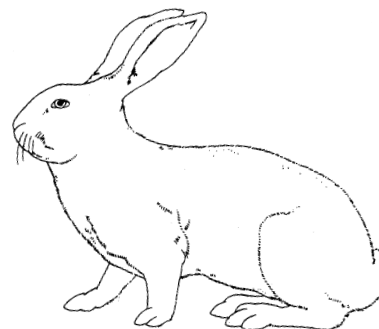


# Keeping Rabbits

## Why rabbits?

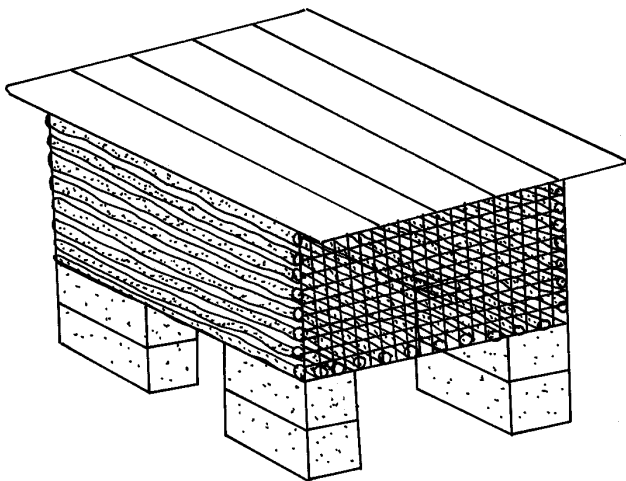
Farming with rabbits is becoming increasingly popular because

-  they can be kept in a relatively small space
-  it is not expensive to keep them
-  they eat almost anything
-  they produce high-quality protein
-  they can be sold to make money.



## Housing

-  A big cage can be made of wire mesh or scrap wood. It should be supported by poles or placed on old tyres or bricks so that it is lifted off the ground.



-  Individual cages should be 80 x 60 x 60 cm high to house a medium-sized rabbit.
-  The cage should have a wire mesh floor with holes large enough for the droppings to fall through (the holes in the mesh should not be big and allow their feet to get stuck). The droppings can be used as a fertiliser in vegetable patches or flower gardens.
-  The cage should not have a ground floor because the rabbits will dig a way out.

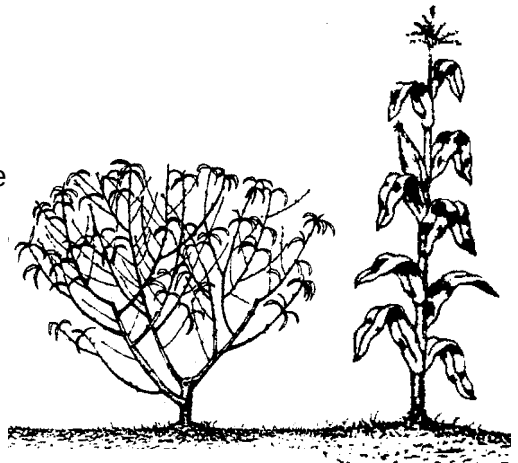
-  If a wooden frame is used, the wire mesh should be placed on the inside of the frame to prevent the rabbits from gnawing through it.
-  The mother, however, needs a nesting box to keep her babies warm. This box should be about 38 x 25 x 25 cm.
-  Clean the cage regularly and keep it dry to prevent disease.
-  Protect the cage from sun, wind and rain. It is not necessary to put the cages inside buildings such as sheds to protect the rabbits against cold as they can tolerate cold better than heat.
-  Rabbits need plenty of fresh air. Their cages therefore have to be well ventilated.
-  The cages should be put in a quiet place where dogs, cats and rats cannot get to them.

# Feeding

 Rabbits will eat almost anything that grows in the soil.

 A rabbit's diet can include lucerne, grass, green maize leaves, carrots, turnips, cabbage (not too much) and lettuce. Do not feed cabbage to the female while she is in milk as it can lower milk production.

 They also enjoy food such as maize meal, porridge, bread, samp, weeds and leaves of fruit trees.



 **Potato and tomato leaves and rhubarb are POISONOUS to rabbits.**

 Do not introduce sudden changes in the rabbit's diet.

