

HOUSE RABBIT HABITATS

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Rabbits are very social creatures and require as much attention and stimulation as a cat or dog. Because of this requirement, **rabbits tend to be happier, healthier, better adjusted and more affectionate if housed indoors**. Rabbits also tend to live longer, happier and healthier lives in pairs or groups. Companionship is very important to bunnies.

Living Indoors

When choosing a habitat for your bunny, do not select an aquarium or a solid-walled cage. These do not provide sufficient air circulation, which can lead to respiratory disease, and can also cause heat build-up in hot climates. The indoor hutch for a six-pound rabbit should be at least 18 inches high by 30 inches wide and 48 inches long. A large breed rabbit will require a more spacious cage and for each additional rabbit, increase the floor area by four to six square feet. A sleeping compartment is a must for any hutch and you'll want to provide a thin board or other covering, so your rabbit can get off the wire mesh to rest.

If possible, cages should be kept in the coolest and least humid area of the house away from heat and drafts. Sixty-seventy degrees Fahrenheit is best for bunnies; heat in the upper 80's and beyond can potentially cause a fatal heat stroke, so when it's that hot, leave a bottle of frozen water in the cage and wet down the bunny's ears.

Keep your bunny's habitat clean. Clean and change litter pans, wash feed bowls and water containers, sweep and vacuum up any debris and wash bedding on a regular basis.

The Enclosure

Commercial cages may be converted by removing or covering wire floors, enlarging door openings, changing the way that the door opens, adding additional doors and/or placing it on a cart with wheels if mobility is needed. Be sure to cover any cut wire edges with plastic edge protectors or the plastic spine backs from report covers.

Wire floors on commercial cages may be removed with J-clip removers or a small awl and needlenosed jewelry pliers. If the floors are not removed, a variety of coverings may be used to cover the wire floors. Dri-Dek tiles, self-healing cutting mats (the type used by artists and quilters), synthetic sheepskin and towels have been used with success. If linoleum is used inside the cage, use a piece rather than individual squares. It can be rolled up and placed inside the cage, but tends to curl up at the sides. If your bunny starts to chew or ingest any of your non-natural floor coverings, replace them with another item.

Grass mats or sea grass mats may be used for floor and ramp coverings and recreational chewing. If you live in a humid area or the grass mats get wet (from dripping water bottles), you will need to check periodically for mildew. Replace mat squares as needed. If a cage is on legs and not too high off the ground, a ramp, stool or step placed at the cage door's entrance will allow

the bunny to enter and exit the cage at will. If a ramp inside the cage is set at too sharp of an angle, shortening it and resting it on a shelf, stool or wooden box should solve the problem. Make sure that if you raise the ramp, there is still adequate room for your bunny to enter and exit the cage. It may be necessary to enlarge the ramp opening.

When building a habitat, keep in mind that hardware cloth should be used rather than chicken wire. It is sturdier and easier on the bunny's paws and mouth. Also, do not build or purchase cages with wire ramps. Feet can get caught, legs twisted and nails torn off. Dog crates have been used successfully as bunny cages, but even though they may be large enough to have a shelf in them, they are small, so make sure that you provide adequate free run time outside of the crate.

Shelves may be added to cages if there is sufficient height between the floor of the cage and the top. Angle braces may be attached to a wooden shelf and slipped over the cage wire. (Attach angled brace to bottom of shelf with one side of the angle on the outside and facing downward.) The shelf may be used for resting, lookout or exercise. A flat-roofed house of wood or cardboard will provide the same in addition to a private area for the bunny. A hooded litter pan may be placed in a room for privacy.

A piece of 8" x 10" Plexiglas may be clipped to a cage behind the hay container to keep the hay inside the cage and to keep cats' paws out of the hay. A piece 4" wide times the length and width of the cage may be clipped around the bottom of the cage to deflect urine or debris. (Use a 1/8" tile/glass drill bit to make holes if using "O" rings to attach Plexiglas.)

When constructing cages, keep in mind that if they are wider than 24" you may not be able to get them through a doorway. If mobility is a factor, add wheels and consider the weight of the finished product.

Small thin bungee cords and clips may be used to hold open cage doors. Hook and eye closures seem to work better than latches on handmade wooden habitats.

