

# RABBIT FEEDING & NUTRITION

The rabbit is different from other species of domesticated animals in many aspects, but particularly so in its digestion and alimentary process. This difference is mainly in the development of specific roles for the caecum, involving a large microbial flora and a complex caecal wall, and in the practice of caecotrophy. Patricia Gaskin describes how to maintain this non-stop eating machine in peak condition.



*Dutch youngster: photo Adelle Homer*

Ask any successful exhibitor and they will declare that rabbits are "made in the nest". Rabbit milk has a high nutritive value providing a complete food during the entire suckling period. A doe will feed her young only once in twenty-four hours and suckling lasts two to three minutes; this is sufficient because of the extraordinary richness of rabbit milk which contains more than twice as much total solids as cow's milk and four times the protein and fat.

It follows therefore that if the youngsters are to thrive then the doe at the time of mating and up to the birth should be at the peak of nutritional health, and here's where feeding plays a very significant role.

Today's fanciers have a large and perhaps bewildering choice of feeds. It is estimated that at least seventy per cent of the fancier's budget is spent on feedstuffs, so it is essential that this outlay provides optimum results.

Ensure there is a correct balance between protein, fats, fibre and carbohydrates, minerals and vitamins, and remember that some rabbit feeds

also contain additives such as coccidiostats and probiotics.

Manufacturers also provide specific feed to cover different sizes and age groups, and pellet-only to pellets mixed with cereals: what benefits one rabbit may not satisfy another so it is important to study the small-print on the bag label or study the manufacturer's leaflet.

Newly purchased stock should be fed on the diet that it is used to while the new owner decides whether to continue this feed or to introduce another. (Rabbits can be very fussy and may even starve rather than accept a different product.)

Don't cut corners. Using a cheaper substitute feed – i.e. one that is designed for horses and cattle – should be avoided as the more expensive rabbit foods include high biological value proteins which are not present in other feeds.

The doe's feeding routine during the pregnancy varies greatly. From about the 25th day her appetite lessens and she may refuse solid food just prior to kindling. She will still continue to drink

## SEE HOW THEY GROW!



*Blue Rex 6 days old, eyes not yet open*



*Orange Rex three weeks old, still in nest. Ventures out to nibble grass at evening feed*



*Two Orange Rex at six weeks old, eating pellets ad lib and enjoying handful of green at night. Pictures by Fur & Feather*

water and this should be provided ad lib at the time of kindling.

After the birth her appetite rises quite sharply and she should never be without fresh water. A shortage of water in early life can have a quite serious effect in retarding growth.

The kits will begin to explore the hutch from around three weeks of age and may drink a little water in addition to mother's milk. Small amounts of good quality hay should be introduced and within days the young will be gathering at their mother's feed pot.