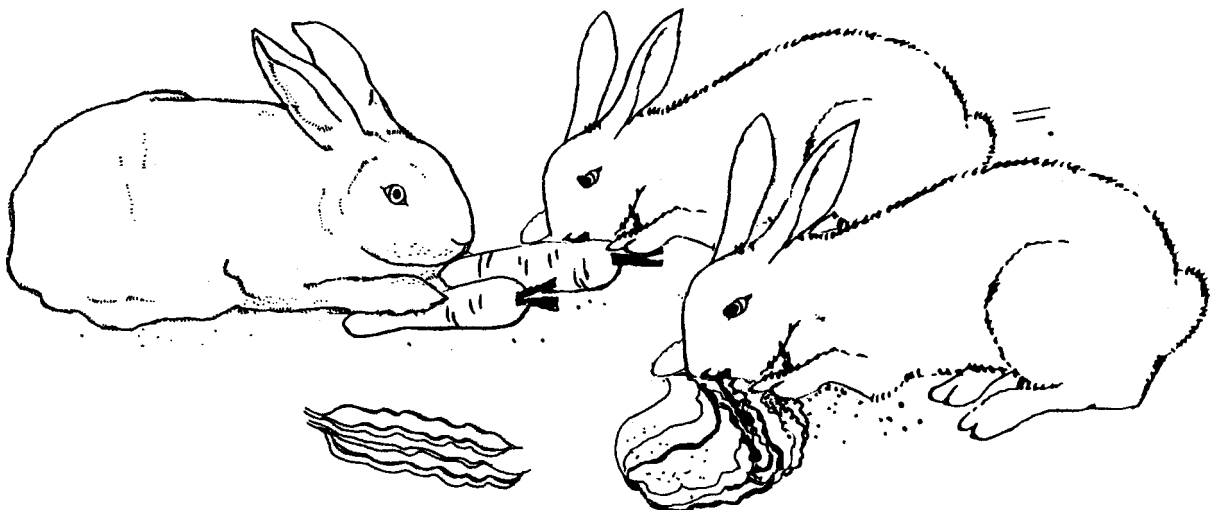
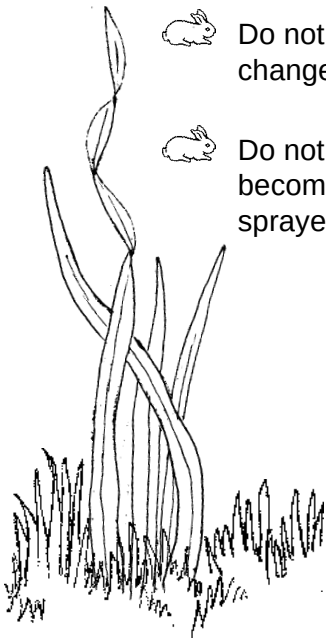
 Do not feed rabbits greens that have become heated, food that has been sprayed with pesticides, spoiled food or mouldy hay.



 Clean water should always be available. Never leave them without water.

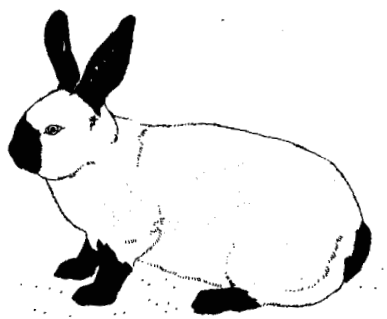
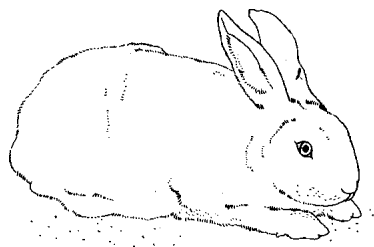
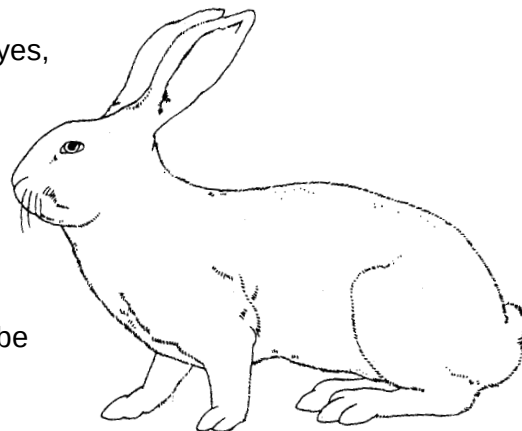
 Feed the rabbits early in the morning and late in the afternoon. Most of the food should preferably be given late in the afternoon.

 You can grow your own green material for rabbit food.



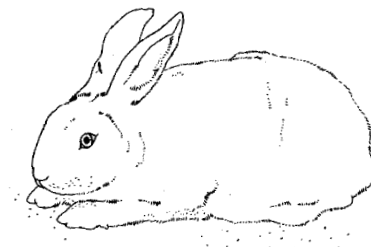
## Selecting breeding stock

-  Make sure that you buy healthy rabbits with bright eyes, dry noses and clean ears and feet.
-  The rabbit's fur should be smooth and clean and its teeth in line.
-  Do not buy a mature female because you cannot always know how old she is. She might for instance have reached the end of her productive life and will be of no use.
-  Long toenails indicate that the rabbit is older.
-  Select your rabbits from parents which have a good breeding record. A female that does not perform well will also have poor offspring.
-  Buy breeding stock when they are about 6 months old.
-  Replace your breeding stock every 3 years and get rid of poor performers.



