

Which breed of rabbit is best for growing meat?

Which breed of rabbit is best for me?

By Carla Carter

This becomes the first question we are asked when people join the group if they don't already have their rabbits. It's a difficult one because it's really like asking, which is the best kind of ice cream to eat. Is it as simple as chocolate or vanilla? Not really there are many more factors to consider.

The first thing I ask new breeders coming to my rabbitry looking for meat rabbits is: What are the goals for their rabbitry? It helps me to understand what they are wanting to achieve in order to help guide them to the breeding stock that will help them to achieve their goals. Most new rabbit producers may have not thought this completely through. If not, here are the questions that I ask them:

- 1) Are pelts important to you? Are you planning on tanning or saving the pelts to tan at some point? Are you going to sell them or make things out of them? Does the feel of the pelt or the color of the pelt matter to you in any way?**

Making your decision based on need for pelts is entirely different than just on meat alone. Many people don't like the plain white pelts if they are going to be doing a variety of creative things with the colored pelts. Again, it is a planning issue for the long term use of your rabbits.

- 2) Is there a particular breed that you know about that you are drawn to for some reason? Which one and why?** (Often there are people who have heard about heritage breeds and have interest in helping to preserve these breeds.)

Perhaps you raised a particular breed like the Rex when you were a child and just can't bring yourself to raise anything else. That is fine, but you just need to understand that the growth rate will be slightly less and that may be an acceptable trade-off for you.

3) Are you interested in economical meat (fast growth) or just the fun of growing your own meat? Does the cost matter to you?

There are a lot of people who think that producing rabbits in their back yard is an inexpensive way to raise meat. Let's set the record straight right now on that. It's now. To do things properly: correct cages, watering system (whether it is an automatic system, bottles, crocks or whatever you choose) feeders and everything else you will need RABBITS ARE NOT CHEAP TO FEED OR RAISE. BUT they are an excellent meat to raise to feed your family. They are nutritious, healthy, fun and a great learning experience for your entire family. Compared to the cost of meat at the grocery store it is quite feasible and they certainly do produce quite a bit of meat once you get them producing, but it is NOT FREE OR CHEAP MEAT.

BUT there are lots of things that you can do to keep the cost lower. Choosing a breed that promotes faster growth (5# by 8 weeks) will help contain your food costs which is one of the most expensive pieces of the picture of raising rabbits. If you have a breed that takes 12 weeks to reach 5#; you have increased your feed cost by 50#. If it takes 4# of feed to put on 1# of weight, which is the average feed conversion ratios considered by most standards, and your average feed cost is \$14 for a 50# bag of feed, your feed cost is .28 cents a pound. That means your feed cost should be around \$5.60 for that 5# rabbit. However, you can see if it takes 1.5 times as long to get to 5# it will take much more feed to get it to that weight. So your feed cost will be \$8.40 instead of \$5.60. That can make a considerable amount of difference in your cost of that rabbit.

- 4) Do you have any interest in commercial production? If so, then you need to consider sticking with the white pelt rabbits. Commercial processors will only accept whites (New Zealand Whites and Californians). There are other Commercial avenues, but this is typically the easiest and fastest method to develop.

- 5) What other avenues for your rabbitry do you plan to explore? Your long term plans for your rabbitry should be taken into account in terms of which rabbits you begin with. For example, while the heritage breeds are fun to raise and often have great dispositions, they are also known for slower growth rates and more expensive to have for meat because of those growth rates.
- 6) Do you or your children ever plan to show rabbits in fairs, 4-H or rabbit shows? This requires an entirely different avenue than meat rabbits and we need to explore this on a different level.

After you have looked at all of these issues then here are some other things for you to consider. The “basic” meat rabbit breeds are the New Zealands and Californians. They are the standard commercial lines because of the fact that they are the fastest growing meat rabbits available.

The Texas A&M Production White line is a New Zealand White that has been especially formulated not only for fast growth (5 pounds by 8 weeks) but also heat tolerant, fertility and good mothering skills. You can find more information about them here: <http://users.tamuk.edu/kfsdl00/rabb.html>.

Hybrid vitality is another consideration. When you cross a New Zealand and a Californian you infuse hybrid vitality and will also get a faster growing kit. Sometimes it is a good idea to have a NZW Buck and Californian does.

Which breed is best at mothering? For me, I think the Californians are the best milk producers and the New Zealands produce the largest litters. I like to have a combination of both. They will both foster anything you give them and the Californians are great milk producers. Some of my Californians can raise up to 13 kits consistently. I keep them even if their average falls to 8 kits per litter (which is low in my barn).

What if you want some color? You can infuse some with the New Zealands and get some different color for variety if you are just using them for meat but consider that it really is more difficult to dispatch those cute rabbits over the red eyed white ones. Can't explain it, but it is.

I hope this explains some for you. Answer the questions for yourself and see what you come up with. If you answer them and still can't figure it out, post your answers on the board and we'll try to help guide you!

Good luck on your journey and remember that ultimately ANY rabbit can be used for meat, it is whether it is the best or the fastest growing rabbits that make sense for you to use. We want your experience to be a good one, that's why we guide you the way that we do. Let us help you if we can! Thanks for listening.