

Breeding Issues

By Carla Carter

What can I do when I have breeding issues? There are so many variables to consider that can be causing problems, it's not always an easy answer. I hope in this article to present the most common causes so that you can ask yourself the questions and one by one diagnose what your particular problem might be. Always consider that the issue can be either the buck OR the doe in each situation. All of the problems apply to both of them and both must be in top conditions in order to produce.

1) The most common thing to consider is condition of the buck and doe.

- a) Are they underweight or overweight? Feel the back of their spine and see what you can feel. You should be able to feel the bones of their spine with a slight pad. If you can barely feel their bones, they are probably overweight. If they are bony with no pads, they are probably underweight. An underweight or overweight buck or doe is hard pressed to reproduce. Overweight bucks are also less ready to give you the 3 or 4 falls offs that you need on a single presentation. They will be panting after one or two. That's your sign that they might need to have their rations cut back.

An overweight doe can have fat accumulate around her ovaries and cause her to not release eggs. It may take more time to get an overweight doe back into breeding condition but it can be done.

If you think that weight is the problem, the best thing to do is to weigh the does upon beginning their "diets" and then weigh them once a week until you have them to their desired weight.

This is the one time I will advocate using hay to help them feel full during the weight loss process.(mark it in the record books LOL) Ration their pellets carefully and give them some hay to help them feel full without being too hungry. You don't want them to be too stressed during the dieting process. Don't overfeed them hay either, but some hay with their smaller ration of pellets might help.

A normal ration of pellets is approximately 1 ounce of feed (by weight) to 1 pound of rabbit. If that amount causes your rabbit to be overweight you might need to look at what you are feeding.

A lot of the time feeding a feed too high in fat will also result in an overweight rabbit. That is one of the reasons I like to use the feed that I do.

- b) **Feed 18% Protein 18% Fiber and Less than 3% fat** (I like 1.5% but it's hard to find). Remember that when your feed says min 14% max 18% that your fiber isn't 18%; it is actually 16%. You average the two together to determine what the actual fiber % is. If you feed a higher % of fat to meat rabbits, you can end up with fat rabbits. I know a lot of breeders like to feed higher % of fat for their coats (show rabbits in particular or special breeds) but for standard meat rabbit breeds (particularly New Zealand's' and Californians) I find a lower fat to be sufficient.

I do find though that the higher protein helps a lot in keeping my does and bucks in top breeding condition. They may be "healthy" without it, but I get higher litter sizes and healthier more vibrant kits with the higher protein. I also find that my does have more milk in the process with that higher protein. It works well for me. I know other breeders in other areas feed 16 or 17% and it works for them. I am in Missouri if that matters, and 18% works great for me. The 18% fiber however, is really a necessity and I think everyone agrees on that. I would feed higher than that if I could find it in the pellet.

2) Are they old enough? Did you check the does vent for signs of readiness?

- a) **Different breeds mature at different times:** Some of my Texas A&M stock have gotten bred by their brothers (oops) at three months (seriously). I wouldn't recommend breeding them at 12 weeks, but it happens. They are bred to mature early and you CAN breed them at 4 months with no problems. Most of my stock can breed at 5-6 months. You should discuss with the breeder that you purchase your stock at what age do they typically mature and are ready to breed. It varies greatly from line to line. Some breeds such as the Flemish giants are not ready until 8-9 months. Know your herd and your lines and what you are dealing with. Ask the person you bought your stock from what you should expect. Waiting too

long can be as detrimental too;_after so long (8-12 months I'm told) they have a harder time getting bred as well. Most breeders agree that starting them younger and breeding them regularly is the key to successful breeding.

