

Raising Rabbits in the Winter by Pat Vanecek, printed in the Oct/Nov/Dec 2009 issue

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You need to extend daylight hours. Rabbits naturally breed in the spring when the days start getting longer. In the winter, you have to fool them into thinking it's still springtime. My lights come on at 6 am and shut off at 10 pm. If you have them outside you can hang a light and put it on a timer so that it comes on at dusk and turns off at 10 pm.

I use a wood nest box with a wire bottom. To get the nestbox ready, first I put a piece of cardboard in the bottom (to keep the shavings from falling out and keep the cold air from coming in). Then I put in 2 inches of pine shavings. Then I fill the rest of the box up with hay. I check the nestbox every day to see if I need to add more shavings or hay.

Rabbits can tolerate pretty cold temperatures but those little ones can't. Once the bunnies are born. I check the nestbox and then I remove it from the doe's cage (I write the doe's name on the front of the nestbox) and put it in the nursery. I have a room that I have shelves on and we have insulated and heated. I put the nestboxes in there and cover them with a piece of 1/2 inch by 1 inch wire (to keep the babies from escaping). I put the nestboxes back with the does at 8 am. I leave them in and let the does nurse for about 15 minutes. The does have all hopped out by then and I remove the nestboxes and put them back in the nursery. Depending on the temperatures, I will continue to do this until the bunnies are 3-4 weeks old. Of course, I check the nestbox and if it gets too messy inside, I put in fresh shavings and hay.

To help keep my barns tolerable in the cold weather, I have removable doors that go back up when it gets really cold. Rabbits can tolerate down to 0 degrees. The biggest problem with temperatures below freezing is the water freezes. Rabbits will not eat if they don't have water. They might lick on frozen water but they aren't going to be able to get enough water that way. When we know it is going to get below freezing, we drain our Edstrom water system. The next day if the temperatures go above freezing we turn the water system back on. If it isn't getting above freezing we have to put out crocks. I don't have 215 crocks (I have 215 cages). So, we put the crocks (filled with warm-not hot water) in two rows of cages. We allow the rabbits to drink for 15 minutes and then move onto the next two rows. We put out water in the crocks 3 times a day -- morning, noon, and night. I know this is a lot of work but we don't get that many freezing days in a year. Maybe 2 or 3. For people that have a lot of freezing days, I would suggest heat tape around the water lines or now they have a new system that heats the water in the bucket and keeps it circulating.

I also have about 25 cages outside. They have a roof over them. Some of these cages have backs, some don't. In freezing weather I put a nestbox (filled with hay) in some of these cages. If I have rabbits in these that are over 4 months, usually they can tolerate the cold

no problem. These cages are about 5 feet from a building so they don't get much wind blowing on them. They are also under trees so that's added protection.

When the temperatures drop, I also increase rabbit pellets slightly. Plus, I start feeding a conditioning mix (2/3 crimped oats, 1/3 crimped barley plus a few black sunflower seeds) in the fall. Rabbits need some extra calories to help maintain their body temperature.

Hope this information can help you. My philosophy -- you're no-bunny till some-bunny loves you.