



A Rabbit in the House

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Rabbits are very special animals. They are bright, interesting, inquisitive, loyal, affectionate—a joy to watch, to touch, to be with. Like us, they are individuals. Caring for a rabbit means getting to know him or her, a process that takes time and patience.

Rabbits respond to love and attention. If you leave him alone in a cage or hutch all the time, you will be missing the best part of knowing your rabbit. Isolated rabbits become bored and withdrawn. They may also have undetected illnesses.

Choosing a Rabbit

One of the best places to get a rabbit is from a rescue group or an animal shelter. Although you can get rabbits from breeders, pet stores, or people who wanted “just one litter,” we urge you to avoid these sources. Most pet stores sell animals:

- with physical and emotional problems (roughly 80% of these rabbits die within the first week at home);
- confidently declare the sex of rabbits but are wrong at least 50% of the time (as are vets who don't have a specialty in rabbits);
- offer all kinds of advice about caring for rabbits that is almost always based on selling products.

Further, *buying* a rabbit from any of these sources contributes to the suffering of many more bunnies. Economic gain, breeding of show animals, and breeding “just for fun” are major causes of the overpopulation of companion animals. Every year 15 million cats, dogs, rabbits, and others are destroyed at shelters in this country, and millions more die agonizing deaths without ever reaching a shelter. Each purchase profits someone who will then want to breed more. Rather than

contributing to this horribly cruel problem, be part of the solution by saving a life. Get good information from the House Rabbit Society about rabbit care, and then adopt a bunny who needs a home.

Breeds. Breed generalizations are easy to make and easier still to find exceptions to. You may hear that a certain breed is mellow, or good with children, but in fact there is no such thing as a “good with children” gene. Choose a rabbit as you would choose any friend, not by his appearance but by who he is underneath his floppy ears or spotted coat. Visit your local HRS foster home or shelter. Spend time with a variety of rabbits to get a sense of who they are and the “chemistry” between you. Sit quietly and give the rabbit a chance to show you his unique personality.

Age. People often assume that baby bunnies are more easily housetrained and that they can be held frequently so that as adults they won't mind being handled, held, cuddled, and carried around. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Being held and cuddled is something that very few rabbits of any age enjoy. As ground-loving creatures, a hug means restraint at a high altitude, not an expression of affection. Baby bunnies are so full of energy and curiosity about the world that they often hate being restrained. And like puppies or young humans, they can't be expected to have good control of elimination. Even when such control is gained, they may be too busy chewing your shoes, books, telephone cords, remote control, etc., to be bothered to return to the litterbox.

In the first year of life, most bunnies



Vi loves reading motorcycle magazines with his human pal, Steve

go through some personality changes. The precious little ball of fur who may have tolerated being snuggled may suddenly become the bunny from hell as his or her hormones being making themselves felt. A hissing, nipping and apparently furious little beast now inhabits that soft furry little body. You may be subjected to golden showers sprayed on you, your kids, and your furniture, and to attacks on legs and arms as your bunny experiences the powerful urges of sexual maturity.

But wait, there's more. Your precious little pet may be so unpredictable that you never know whether to expect warm little kisses or painful nips. Litter training becomes a distant memory. You and your possession are subject to severe attacks of tooth and claw. And just as you are wondering whether moving and leaving her behind is too extreme a solution, the little monster sits up, looks adorable, and gently nuzzles your hand, melting your heart.

Unless you are one of those special people willing to put up with the turmoil of the first year without losing patience,

and willing to replace or repair the damage inflicted on your home, do not adopt a rabbit under a year old.

Handling

Many people are surprised and disappointed to find that rabbits rarely conform to the cute-n-cuddly stereotype prevalent in children's stories. Bugs Bunny, with his independence, mischievousness, and strong sense of self is a more accurate portrait. Can you imagine Bugs tolerating huge quantities of gooey affection or allowing himself to be carried around in some mere human's arms?

Rabbits can be taught to accept routine handling, but there is nothing abnormal about a bunny who prefers to sit beside you rather than on your lap.

Housing

Indoors or outdoors? You will get the most enjoyment from your rabbit—and vice versa—if he lives in your home with you. People sometimes consign rabbits to life in a hutch in the yard because they do not realize what wonderful house companions rabbits can be. With a little training, your rabbit can be a delightful addition to your household.

