

All across America, the national 4-H project is helping young rabbit owners grow into responsible adults. There are currently over 6.5 million members enrolled in this youth program. Established in 1914, 4-H helps members develop skills in agriculture, horticulture, homemaking, and the arts; and then offers them the chance to show off those skills through fairs and competitions. The rabbit program is an important part of the 4-H curriculum, and if you or your child would like to be successful in raising rabbits for 4-H, here are some pointers to help you get started.

Do you need purebred rabbits to show in 4-H?

The answer to this question is yes and no. It depends on what type of classes you want to enter, as well as the regulations for your area. 4-H is managed on county-wide and state-wide levels, and each region has its own way of doing things. In general, breed competitions are usually judged by the ARBA Standard of Perfection, so to compete in these classes, you need to have a purebred rabbit recognized by the American Rabbit Breeders Association. However, some fairs may have a mixed breed class in addition to the purebred classes. Also, you may be able to use mixed or crossbreed rabbits in meat pen (market pen) or showmanship competitions. Check with your local club leader or extension office to learn the regulations for your region. Remember though, that whether or not your area will allow mixed breed rabbits, you will probably have better success by buying purebreds.

Where to Buy Rabbits to Show in 4-H

If you are beginning a 4-H rabbit project, the best place to buy rabbits is from a local breeder. If possible, buy bunnies from a breeder in your immediate area. That way you can develop a relationship with the breeder and he or she can be there to help if you run into problems down the road. Also, this gives you a chance to visit their farm (if they invite you over) and see how they manage their rabbitry, which can give you ideas on how to start your own project. Finally, there's a good chance that a breeder in your county is familiar with the fair you plan to show at, and will know the classes they accept. One of the best places to get in touch with local breeders is through online Rabbit Breeder Directories.

Most fairs have their own regulations when it comes to dividing rabbits for judging. It's important to know what classes they offer so you can know how to buy and breed your stock. Some fairs divide rabbit classes by fancy (small) and commercial (large) breeds. Others judge each breed separately like an ARBA sanctioned show. In fact, some fair

shows are also ARBA sanctioned. Some allow mixed breed rabbits and others do not. Some fairs have "get of sire" or "get of dam" classes, where you can show a senior rabbit with its junior offspring. Almost all fairs offer market classes such as meat pens, single fryers, and commercial fur. Most have rabbit showmanship competitions, and some have extra contests for youth participants such as judging, quiz bowl, skill-a-thon, or royalty.

Narrow down which classes you would like to enter before you purchase your stock. Then look for a respected breeder in your area that raises the type of rabbits you would like to show. Start looking for a breeder as soon as possible; don't delay even for a few weeks. Some breeders have waiting lists of customers and it might take several months before you can get stock from them. Contact them early to get on their list early, and also to make sure you don't miss the fair's deadline. Many fairs require exhibitors to have their rabbits on their own premises a couple of months before show day. That way they can be sure that the showman is responsible for the rabbit's current health and condition.

Never purchase a rabbit if you detect any red flags about the bunny or the breeder. Don't be afraid to ask the breeder questions: if they won't help you with your questions, they are not someone you want to buy from. Check the rabbit over thoroughly for health issues or disqualifications. Always, always check its teeth, toenails, and sex before agreeing to bring it home. Even well-meaning breeders can make mistakes when sexing a rabbit or looking it over for disqualifications, and you don't want to find out too late. If it's your first time buying rabbits, bring your 4-H leader or other mentor along with you to get their opinion about the bunnies.

Care of a 4-H Rabbit Project

Once you have your rabbits home, your only job is to keep them in top condition until show day. Here are the five top rules for preparing your rabbit for fair:

1. Use the proper equipment. Only use all-wire cages. These are much less likely to cause urine stains on your rabbit than solid bottomed cages. They also keep your rabbit's environment cleaner and reduce ammonia. If you plan to breed your rabbits, make sure you have a nest box ready at least a week before your doe is due to deliver.

2. Feed a healthy and consistent diet. People will spend a long time looking at feed bag labels trying to determine the healthiest diet for their rabbits. While that is admirable,

sometimes the freshness of the feed and the consistency of the nutrition are more important than the brand of pellets. Ideally, show rabbits should have a diet low in protein and fat and high in fiber. Free-choice timothy hay is an excellent addition to any rabbit's meal. Always make sure the feed is fresh; rabbits will not condition well on stale pellets. A healthy base diet is more effective at getting your rabbit in top condition than any supplements you could throw in.

3. Provide the proper environment. Proper housing doesn't stop at a well-made cage. The cage must be located in an area with excellent ventilation. The surrounding temperature should not get above 85 degrees at any time of the year, at least unless you take measures to keep your rabbit cool and hydrated in hot weather. The cage can be kept outside, but must be protected from predators and precipitation. It must be kept in a quiet area so your rabbit will not be stressed. All these factors, if the rabbit is not protected from them, can compromise your bunny's immune system. It's also very important to keep the cage clean. Not only will this help prevent disease such as coccidiosis, but it will help your rabbit's coat from getting stained.

4. Handle your rabbit often. This step must not be neglected if you want to be successful showing rabbits in 4-H. You must train your rabbit to pose, so it will look good for the judges. Rabbits can learn to pose themselves as soon as they are touched if you work long enough with them. If you are competing in rabbit showmanship, you should get your rabbit used to the routine, so it will cooperate with you on show day. Handling your rabbit is also very important because it allows you to check its health and condition daily. That way if your rabbit has any health problems, you can catch them early on.

5. Keep good records. Some 4-H leaders or county fairs will require you to show your project record book along with your rabbit. You might even win a prize for keeping good records! Even if record keeping is not a requirement, it's an excellent management practice and will help you raise better rabbits in the end. At bare minimum, you should keep pedigrees and breeding records for every rabbit you raise. Hint: grab some rabbitry management software and/or custom pedigree templates to make your job easier.

Beyond the Show Day

Many 4-H members are "in it to win it" - and that's fine. It makes for healthy competition. But 4-H is about much more than winning Grand Champion. Even if you start because you

want to compete, you will find that you learn many skills in 4-H that will help you your whole life. So even if you don't win first prize, take time to enjoy learning how to care for animals, enjoy the friendships you build with others in your club, and enjoy being a benefit to your community as you pledge your "hands to larger service."

If you'd like more information on how to show rabbits in 4-H clubs, check out the Youth Rabbit Project Study Guide. Updated for 2013, this book gives expert tips about how to show your rabbit in Showmanship and compete in Breed ID and other 4-H competitions. Written by a two-time runner up for ARBA National Rabbit Queen.