



Easter Bunnies

The Easter Bunny and parents often give children young rabbits as presents around this time of year. An area animal science specialist with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System says rabbits can be good pets, but they have some basic requirements.

Robert Spencer says to maintain a healthy rabbit in a suitable environment, owners must meet some basic needs for the pet.

“Some necessities include a cage as the bunny develops into a rabbit, a feeder and water bottle that hang on the side of the cage, feed and hay, and possibly a few toys,” says Spencer. “This equipment and food items can be purchased at many pet stores or feed stores. A good place to look is the location where the bunnies were originally purchased.”

Rabbits make suitable indoor or outdoor pets. Pet owners will have to decide which is the best option for them.

If the rabbit will be an indoor pet, owners have several aspects to consider. First, rabbits can be litter trained. The process is as easy as house-training a cat.

Next, rabbits can be destructive if left unattended outside their cages.

“Owners should be prepared to keep a watch on the rabbit if it is loose in the house,” he says. “They may chew on furniture or electrical cords or shred carpet if unsupervised.”

Spencer says a rabbit’s digestive system will not tolerate much variety in their diet.

“It is best to stick with processed rabbit feed and hay,” he says.

Also, they can become easily stressed by other house pets such as dogs or cats. Introduce other indoor pets to the rabbit for short periods of time until they become accustomed to each other.

If the rabbit will be an outdoor pet, there are some additional factors to consider. The need for a cage, water bottle, feeder, feed, and hay still apply. However, the rabbit and cage will need shelter to keep them dry in bad weather. Shelter will also help the rabbit avoid heat stress and provide protection from predators.

Keeping the rabbit dry is especially important in cold weather. They can become chilled and develop hypothermia.

“Hot weather can be a problem too. Rabbits do not deal well with direct sunlight or extreme heat and humidity.”

Spencer adds they do not tolerate temperatures higher than 90 degrees. In extreme heat, they may experience heat stress and die.

Place the rabbit and its cage in an area that has a roof with moderate air flow. If using a fan, make sure it moves air above the cage not into the cage. A frozen water bottle can serve as an air conditioner during the heat of summer.

Indoors or outdoors, rabbits enjoy playing with toys. A variety of appropriate toys can be found at pet stores and some feed stores. Make sure they are labeled for rabbits. Simple things found around the house also make great toys. Clean, empty cans with no labels or sharp edges are an option as are clean, empty plastic bottles or a section of PVC pipe. Rabbits will spend lots of time playing with their toys.

Cage size requirements for a rabbit will depend on how large it will become as an adult. Rabbits are generally classified according to size and weight. Small rabbits weigh about two to five pounds at maturity, medium breeds five to eight pounds, and large breeds eight to 12 pounds.

Spencer says a medium-sized rabbit needs a cage that is 24 inches wide, 24 inches deep and 18 inches high. For smaller rabbits, something smaller is suitable. Larger rabbits need a bigger cage to provide adequate space.

Spencer encourages owners to learn more about the new pet. Books and other information can be found at the local library, pet store or bookstore. An Internet search will provide extensive information on rabbits. One excellent Web site is the American Rabbit Breeders Association at www.arba.net. It offers information on raising rabbits, rabbit shows and a rabbit registry.

For more information on being a responsible rabbit owner, call Robert Spencer at the Lauderdale County Extension Office at 766-6223 or visit the Extension Web site at www.aces.edu and search on rabbits.