



Raising Backyard Meat Rabbits

Transcript – Module 2

Hi, I'm so glad you've joined me again on the adventure of raising backyard rabbits. We're going to, this is module two and we're going to talk about housing your rabbit. Now that you've got an idea of what breed you might like to raise and kind of set that in motion, where you're going to get your rabbits from, you're going to need a place to put them when you get them home. So, we're going to talk about hutches. We're going to talk about metal hutches versus wooden hutches. I'm going to show you the hutch design that I really like that I use for my rabbits. We're going to talk about space requirements and shade requirements and what difference the climate makes for where you're going to put your rabbit and how you're going to house them. So, join me as we dive back into the adventure raising rabbits.

We're going to start off by talking about wire cages versus the wooden hutches and this is kind of what we started out with. We started out with wire cages that were stacked. We bought our rabbits from the buyer and she gave us the cages also. So, it had a pan in it that you put wood shavings in, and you pulled out to clean it, but I'm just going to say right now, don't do this. Do not do this. This, the rabbits are big, and their poop is big. They poop a lot and you have to clean this tray constantly and that didn't work out so well, especially with an 11-year-old, just going to say right now. So yeah, that is too much maintenance to keep up with. I can see why people use it. They stack them and they put a tray so that they can put a rabbit under there, but that would be in the situation like the person we bought our rabbits from had them in her shed and she had an air conditioner on them. So, she needed that vertical space. And you know, I guess that worked for her, but she had to change these a lot, so don't do that. So, what I did was I took a trusty pair of bolt cutters and I just clipped off the stackable feature and I clipped off the part where you put the pan in and I made my own stand for them. So, I've got an example here. I just cut this off with a circular saw right here and then I had this shelf to put the cage against and then all I needed was some braces in the front to make that work. So, let me show you the cage system that we started with. One reason that we started with this is we needed to keep costs really low so you can find these cages. A lot of different people sell them or they're getting rid of them, they're getting out of their rabbitry business, they give them away, they sell them pretty cheaply, and then you can just make your own system with free pallets. So that kept the start out costs really, super low. Alright, let me show you what I mean.

So, this is an example of the cages we started out with and the wire cages do have certain advantages. Disinfecting is the main one. I mean you can really clean them, and you can set them out in the sun and disinfect them really well, whereas the wooden hutches you just can't do that as well. So that is one advantage, but there are lots of other disadvantages. One, when we got our cage, my son was so excited and he bred the rabbit, he had only started out his business as I said, he bred the rabbits and he put the mark on the calendar for 28 days and he was excited and then he went and got the metal nest box, which we'd gotten. And he took it and he tried to put it in the opening and the nest box was too big for the opening. So, here we were with a rabbit that was about to have babies any day and we had no nest boxes. So yeah, make sure when you get a cage, just try out your nest box if you purchased it somewhere and make sure it fits. And so, we ended up building our own and, and that worked out well. So, the ones we built were smaller and fit in doorway. So that was good.

Okay, another huge disadvantage. See these holes in the bottom of the cage. You wouldn't think a baby rabbit could fit through those holes, but trust me, it can. So then again, we got the nest box built, it fit, we put it in there, we put the hay in there. My son was psyched, he's waiting every day for these baby rabbits and then he comes into me one morning, says, "Mom, I found this in the yard." It wasn't really recognizable as a baby rabbit anymore because the birds

had gotten ahold of it. So that was a huge disappointment to him. He was just like heartbroken. He was like, this is my beginning here. So, they can get through here. So, what happened was the momma laid on the wire, the baby squirmed, they dropped out through these holes onto the ground and then the birds got them before we even got out there in the morning to check.

