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National Agricultural Research Institute

Rabbits



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GOOD FOR MEAT PRODUCTION USING SMALL SCALE OR INTENSIVE FARMING

DESCRIPTION

The domestic rabbit evolved from the European wild rabbit but is now quite different and does not burrow in the ground. In Papua New Guinea we have two breeds of rabbit introduced in 1993. The Canberra Half Lop, which can be a mixture of black, brown and white colour and usually has one ear up and one hanging down, has proved to be the most suitable for the hot, humid climate. The New Zealand White has only been used to produce crosses with the Half Lop.

ADVANTAGES

Rabbits have some advantages over other larger farm animals. In small scale farming, raising rabbits does not compete with people for the same food and requires very little space. A doe (female rabbit) can produce several times her weight in young per year.

When the young are weaned at 5-8 weeks, their total weight often exceeds that of the mother. The doe is capable of turning out about eight



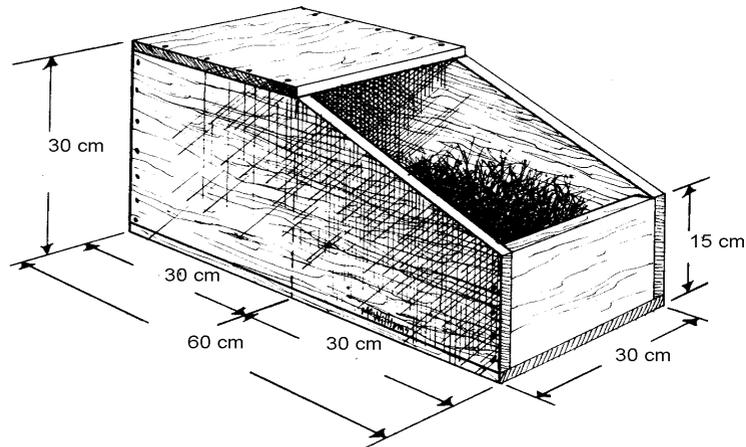
A rabbit house built on the ground



A rabbit house built on posts

BREEDING

Rabbits are first ready for reproduction at 5-6 months of age and should have reached a minimum live weight of 2.5 - 3.0 kg before first mating. The young are born 29-33 days later. Litter size varies from one to nine, seldom more. Nest boxes can be made from wood with wire mesh floors and should be put into the cage with the doe shortly before kindling or giving birth. The doe makes a nest in the box using her own fur and this nest must be kept dry while the doe is feeding her young up to weaning.



This simple nest box can be made from scrap timber to fit right inside the cage

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litters per year but is more likely to give only three or four. The young can be reared to 1.8 - 2.0 kg live weight in 3 months and give a 900 - 1000g edible carcass.

USES

Rabbits are raised for a variety of reasons and can provide meat, skins and manure. Rabbit meat is higher in protein and water and lower in fat than chicken or duck meat.

Rabbit skins can be processed and marketed to make coats, hats, bags, book covers or rugs. White rabbit pelts in particular are of commercial value. Rabbit manure is a valuable organic fertilizer for use in kitchen gardens.



Sewing a handbag from rabbit skin

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MANAGEMENT

Domestic rabbits are kept in wire, wooden or bamboo cages. The usual dimensions are 80 cm broad x 60 cm deep x 50 cm high. In intensive rabbit farms, rabbits are always fed with commercial pellets. For practical reasons, nursing does and growing broiler rabbits are offered the same feed. Broiler rabbits are housed separately from the does while being fattened. They are usually kept in small groups of four to eight per cage. Good clean water should be provided at all times. In villages, small numbers of rabbits can be raised in bush material houses with suitable cages, drinkers and feed troughs.



Rabbit in a wire cage

A family can successfully manage rabbit production. Such backyard systems can use a variety of green forage, vegetable household waste, surplus food crops and agricultural by-products to feed rabbits. However, rabbits do not produce well if given green feed only. They must be given some more concentrated energy food such as root crops, bananas or coconut. They will grow well if given about 20-30 g of commercial pellets each along with all of the green leaves that they will eat every day.



A happy family with their rabbit house in the background