You may want to set up an outdoor run where Thumper can spend a few hours during the day, sniffing and hopping around and enjoying the sunshine. A few basics to remember when building an outdoor area: fresh cool water at all times; a protected corner, shaded from wind and sun; a roof to keep out raccoons and other predators; a fence that angles down several feet underground, otherwise your rabbit will soon dig his way out of his run.

To cage or not to cage: The main reasons for caging a rabbit are if she is not litterbox-trained and if she chews on forbidden objects. The extent to which your rabbit can be trained will determine how much freedom it is safe to give her.

Most rabbits like to have a cage, a secure place that is their own, where they can be quiet and alone sometimes. Here are some considerations in choos-

ing or building a cage. First, bigger is better. However, a large cage is not a substitute for free-running time. When she's in her large cage or habitat, she may be getting some physical exercise, but unless you're in there with her, she's not getting much social exercise. At minimum the cage should be four times the size of your bunny when she is full-grown. A slatted floor is more comfortable than a wire one; if you do get a wire floor, be sure to provide a wood or cardboard area as relief.

Fresh cool water (changed daily) should be available at all times. Make sure the water bowl or bottle is not in direct sunlight. If you use a bottle, check the release action regularly to see that water is actually coming out of the metal tube. Both food and water bowls should be heavy enough that they cannot be tipped over (a favorite bunny pastime).

Put a litterbox inside the cage. If your rabbit learns to use one in the cage, then housetraining out of the cage will be easier. Many rabbits will select one corner of the cage as a toilet area. If yours does this, by all means put the box in that spot. (More on litterboxes below.)

Many rabbits like to have a private area in the cage. A cardboard or wooden box makes an excellent place for Thumper to feel that he is in his "burrow." A towel over one corner of the cage also provides privacy.

Rabbits and...

As social animals, rabbits enjoy the company of other living beings. In addition to his human friends, your rabbit can get along with other rabbits, cats, guinea pigs, and well-behaved dogs. Introduction to another rabbit should take place on neutral territory. If both rabbits are altered, their chances of forming a long-lasting bond is strong. Two males will rarely become friends, but two females or a neutered male and a spayed female can double the pleasure of sharing your life with a rabbit. The get-acquainted period can last anywhere from a few minutes (love at first sight) to a few weeks. It usually includes a fair amount of chasing, nipping, time-outs, then more chasing, etc. Eventually they

will work out who's boss, and the deep friendship can begin.

Cats and rabbits generally work out their relationship with little help from humans, especially if the rabbit is confident and does not run from the cat. In fact, many rabbits will boss their feline housemates, chasing them and nudging them from favored spots. If the rabbit does run from the cat, then introductions should take place with Thumper in his cage. Most rabbits feel more at ease in their cage, which is their familiar safe haven. Alternatively, hold the cat on your lap, and allow the rabbit to investigate at his own pace.

Similar guidelines apply to dog/rabbit introductions. If the dog knows some obedience words, she can be put in a down-stay so Thumper can get to know her at his own level. Use a leash to control the dog if she is not trained.

Contrary to Eastertime hype, rabbits are rarely a good choice of companion for a small child. The natural exuberance, rambunctiousness, and decibel-level of even the gentlest toddler stressful for rabbits. Children want a companion they can hold and cuddle; rabbits need some one who understands that they are ground-loving creatures. It is unreasonable to expect a child to take full responsibility for care of a rabbit. Unless the adults of the household are enthusiastic and informed about the work involved, do not adopt a rabbit, at Easter or any other time. An easygoing, low-maintenance plush bunny from your friendly neighborhood toy store makes a great pal for a young child.

Neutering

Neutering is one of the best things you can do for your rabbit to help him or her live a long, happy life as a member of your household. Females should be spayed at 6 months, males neutered at 4 months. The behavior changes that accompany sexual maturity include aggressiveness, extreme mood swings, spraying, and loss of housetraining. Neutering will cure all these problems, but it does not change your bunny's personality. An assertive friendly bunny does not lose her liveliness or respon-

siveness. The mood swings caused by her fertility cycle will ease, but playfulness and inquisitiveness (to say nothing of all-around cuteness) do not disappear.