A roof may be created over part of a cage with a wire top by using a piece of cardboard, wood or similar material. You may wish to add a small cabinet or bin on top or to the side of your habitat to store your bunny supplies.

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Essential supplies for all habitats include a litterbox with organic litter (never, never pine or cedar wood shavings), water bottle or bowl, feed bowl, hay, rug to rest on and toys. Bowls need to be heavy enough not to be tipped over. Litterboxes may need to be attached to the cage with clips, wire or 1" c-clamps.

Although a cage can be a place for security and quiet time, it is best to place the cage in an area of activity since bunnies love attention and can become lonely if isolated.

If you use a wire exercise pen as a habitat, make sure that it is stable and secure. Dogs, cats, children and rambunctious bunnies can easily move or knock over a pen. Also, be aware that since the pen does not have a top over it, cats have easy access to the area and to the bunny. If your bunny is a jumper, make sure that you get a pen tall enough to prevent escapes. These pens come in various heights and are usually sold as dog exercise pens.

Gates, such as those used to keep children and dogs out of certain areas, are another way to set up an area for your bunny. If your bunny seems overly interested in chewing the gate, try decorating it with acceptable chew toys as a diversion. Be aware that if the gate is used for separation of bunnies, it can lead to aggression.

Keep in mind that the bigger the cage the better, but a large cage is not a substitute for free running time. Free running time affords the bunny both exercise and time to socialize with you or other members of your family.

Free Running Time, Supervision and Exercise

Rabbits may be allowed free reign of the house; however, most rabbits do better if confined to one room or their hutch when unsupervised. It is natural for bunnies to chew and dig and they can be quite destructive. Therefore, you must bunny-proof your home so that you and your bunny may enjoy his/her running time to the fullest. Remove small objects that could be ingested, poisonous plants and toxic substances. Encase all electrical cords in protective coverings. Cord coverings may be purchased at hardware, electrical or electronic stores. It is imperative that electrical cords be covered, hidden or removed since one bite by your bunny could be fatal. Use caution when using recliners and hide-a-beds; bunnies can get trapped inside or caught in opening or closing mechanisms.

Most bunnies should be supervised during their free running time, especially if they're in an outdoor run. Supervision will allow you to see if the bunny is getting into mischief and also, if the bunny is outside, to ensure that the bunny is safe from the environment whether it be the weather or predators.

Rabbits can be harness trained using a rabbit or cat figure-eight harness and light lead. A portable hutch can be placed in a securely fenced yard to allow the rabbit to graze and enjoy the outdoors. These hutches are basic A-frames with mesh wire sides, a bottom and a sleeping compartment. If your rabbit is not used to eating greens, he should have limited access to grass for several days as his digestive system adjusts. Garden runs can also

be built, but unless the run is covered, the rabbit must be supervised at all times.

Outdoor runs should have a wire bottom or solid bottom covered with a thick layer of straw. Runs, like wire exercise enclosures, need to be high enough to keep bunnies from jumping out the top. A wire or solid top will prevent escapes and other animals from entering the run. If there is no bottom to the cage, wire needs to be extended several feet down into the ground to prevent the bunnies from digging out. The run should include a sleeping box, food and water.

Outdoor runs need to be placed out of the sun and drafts with water provided for the bunnies at all times. Keep in mind that outdoor runs should only be used for a few hours of exercise, and then the bunny needs to be brought inside the house. Never leave your bunny outside at night, even if the housing is secure. A bunny can easily die of fright from the sights and sounds of predators, such as possums, raccoons, dogs and even cats. Death can occur even if there has been no actual attack.

Boredom

To keep bunnies happy and relieve boredom, provide them with plenty of toys, such as untreated baskets and wood, grass mats, wire cat balls and hard plastic baby toys. See handout, "Bunny Toys" for a complete list. Make sure that if you use hard plastic baby toys, the bunny is not eating and ingesting them. If so, immediately remove the item. Rawhide chew toys should not be used because a piece can become lodged in the throat and the bunny can choke.

