



Raising Backyard Meat Rabbits

Transcript – Module 1

Hi, my name is Ann Marie and my friends call me Dash for the hyphen in my name. And I'm honored today to be doing a course teaching about how to raise backyard meat rabbits for The Grow Network. Trust me when I say I have traveled that road before you and I have fallen into those pitfalls and so that's my job today is to help you to avoid those pitfalls so you can have a smooth transition into raising your own meat for your family. You might hear some airplanes going overhead, you might hear some traffic noises. Well, guess what? I live in the big city of Dallas and this is my backyard. Me and my husband really wanted to provide good, nutritious, organic food for our family. We want to just go to the grocery store and just purchase good food and my kids were having some health problems. We were all having some health problems and we saw that as a solution, but to be honest, we could not afford to do that. So, we decided to just bloom where we were planted and that's what we named our little homestead. We had for years, we had wanted property out in the country and that just year after year that wasn't happening financially. So, we just decided to do everything we could right where we were to provide healthy, nutritious food for our family. So that's what we did. First, we got chickens and then we got rabbits and turned our whole front yard into a garden. And then just for the sweetness of it, we got bees. I am all about inspiring others and teaching them how to grow nutritious, organic food, healthy food for their families. It is so rewarding and very possible to do so. And that's what I'm here to show you how to do.

I'm so excited that you've joined me on this rabbit course of raising backyard meat rabbits and this course is gonna cover everything from choosing the right breed through feeding, diseases, care of your rabbits, breeding, having babies, what can go wrong with a first time mom, all the way to harvesting the rabbit and putting, getting it on the table with some delicious recipes I think you can just work into your lifestyle and work in for your family.

One of the first things I want you to do is think about your purpose for raising backyard rabbits. The first purpose would be manure right away. It is great for your garden. It just rocks the garden. I'm telling you, it grows some great food and it's not hot, so you don't have to worry about composting it first. You can just shovel it right from under your hutch and put it right into the garden and it's great fertilizer. And it's ... a lot of people around my area in the city here can't have chickens. Some cities don't allow it at all. And so, a rabbit is quiet, it's easy to care for, no one's gonna even know you have three rabbits, right? And then they really are easy to take care of. My 11-year-old son had his own rabbit business and he raised them, and he learned a lot about budgeting his money.

He learned about building hutches. He built all the hutches for them. He learned the responsibility of caring for them even on his birthday. I mean the chores, the daily chores, he learned that. So, if my 11-year-old son can do it, then it's pretty easy to do and you can do it too. After that, I would say meat. A purpose for raising backyard rabbits would be for meat. And my family raises backyard meat rabbits and it's very cost efficient. It's a lean meat. It's delicious. It's very good for you and it's a lot like chicken. A lot of the times you can substitute this meat for dishes that you would put chicken in and just work it right into your regular lifestyle. And then I guess what it is important for me, for the animals that I consume to be raised humanely, and I know that in a factory farm method, many animals are not raised humanely.

And so, I know what goes into my animals. I know that care that they receive, they have a good life. I feel good about that and that means a lot to me. The other reason I would raise backyard meat rabbits is to sell. And I sell my rabbits to the public and I'm excited about that because I can help others get started on their journey of raising rabbits, offer their homestead, raising wholesome food for their homestead. And the other reason is I can meet my whole feed costs for

the whole season, the whole breeding season by just selling three rabbits. So that makes a big difference to me. When you think about selling your rabbits, I want you to ask yourself a few questions. Do you have a market to sell your rabbits? I live in the big city of Dallas, so I've got this huge market. I'm not out in the middle of nowhere where people are gonna have a hard time finding me. So, ask yourself, do you have a market and then are you willing to contact 4-H groups? Are you willing to contact Future Farmers of America groups? Are you willing to put your rabbits on Facebook, to take pictures and take the time to post them on Facebook sites, groups for selling rabbits? Are you willing to deal with the public? A lot of homesteaders I know are very private. They don't really want the public on their property and that is part of it if you want to sell your rabbits, I want you to just ask yourself those questions before you decide if you want to sell or maybe you just want to have meat rabbits for good, nutritious, wholesome meat for your family and that's great too. If you're like me, you might want to do it for all three reasons. The manure rocks your garden, the meat is nutritious and wholesome for your family and then if you sell your rabbits, you can help other homesteaders get started and you can meet your feed costs for the whole season. So, just think about those things and decide what purpose you want for raising your rabbits because that's gonna influence the breed that you choose. And we're going to get into that in just a minute.

