

Keeping Rabbits Outdoors

INTRODUCTION

Rabbits do well both indoors and outdoors, and many families choose to keep rabbits inside and offer outdoor time for exercise and enrichment. Some families may choose to keep their rabbits outdoors because of other pets in the home or a family member being allergic to rabbit fur or hay. If you choose to give your rabbit time outside, it's important to keep them safe.

SAFETY & SUPERVISION

- Rabbits are not always able to successfully distinguish between a safe, edible plant and a toxic plant. All plants that the rabbit may encounter should be identified to be sure it is safe for them to ingest. Avoid plants or soil that have been treated with weed killers, pesticides, or insecticides. If you believe your pet has eaten a toxic plant, take it to an emergency veterinarian as soon as possible.
- Bunnies living outside do better with companion or bonded partner to keep them company. If housing with other animals, such as chickens, rabbits will need their own space and hutch away from the chicken coop. Interactions with other animals should always be supervised by an adult.
- Aerial predators, such as hawks, can be a risk to bunnies when free ranging. Rabbits outside in a space without a roof or cover should be supervised by an adult.
- Even in the city and suburbs, pet rabbits are at risk from predators like raccoons, opossums, rats, snakes, outdoor cats, dogs, and even coyotes.

HEALTH & VACCINATIONS

- Domestic rabbits are sensitive to warm temperatures and in as little as 80 degrees Fahrenheit can suffer from heatstroke and other health emergencies. Many owners will keep their rabbits indoors during the winter and summer to avoid extreme cold, heat, and storms. To keep your rabbit safe during warm temperatures, offer a temporary space inside. Bathrooms, laundry rooms, and other spaces can be easily bunny-proofed if necessary.
- When housed outdoors rabbits are exposed to germs, parasites, and viruses (such as Myxomatosis and RHDV/rabbit hemorrhagic disease, both of which are extremely dangerous). Rabbits spending time outside and should be kept updated on vaccinations, flea treatments, de-worming, and overall health exams.
- There is no approved vaccine or treatment for Myxomatosis in rabbits. For prevention against Myxomatosis, it is generally recommended to use screens or mesh to limit the exposure of mosquitoes potentially carrying the virus from accessing your rabbit, as well as continued use of flea treatment for your outdoor rabbit.
- Long haired bunnies need to be groomed more often since they are exposed to the elements and more debris that can lead to matting and tangled fur.

HOUSING & ENVIRONMENT

- Indoor or outdoor, the recommended minimum housing for rabbits is 4'x4' / 16 sq ft for a single rabbit.
- Flooring in outdoor housing should be a solid surface. Rabbits do not have paw pads like dogs and cats and when kept on wire flooring they will develop sores and open wounds on the bottom of their feet.
- Wood as a building material should be pet-safe and not treated with any harsh chemicals since rabbits will chew on and potentially consume the wood. When choosing wood for housing, it is best to choose thicker panels because rabbits may chew through thin wood panels. This can result in your rabbit getting loose and increase the risk of predators chewing their way in.
- A common alternative to hutches is a shed. Most garden sheds can be easily transformed into a bunny paradise. They are highly customizable and come in many sizes and styles to fit your yard.

WEATHER-PROOFING

- Ventilation is important for temperature regulation but can also assist in airing out unwanted smells.
- Rabbits can generally tolerate light rain showers but should not be allowed to get soaked in the rain. It takes rabbits a long time to fully dry off after becoming soaked and can quickly develop hypothermia.
- Many owners will opt to bring their outdoor rabbits inside the home or garage during the summer and winters to help with exposure to extreme temperatures.

PREDATOR-PROOFING

- If the rabbits have any access to the ground or lawn (usually called a 'run'), wire must be buried underneath the ground or sitting snug to the ground. This prevents the rabbits from digging their way out and keeps predators from digging their way in.
- When using wire, it is safest to choose a wire or hardware cloth with small gaps (such as $\frac{1}{4}$ inch or $\frac{1}{2}$ inch) to prevent predators from easily reaching in or chewing into it. Chicken wire, 'Garden Fence' and Chain Link fencing are not secure against predators, pests, and raccoons as they have large gaps.
- With a strong sense of smell, incredible hearing and a great sense of eyesight, even just the presence of a predator outside of the enclosure can cause a rabbit to panic. It is important to have secure walls set up to reduce the risk of any predators encountering your outdoor bunny.