Large tubs of hay, newspapers or a towel may be used as an outlet for digging. A large ball might be welcomed by your bunny for rolling and pushing. A climbing area may be created with baskets, boxes and pillows. Jute, sea grass and hemp doormats are another diversion for chewing, as are pieces of untreated wood attached to baseboards or the inside of the cage. Tunnels can be made from open-ended cardboard boxes, cat tunnels and cardboard propped up against the side of a wall.

Living Outside

The pleasures of being outdoors include fresh air, sunshine and freedom to run, chew and dig. For a prey animal such as a rabbit, outside is also a place of danger from predators, theft or teasing by humans, moldy or poisonous plants, toxic pesticides or fertilizers, exposure to sun, heat, wind or wet, bacteria contained in dirt and diseases spread by flies and mosquitoes.

However, the single greatest threat to an outdoor rabbit is attack by predators. These occur primarily at night, but can also happen occasionally in the daytime. Hutches or cages do not provide enough protection to make it safe to leave the rabbit outdoors 24 hours a day. The House Rabbit Society receives many calls every week from baffled people whose rabbit died during the night while confined in a hutch. "I don't understand. The hutch was locked and the rabbit didn't have a mark on him. What happened?" With their acute vision, hearing and smell, a rabbit can sense the presence of a predator, such as a raccoon, even in your neighbor's yard. She may panic and injure herself, or she

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may die of shock. Many raccoons can open hutches. Other predators include coyotes, owls, hawks, possums, cats and dogs.

Don't think your yard is free of predators just because you live in the city. Raccoons come up through storm drains and arrive in very urban areas. These agile animals can climb trees and open doors. Wire cages are no protection for your bunny. If your bunny cannot stay in your house at night, make sure that he's enclosed within solid walls and behind a solid door, such as a garage, shed or basement, with a good lock.

My rabbit has lived outside for a long time without harm from predators - why should I consider bringing her inside now?

Some outdoor rabbits avoid death by predator or the other risks mentioned. But what is the quality of life for an animal living outdoors all the time? And what sort of relationship can you build if your bunny is out there and you're indoors? A life spent confined to a hutch is boring, depressing and stressful for a sensitive creature such as a rabbit. A life spent unconfined but outdoors is simply too dangerous for domestic animals. By domesticating them, we have deprived them of whatever natural ability they had for survival on their own. If your rabbit currently lives outdoors, we strongly urge you to bring her in at least during the night, when predators are most common. Even if she's confined to a smaller cage, or a bathroom or utility room, she's safe, and she's making a first step to being part of your family. There's no magic in turning an "outdoor rabbit" into a house rabbit. It can begin in a single evening.

What kinds of safe daytime exercise can I provide outdoors?

For safe daytime exercise, we suggest a pen within your fenced yard, one with a top and bottom as well as sides, to keep the rabbit from digging out and unwelcome visitors from climbing or jumping in. A plan from the House Rabbit Handbook (Drollery Press, 1996) describes an 8'L X 32"W X 32"H made from a frame of pine 2 X 4's and 1" welded wire. A plywood top gives shelter

and shade, and a wire floor covered with clean straw provides the rabbit with safe material to burrow in.

How to Cool Down a Hot Bunny

You need to cool down a hot bunny. Heat is deadly to rabbits and when the temperature creeps up into the 80s or more, heat stress becomes a real concern. Overweight rabbits seem more susceptible to heat stress – a good motivation to trim bun down before the hottest months of summer.

Tips:

- 🐾 Freeze water in one or two liter-size soda bottles and keep them in the cage as a giant ice cube for bunny to lean against. Keep a couple of bottles rotating in the freezer, so you always have one ready.
- 🐾 Dampen a towel and drape it over one end of the cage with a fan blowing gently on it, enough for good air circulation, but not so it's drafty.
- 🐾 Gently mist rabbits' ears and fur with clean water.
- 🐾 Place a square or two of ceramic tile or marble in the cage. It will remain cooler than the air temperature and will be a cool place for bun to rest.
- 🐾 Always have plenty of fresh drinking water available.
- 🐾 If your rabbit spends time outdoors, be sure to provide shade and keep him out of the direct sun in the hottest times of day.
- 🐾 If your rabbit becomes exposed to too much heat, seems listless, is not eating or acting normally, get him to a veterinarian immediately. Do not wait!

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