Now let's get into what kind of rabbit you want to choose for backyard raising. You wanna choose a rabbit that has a good bone to meat ratio, and you might think the Flemish Giant would be a good rabbit because they get so large, but they actually have a large bone and they grow quite slowly. So Flemish Giant would not be a good choice for backyard meat production. The top five breeds for backyard meat production that I would say is number one, the Californian, number two I would say is the New Zealand and number three would be Rex rabbit. Now they have a mini Rex, but of course you're looking for the standard Rex for your meat production. And then the fourth one that I would consider would be the TAMU rabbit and that stands for Texas A & M University. And it's a rabbit that spread, especially at Texas A & M for their good mothering skills, their good milk production, their large litters and their ability to do well in the hot humid south. So that is another breed I would definitely consider because it would be more valuable to you. And if I did go that direction, I would be sure to get a certificate saying that this rabbit was bred in the Texas A & M facility and it is indeed a TAMU rabbit. Then the fifth category I would say is the heritage breeds and that's what I've chosen to raise. As I've said, I have chosen to raise Champagne d'Argent, the heritage breed. They start out totally black and they turn a lovely silver color. When they mature at about 12 weeks, they're totally silver. So that's kind of amazing. Some of the reasons you would choose a heritage breed is because if you choose one of those top three, the California, the New Zealand or the Rex, they're very common and they would cost you about 10 to 15 dollars and you could sell them for about 10 to 15 dollars each. But if you choose a heritage breed, they're worth a lot more and it expands your market. For instance, my champagne d'Argents sell for 40 to 60 dollars each and I can sell them to 4-H kids, I can sell them to Future Farmer of America's. They're a beautiful rabbit and the kids like to take them to the state fair of Texas. So, it just really increases your profits, if you're going to sell it to the public, it increases your profits and it expands your market to have a heritage breed and are lots of different heritage breeds be besides the Champagne like I raise.

There's the American, the Silver Fox, the American Chinchilla, the Beveren, the Cinnamon and last the Palomino. And one fun way to learn about all these different breeds and get to see them for yourself is to go to a rabbit show and you can go to the American Rabbit Breeders Association, the ARVA, just search it and actually I'll leave the link in the resources for you. You can go to their website and you can put in your zip code and you can find rabbit shows in your area. It's really fun. Take a friend with you, take your kids with you, that all, and just all sorts of rabbits. They even have one, it's called the French, I think it's called the French Lop and it has long ears, like a Basset Hound, but that's a really good place to get to see lots of different heritage breeds and find a breeder maybe close to you or you can purchase your rabbits at a show.

The Grow Network library also has a resource on heritage breeds. It's done very well. Check that out. She's done a really good write up on all the heritage breeds and kind of where they, the countries they came from, and whether they're, you know, how scarce they are and how popular they are. And so, and she's done a good job of that. So, check that out. I

hope you have a better idea now of what breed you're going to choose and that you have available to you. Again, it all depends on choosing the purpose of your rabbits. That first question I asked you, because obviously if you're gonna choose to sell it to the public, you're gonna, that's going to influence the breed that you're going to choose.

To sum it up, if I were going to raise rabbits, just for meat for my family, I would choose one of the top three breeds. I would choose either the California, the New Zealand or the Rex rabbit. But if I were going to sell to the public, I would go with something that would expand my market more. So I would either go with the TAMU, a Texas A & M University rabbit or I would go with a heritage breed just because it just expands your market and gives you more profit for your trouble, for your time in marketing them. There is one other consideration I would think about if I needed to really keep my startup costs really low. Obviously if you can sell account California rabbit for at 10 to 15 dollars, you can also buy one for that. So, if I really need to keep my startup costs super low, I would probably just go with one of those common breeds and I would just breed them. I would pick the, you know, the strongest in my litter with the best mothering skills in your breeding program. I hope I've given you a better idea of what kind of breed you might want to raise in your backyard, rabbit production. And next we're going to look at what to look for when you go and buy a rabbit, how to choose the healthy rabbits.

What we're gonna look at next is what to look at when you go to buy a rabbit. So, I'm going to use one of my Champagnes as an example. Alright, the first thing you want to do is know how to calm your rabbit. You can just tuck them in kind of the crook of your arm or you can cover their eyes. That just kinda calms them down. You want to do a health check on the rabbit that you're buying. The first thing you're going to look for is nice bright eyes and then you're going to take a peek in the ear. What you want to see is a nice clean ear. You don't want any signs, any dirtiness that might be ear mites or signs of scratching, that they'd been scratching your ear. You want a nice clean ear and then you would just want to look at the body condition. You want to feel the rabbit. You don't want to feel any bones. You don't want to feel the hip bones. You just want a nice, nice plump condition. Then you're going to turn your rabbit over.