Every year, thousands of wonderful rabbits are euthanized at animal shelters nationwide. Thousands more are abandoned in fields. The reason for this tragic situation is that there are simply more great rabbits than there are responsible humans to care for them. Please do not contribute to this problem by allowing your rabbit to have even one litter.

You can also help solve the rabbit overpopulation tragedy by adopting from a shelter or rescue group, or finding someone who is planning to get rid of a rabbit. It's a sad fact, but no matter where you live, you are always within ten miles or so of a rabbit who needs a home. It may take a little more time and effort to find just the right one for you, but don't the rabbits deserve all the help we can give them?

Housetraining

Yes, rabbits can be trained to use a litterbox. In fact, some rabbits simply train themselves—you supply the box and they do the rest. Most rabbits need a little help from their human friends.

The first step is to keep a box in the rabbit's cage, as described above. Provide at least one more box outside the cage. If you give Thumper several "right places" to go, you increase his chances of success.

You can use organic litters made from alfalfa, oat or paper (some brands to look for: Care Fresh, Yesterday's News, Cat Country, Critter Country). A wonderful and inexpensive litter is wood stove pellets, which can be purchased at home improvement stores. Straw, shredded newspaper, or corncob also can be used as litter. Recent studies have shown that pine and cedar shavings can cause liver damage in rabbits, so stay away from these products. Experiment with different fillers if your rabbit is not using his box. Some have definite preferences in this matter.

Encourage your rabbit to use his box(es) by luring (with a treat) him to the box and giving him praise and the

treat when he is in the box. Many rabbits will sit in the box and groom themselves or even take a nap. This is wonderful behavior! Let Thumper know he is doing the right thing. Place a handful of hay in one corner of the box daily for him to munch.

If you want to get fancy about it and amaze your friends at the same time, teach your rabbit to go to his box on command. As you are luring him to the box, say, "Hop in your box," or maybe "Hop to it." Repeat this lesson over and over. If Thumper really wants that treat, he will obey your request. Training requires patience and enthusiasm, but the rewards are worth the effort.

Reprimands and punishment have no place in housetraining. If your bunny is soiling outside the box, he is not yet ready to have run of the house. Keep him in his cage when you are not around to supervise and work on training.

Thumper may occasionally urinate or defecate outside the box. Often this behavior is caused by excitement, for instance, when he is first let out of his cage in the morning. Fortunately, rabbit droppings are easy to clean up. Unneutered rabbits of both sexes have a tendency to mark their territory by spraying urine and defecating outside the litterbox.

Destructive Chewing

Rabbits love to chew. It is as natural for them as digging, hopping, sniffing and being adorable. Helping your rabbit adapt to our human environment means teaching her what she is and is not allowed to chew.

Provide plenty of plain untreated wood, branches, and twigs. Offer these to your rabbit and encourage her to nibble on them. Stay away from redwood, which may be toxic for rabbits. Give her plenty of hay to munch on; it is good for her digestion as well. A cardboard or wooden box makes a delectable, inexpensive "edible" house.

One of the greatest household dangers to rabbits is electrical cords. Most rabbits find them irresistible. Unless you want to switch to a totally battery-operated house, you will need to do some

rabbit-proofing. Put cords out of reach wherever possible, behind furniture. You can buy heavy plastic cord-covering material at a lighting-supply store. Hardware stores sell clear plastic hosing that can be slit lengthwise and wrapped around electric cords. Until all cords are protected, do not allow Thumper unsupervised time out of his cage; the results could be fatal.

To teach him not to chew on furniture and rugs, place lots of permitted chewing objects all around the house, as well as in his cage. When he goes after anything he is not allowed to chew, tell him "no" and immediately distract him with some wood, cardboard, or other chewable toy. Repeat this lesson as often as necessary. Be patient, especially if you have a young bunny. He will learn, in time. Spray commercial cat or dog repellents on furniture and rugs to discourage chewing.

To be befriended by a rabbit is a great privilege. If you adopt your bunny from a shelter or a rescue group, you will have the added satisfaction of knowing you have saved a life. In addition to being amusing and enjoyable, sharing your life with a rabbit is also one of the surest ways to become sympathetic to the animal-rights movement. Once you realize that these sensitive, intelligent creatures are the same ones being subjected to the cruel and unnecessary punishment of laboratories, breeding mills, and factory farms, your perspective will be changed forever.



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