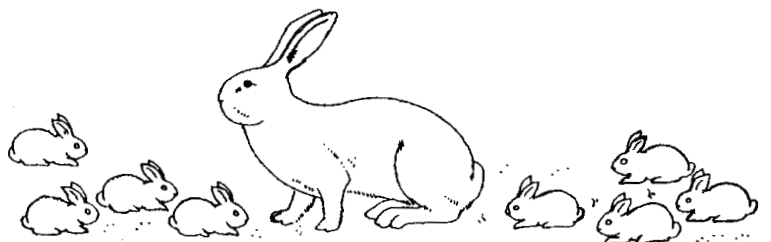
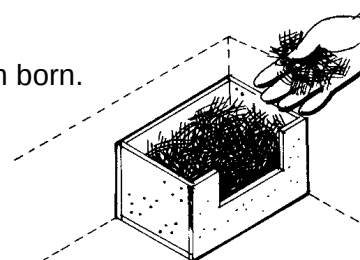
## Breeding

-  Female rabbits are ready to breed when they are 4 to 6 months old and males when they are 5 to 6 months old.
-  Keep the male rabbit in a separate cage.
-  Always put the female into the male's cage. If the mating was successful the male will roll over.
-  If the female is not ready for mating, she will try to run away.
-  When mating does not take place, the female can be put into the male's cage for the next 5 to 6 days.
-  The female is more productive during springtime, summer and early autumn.
-  Breeding during the winter months is not recommended as it is too cold.
-  Pregnancy lasts about 1 month.



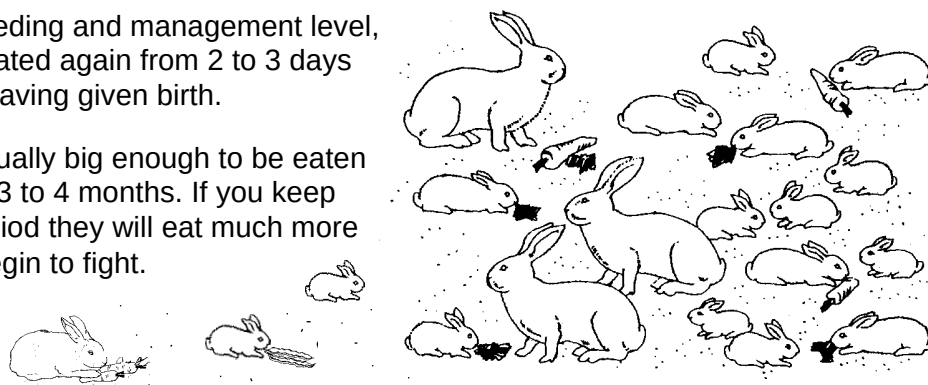
## Birth

-  About 25 days after mating soft dry grass can be placed in a clean, dry nesting box for the female. The female will add some of her own fur to the grass.
-  Stay away from the cage at this stage until the babies have been born.
-  The babies are usually born during the early morning hours.
-  Inspect the babies carefully to see if they are alive and well.
-  Remove dead babies immediately.
-  Try not to touch the babies unless it is absolutely necessary. The female may reject the babies if she picks up your smell on them. It is wise to put a strong-smelling nontoxic substance on the female's nose before handling the babies (Vicks Vapo Rub).
-  The babies should lie close together in the nesting box.
-  Make sure that the babies are suckling and well nourished.
-  Females who have babies for the first time, may eat them.
-  The female cannot allways feed all the babies if there are too many. Some of the babies can then be given to another female who only has a few babies. The babies should be of the same age.
-  Cow's or goat's milk is a suitable substitute where the mother cannot rear the babies.



## Weaning

-  The baby rabbits can be weaned from the age of 30 to 35 days.
-  At this stage they can be taken away from their mother. Put the young females and males in separate cages.
-  Depending on the feeding and management level, the female can be mated again from 2 to 3 days up to 1 month after having given birth.
-  Young rabbits are usually big enough to be eaten or sold at the age of 3 to 4 months. If you keep them for a longer period they will eat much more and the males will begin to fight.



*Compiled by the National Department of Agriculture in cooperation with J.A. Erasmus  
Glen Agricultural Development Institute*

*Printed and published in the Republic of South Africa by the National Department of Agriculture and obtainable from  
the Resource Centre, Directorate Communication, Private Bag X144, Pretoria 0001*