You're being so cooperative. And you're going to check if it's a boy or a girl. So, the way you do that is you make scissors and get the tail with your scissors and then you just pull on the tail and then you just push down and it's a boy folks. If it's a slit that looks like a taco, it's a girl. If it's a rounded protrusion, it looks more like a burrito, then it's a boy. And you might be making fun of me saying, well I know how to tell a boy or girl, but a young rabbit is a little bit harder to tell than the adults. And also, if you're going to drive copious amounts of miles to get a rabbit, you don't want to arrive home with the wrong sex. Trust me, I know. Don't ask me how I know that. Alright, and when you're down here, you want a nice clean bottom. You don't want to see any feces here, should be clean and then you're gonna check out the teeth. Oh, I forgot one. Sometimes rabbits kept on cages, especially large rabbits can get cage sores on the bottom of their feet. So, you wanna check and make sure there are no sores on the bottom of their feet. And then we want to check out the teeth. So, you want nice, clean, short teeth and you want them just over the bottom teeth. Right like that.

Next you want to just check out the nails. If you're buying a rabbit that maybe you think is a young rabbit, maybe less than a year old and it's got long nails, maybe they're curled to the side, then your rabbit is much older, you know, than you think. So that's just something to look out for. Alright, thank you for your help, for cooperating on your health check. Your health check is over. You did so good. This Champagne is almost 12 weeks old, so still turning silver has a little black left.

That leads us to what you're going to look for in a seller and what you want to do. What I like to do is go to the property where I'm going to buy the rabbit. I want to look for healthy conditions. I don't want to see the rabbit in the up in their feces. I want to see that the poop is falling away from the cages. I want to see fresh, clean water everywhere available for everyone. I don't want to see overcrowding. If you see overcrowding in a cage, you could end up with an injured rabbit because they can fight if they're overcrowded or you could end up with the rabbit that is already, you know, prematurely pregnant maybe before they should be, or at least you won't know about it. We kinda, I have a little story about that. We did learn our lesson in that regard.

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My son, as I told you, you had a rabbit business and we went to get his rabbits from the seller, and she had them all in their cages and we were buying the travel cages too. So, they were all, you know, lined up in their travel cages ready to go and we didn't really think anything of it. They looked healthy. We looked at them, we took them on our way. And before long, like that first week, we started to have some major health problems. And so I wished to this day that I had gone back and I had looked at the conditions they were kept in and I think maybe at that would've given me a clue as to the health problems that we were going to be up against. I might've changed my decision seeing how an 11-year-old was involved.

So, I usually want to see where they're kept, definitely, but if I buy my rabbits at a show, that's an exception. And you might think, I've heard advice, people tell me, don't buy rabbit at a show because you don't, you can't see where they're kept. And while I agree with that, people that are going to show usually have their rabbits in pristine conditions because they've got to keep that rabbit healthy, in good shape for show or they don't have a chance of winning. And why would they go and waste their time it and show their rabbits if it's going to be an unhealthy, you know, not in a good condition rabbit. So that I would buy from a show. The one thing I would ask if you buy from a show is what condition have they been kept in, meaning what climate have they been kept in?

Have they been an air conditioning is what I'm after because in the South, believe it or not, a lot of people who have show rabbits keep their rabbits in air conditioned and heated barns. So, if I'm going to take my rabbit and put it in 90 degree weather, you know, if I'm buying in the summer or close to summer and it's been, or even if you're buying in the winter, they're heated too. So, if I'm going to go and put my rabbit outdoors and it's been used to air conditioning or heating, well then, it's gonna have a huge adjustment and that could really lead to some problems. So, I would ask them, and you know, even if they are raised in an air conditioned and heated barn, well at least you're gonna know that you're going to know that. You're going to need to give that rabbit's special attention. You're going to need to climatize it slowly. If it's, you know, a certain time of year, you're going to have to work them out into that slowly and then yeah, you might not have that hardy of stock if the whole, you know, business for years has been run in those types of conditions. So, that's something to be aware of when buying from a show. One thing you want to have in a seller of rabbits is you want somebody who's available to answer your question. So, you want it to be able to get their phone number and their email and just feel free. You want them to say, you know, here's my phone number, email, feel free to contact me if you have any questions or any concerns. So, that's one thing I would look for cause when we first had rabbits we researched, we thought we knew everything, but we did have some questions.