- b) **Check the does' vent for signs of readiness:** There are plenty of pictures on the internet of vents that are "ready." Open the vent up gently; don't just look at it without spreading it a bit. You are looking for a red to purplish color meaning that the doe is hormonally ready to receive a buck. Without these colors, it means for some reason that she isn't old enough or that her system has shut down her hormonal system. Any time that a rabbit is stressed or sick, it will shut down all non-essential systems and hormones are one of these. This can happen during times of high stress, such as moving from one place to another if they felt stressed doing it, summer heat, winter extreme cold, darkness (lack of light), etc. If the vent is white or pink the doe will probably not receive the buck or if she does will probably not result in a pregnancy. There are people who say this is not a good indicator, but it has always proved true for me. Yes, you can have a pregnancy regardless of vent color on a fluke true. BUT, most of the time is rings true.
- c) **Bucks can breed earlier but can still be maturing:** Sometimes you can get a litter out of a buck early on, say 4 months, a small litter perhaps, but then later on when he is 8 months you'll get a big litter. So don't write him off on a small litter when he is young. He may still be developing.

3) **Is the stage set correctly?**

- a. **Are they getting enough light?** There are lots of different thoughts out there on exactly how much light is enough 8-12 hours, some say 14 but a MINIMUM of 8 hours of day light or artificial light in the winter is necessary for BOTH does and bucks to keep their hormones functioning correctly. Make sure somehow you are providing that necessary light.
- b. **Is the temperature right?** Bucks can go sterile at 85 degrees. Once they do go sterile it can take those 2-3 months to recover. It is important for you to KNOW the temperatures in your rabbit areas. I have thermometers in every "zone" of my barn to watch to make sure I am keeping everybody cool enough. My bucks are in the coolest area in my barn. The does are important

to keep cool yes, but they can tolerate up to 90 degrees before heat stroke sets in. I don't like to push that limit, but the bucks I HAVE to keep under 85 or spend months waiting on them to be usable again.

I also find that if the temperature is too cold, the does just shut down. Again that hormone protection thing, when you see the does going into a corner and fluffing up, they are protecting themselves against the cold. That is probably NOT a good time to try to get them to breed. I don't have a good "line" to draw in the sand but I would say the below freezing temps are not good to breed in, just from what I've seen.

c) Is it the right time of day? I know you are thinking what? But I've also heard of people who have bucks who like to breed at late night only, etc. I do find that everybody in my barn is easier to breed late in the evening as well and think about it, that is their normal activity time. They are nocturnal animals. That is when they are normally more active, they eat during that time, etc. I just find it better to breed in the evening when I feed, which is later at night, usually 6-9 PM (right after dark in my area).

d) Are the conditions right? It is IMPERATIVE that you take the doe to the bucks' cage. Does are VERY territorial. Does will tear their heads off if not their testicles. They are docile if taken to their cages, but take a buck to their cage and it's out of control.

What about a neutral territory? A lot of people like to table breed so that they can assist and they do this successfully. If your rabbits have been trained to this, I have seen it work. My rabbits don't like assistance. When I put my hand in the cage, the bucks back off and look at me like "I've got this what are you doing." I have also seen the bucks get SO distracted by a new area that they forget what they are supposed to be doing. Having said that if you are having issues anyway, I'd just stick with the regular take the doe to the buck's cage and let it go at that. It's the easiest and most successful way for a beginner to have success.

4) Do they have a special preference?

While this may seem highly unlikely to you, a doe in particular may in fact “prefer” a buck that she perceives to be the “alpha” male in the pack. If you have a doe in a cage next to a buck that she sees breeding other females, she will see him as the alpha male. If that is NOT the buck you want to breed her to, you may have to move her to another cage for a while in order to change her preferential treatment of that buck.

Keep in mind that this can work in your favor as well. If you have a doe that is not taking a liking to a buck you are trying to breed, put them in cages next to each other for a few days and typically they will “cozy” up after a day or two. You will see them begin to lay down next to each other in the adjoining cages where their bodies are touching through the wire. At that point you know it is time to attempt breeding. Usually you will achieve successful breeding after those visual signs of acceptance.

I have also had long term does that preferred a certain buck for breeding. They were used to being bred to one buck and would simply not accept another buck so long as the other buck was on the property.