

I use the smallest-sized Heinz Baked Beans can as a feed scoop. This is about right for a resting adult's daily ration.

If the pellets are excessively dusty they should be sieved before feeding.

Hay: There are a number of types of hay and all vary in their composition. Hay should smell sweet (not musty), have been harvested in correct weather conditions from young grasses and have plenty of leaf.

Ryegrass, meadowgrass, timothy, clover, lucerne or alfalfa are all ideal.

Sun dried lucerne (or alfalfa as it is known in America and Australia) is rich in protein, calcium and vitamin A – the lucerne I feed comes from South Africa and distributed by Simple Systems (info on www.simplesystem.co.uk).

Timothy is higher in crude fibre and much relished by house rabbits.

Another good product is Readigrass (Spillers), a pure dried grass which has a 15% protein and 32% fibre. A useful guide to hay can be found in Virginia Richardson's *Rabbits Health, Husbandry & Diseases* and includes this chart:

Hay type	Protein	Fibre	Calcium
Lucerne	16%	28%	1.5%
Grass Hay	14%	31%	0.4%
Timothy	8%	30%	0.5%
Wheat straw	3%	35%	0.2%

A nutritious hay can be made for free from nettles. John Sandford described it in his book as "the best of all hays" –

see harvesting instructions on page 9.

Water: The rabbit's daily water consumption is about 10% of its body weight (except in lactating does who will consume more than 1 litre per day so water should be supplied ad lib).

If using bottles check frequently for leakages as apart from anything else this can lead to a type of moist dermatitis.

A rabbit that is used to a drinking bowl may refuse to drink from a bottle and become dehydrated, so it is important to check that any new rabbit is drinking adequately.

Treats: Hard baked bread is relished, also pieces of fresh fruit and some vegetable peelings. Most types of wild greens – see the "Salad Days" feature in this issue. Bark and leaves (from trees like willow) are particularly enjoyed; contact West Willows for their willow balls – Sue at *Fur & Feather* buys them for her Netherland Dwarf and says one will last for several weeks.

Chocolate biscuits and other types of sweet "treats" do more harm than good and are an absolute no-no.

Vitamins

Vitamins A & B are found in greenfoods and fish liver oils. A deficiency may cause reproductive failures, poor growth and a susceptibility to certain diseases and nervous disorders,

although this is rare.

Vitamin C: a valuable nutrient found in most greenfoods and synthesised by the rabbit itself.

Vitamin D: once the scourge of rabbit keepers being responsible for cases of rickets, the modern healthy rabbit that has access to sunlight and produces the vitamin itself.

Vitamin E: present in greenfoods and cereal grains.

Caecotrophy Explained

In 1882 a French veterinary scientist (Charles Morot) published a paper showing that rabbits produced two kinds of faecal pellets, one of which they reingest. One is the hard pellet that is seen on the floor of the hutch, and the other is a soft pellet – called caecotrophes – which is rarely seen as it is taken from the anus and reingested. The significance of this discovery was not realised until many years later.

Morot had realised that food eaten by the rabbit rapidly reaches the stomach where it remains for several hours before being gradually introduced into the small intestine, where the particles that have not been broken down by enzymatic action pass into the caecum.

The content of the caecum – bacteria and large and small food particles that have not been broken down – gradually enters the colon where the particles become surrounded by mucus and form into a string of soft pellets known as caecotrophes.

So the rabbit's colon contains two types of excrement: the hard pellets that are expelled from the anus onto the hutch floor – and the soft pellets which are sucked from the anus and swallowed by the rabbit.

Within several hours large numbers of these reingested pellets remain in the stomach, a process that from beginning to end can last for around twenty-four hours.

It is rare to see caecotrophs on the hutch floor – if you do it may be that the diet is unsuitable or that the rabbit is over-eating.

Good Stockmanship

The golden rule to caring for this non-stop eating machine is to feed "little and often".

If the food or water pot is full at the end of the day immediate action should be taken to find out why.

It goes without saying that rabbits that are kept in unsanitary housing, under or over fed, fed irregularly or with the wrong food will quickly lose condition, or succumb to illness. □ □

Leading Feed Suppliers

Available to order from your usual supplier, or telephone for further details

Allen & Page: Breeders & Growers Pellet; Natural Rabbit Pellet; Green Pea Mix; Premium Rabbit Mix. 01362 822900

Badminton Speciality Feeds: Albion Bunnymunch & Protein Plus range. 01425 658450.

Beaphar UK Ltd: XtraVital Rabbit; XtraVital Junior Rabbit. 01440 715 700.

Burgess Supafeeds: Supa & Excel – extensive range of feeds and forage. 0800 413969.

Cardia Grain Co: herbal grass mixtures. 01545 560728.

Delta Pet Foods: Jaco Rabbit, Jasper Rabbit, Josie Rabbit (mixes), plus Dr Broomhalls (extruded pellet). 01550 721333.

Dengle Crops: Hi Fi Lite Alfalfa Oat Straw, Alfalfa Pellets. 01621 841188.

Dixons: Dustless Bedding, Chopped Hay. 01359 259341.

Dodson & Horrell Ltd: Rabbit Royale Mix. Rabbit Mix (commercial). Rabbit Pellets. Rabbits Pellets Plus. 01832 737300.

Fold Hill Foods: Modern Rabbit Diet (extruded pellet). 01205 270500.

Friendship Estates: Friendly Pure Dried Grass. 01302 700220.

Genesis Pet Food: Genesis Extruded Rabbit Feed. (01453 826 848).

Hopewells: local delivery only (Rotherham area) on 4 rabbit mixes. 01709 542428

K-Feeds: 7 products in the Alpha range. 01427 880914.

Massey of Preston: Special 18 Rabbit pellets, Rabbit pellets ACS, Special 18 Rabbit pellets + aurofac. 01772 206200.

My Pet Foods: My Super Rabbit, My Protein Rabbit (mixes). Also Mr Johnson's Supreme Rabbit, Mr Jasper Rabbit (formerley S & E Johnson). 01227 723816

Natural Petfood Company: Herb & Fibre. 01362 822900

Norfolk Pastures - hay and straw. 01953 883131

Petlife International Ltd: Western Timothy Hay. Oxvow. 01284 761131.

R & E Bamford Ltd. RabbiTec 17 pellets (contain Biotec). 01772 456300.

Rolf C Hagen Ltd: Living World Premium Mix. 01977 556622.

Ridgeway Feeds: Sole importer of Canadian Alfalfa Cobs. 01702 476194.

Spillers: Readigrass (pure dried grass). 01908 222888.

Simple Systems: South African sun-dried Lucerne. 01371 870753/01728 604008.

Supreme Petfoods Ltd: Russel Rabbit & Selective range. 023 9236 9000.

W Jordan Biggleswade Ltd. Supreme Rabbit Mix, Dry Rabbit Mix, Rabbit Pellet Plus Pro-Feed. 01767 312001

Waggfoods: Bunny Brunch, Bunny Time. 01845 578111.

West Wales Willows: Timothy hay, willow feed toys. 01437-74 17 14.

Wilkinsons: Barn dried hay, woodshavings, barley straw and soft paper bedding. 01704 879943.

Wilson's of Dundee: Rotastak Rabbit, Wilson's Bunny Break. 01382 462201.