He's all hunkered down here. You say hi? Everybody's hot and bothered right about this time in the afternoon.

All right. That leads us to the questions of how many rabbits do you need? Well that depends. If you are going to raise rabbits just for meat for your family, then one buck and two does, a trio would be perfect to get you off started on a really, really great start and you should be producing in no time. Now if you're going to sell rabbits to the public, I like to have groups to sell that are unrelated. So, I would get two does and two bucks and I would want my stock to be as unrelated as possible. Even if I had to buy a buck from one seller and a buck from another seller, I would want them to be unrelated. The reason is if you don't, a lot of the times people breed back to the mother and the father, but they never breed brother and sister cause in the long run that can cause health problems. So, if you're gonna sell rabbits, two does and two bucks and that way you can take two does from one litter and give them and then the buck from a totally unrelated litter or vice versa. That way you're selling somebody rabbits that are unrelated and in good condition. And a lot of the times your Future Farmers of America's and your 4-H, they'll laugh. They'll want rabbits that are unrelated. They know this, their advisors have told them this.

When we're talking about purchasing your rabbits that leads us to a question. Do you need a pedigree? Well, again, it depends on that first purpose that you've chosen for your rabbits. If you are just doing them for meat for your family, no, absolutely you don't need a pedigree unless you just want a record of their birth date and their family line I guess, but no, not necessary at all. In fact, you could have rabbits of different types and different breeds and pick your

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strongest and your best does with the biggest litter and the best milk production and mothering skills and you could just combine them all. You don't need a pedigree. But if you're gonna sell to the public, I would get a pedigree and you're gonna spend probably a little bit more for stock that's pedigreed, but I definitely would.

Oh, you might be asking, I should tell you what is a pedigree? It's a paper that has the lineage of the rabbit. So, it starts with the rabbits and then parents and then grandparents, and then great grandparents on both sides. So, that's what a pedigree is, and it assures that you're gonna get a full bred rabbit of your breed. And it's also something that you, when you go to sell a rabbit, you can give that to the buyer and that will make it easier to sell. Mostly people who buy from me want a pedigree and if you sell to Future Farmers of America kids or 4-H kids, they're told by their instructors most of the time to go ahead and get a pedigree. So, they're assured that it's a full bred rabbit. So, it just expands your market. It makes your rabbits more valuable to get a pedigree. All laid out there. Yeah, now you sit up.

I'm so glad you've joined me on this rabbit raising adventure. So, first find your purpose. Do you want manure for your garden, that rocks your garden? Do you want meat for your family and are you going to sell to the public? Or maybe you want to do all three and that's going to influence the breed that you choose. And I hope I've given you a better idea of what breeds are good for meat rabbit production in your backyard. Have fun with that. I will leave a list in the resources of the different breeds so you can search them. If you can't make it to a rabbit show and if you can take a friend, take your kids, have a good time exploring the world of rabbits.

And when you go to pick your rabbit, I hope I've given you a good idea of how to pick a healthy one. I, again, I'll leave a list in the resources with a checklist of the things you're going to look for. So you can just take that with you and check those off and at the bottom it'll have a area for the seller's contacts and emails, so you can just get that, write that down and the birthday of the rabbit and you can have that information. Now if you're going to raise rabbits just for meat for your family, then a trio is perfect, two does and a buck. But if you're going to sell it to the public, you want to think about getting, being able to sell unrelated pairs, so two does and two bucks would be better to start out with unrelated as possible and get yourself a pedigree for your rabbit because that's just an expand your markets and make your rabbits more profitable.

Well that is it for module one. I'm so glad you joined me and we're going to go on to module two. Now that you've gotten your rabbit or you have a good idea of what breed you might like to raise, we're going to talk about how you're going to shelter your rabbit. We're going to talk about rabbit hutches for your breeders. We're going to talk about grow out pens for the babies, rabbit tractors, space requirements, and shade requirements. We're going to also talk about what difference the climate makes in the shelters you're going to build for your rabbits. Alright, that sums it up. I'll see you next time. Bye for now.

Hi Buddy, meet your audience. This is Buddy and he's my favorite Champagne. He's my buck and I get very attached to my breeders. I know, I know. He's a little bit stressed. Big audience and all. He's not used to this kind of exposure.