So, if you're gonna do cages like this, let me tell you a feature you're gonna want to have, baby saver wire. Yeah, don't learn that the hard way. So, just a strip of wire along the bottom for your doe's cages that has, you know, smaller openings, it's perfect all the way around the cage. Some of them already have that feature like this side had the metal, you know, a steel plate. So, some of them might have that feature and you don't have to worry about it, but yeah, baby saver wire if you're going to do it this way. So, another thing you're going to need is, a mat for everyone because when you have big rabbits on wire, they can get cage sores on the bottom of their feet. So, everyone gets one of these and the poop just falls through and you can take them out and wash them if you need to. So, you can find them at any rabbit supply store, and I'll put some links in the resources of the supply stores I like best. They're just a couple of bucks each. And then something for them to chew on. I just get pine blocks. I cut them up and put them in here for them to chew on. As you can see, Nugget has really, is using that. He loves it and then lot of the cages had these open feeders saying so you just come, you don't even have to open the cage door. You just come in and you dump your feed in here. It's super easy but really hard to keep the food dry, especially during the rainy season for us. During the dry season, I'll use them. During the rainy season I want it in the cage where it will be dry because wet food is wasted food and that's wasted money, so I just went and got crocks for everybody. We had to start out super cheap, so I went to the Salvation Army store and just got flat bottom. The trick is the flat bottom that way they don't spill them. They can scoot them around, but they won't spill the feed out and water crocks are the same way.

Here's Jolly's water crock. Again, flat on the bottom so it doesn't spill because if it's in the heat of summer and they spill their water, you know that's bad news. If you might not check them again until that evening and they would be without water. It might confuse you that I have a water dish in this one and then I have a bottle in this one. That's because I recently purchased this little guy and he was used to drinking out of a bottle. I don't normally use these because they're just a lot of trouble to me to fill them all when they're empty. So, he's just drinking out of that and I'm just getting him used to a bottle. I need to put a crock in there for him because I don't ever want an animal in the summer to not be used to drinking out, you know, drinking out one way, you know, just don't want any trouble there. Lots of water accessible. We make it easy for him. Alright, let's see.

You can see my pallet stand back there. I just cut off a pallet and use the shelf. And then I just use simple supports, more pallets to support the front of the cage. And this is actually over my vermicomposting bin so the poop can just fall down through the cage and into this bin where my worms can get it. And I also feed them scraps. And that's another good way to get fuel for your garden. Let's see, and we just used, these are just plastic panels. You could use plywood, somebody, I don't know if your friends do this, but people find things all the time and they say, do you think this could be of use in your homestead? And I always usually say, "Oh yeah, I think I can use that." So, this is one of those cases. So, something solid for the roof and then we put a tarp over it to just protect the edges. So, another problem we ran into with these metal cages is, you know what, it would probably be better for me to show you this then for me to just tell you, because then you'll really remember it. Let me just try to get this rabbit out of the cage and you'll see what I mean.

Now this is Dolly. She's not the calmest rabbit. Come on Dolly, come out. Come on Dolly. Got a foot stuck. Okay, it's all right. It's okay. It's okay. I know that was traumatic. Whoa, Whoa, Whoa, Whoa. So, imagine if you were 12 and you were trying to do that. Yeah, that's not gonna work out so well. You sometimes get your arm scratched up really, really bad and you can't bring the buck to the doe's cage cause she'll defend. So, when it's breeding time, you have to get the doe out and put it with the buck. So anyway, these top, these side opening cages are a huge disadvantage when you're trying to get your rabbit out. Now this is my hatch design and when we had a little bit more money to invest in it, this is what my son built. He did it a super good job and I really like it. There are several advantages to it. I would say the

neatest advantage is it's really easy to pick up your rabbit now. This isn't one of my more friendly rabbits either, but you see how much, how simple that was. Yeah, and I like to get out my rabbits a lot to exercise. I like to put them in exercise pens. I don't like them to be stuck in the cages all the time. So, this was a game changer for us, just being able to pick it up without being scratched. The other, one of the other advantages is it's moveable. So, in the summertime I can move it in the middle of the yard where it's more shady and the wintertime I can move it right up against the fence. So, the north wind hits the fence instead of the hutch. So, they're movable whereas the stand that I showed you, the wire stand, that's not going anywhere.

So, I've got these separate dividers. The dividers can come out. Right now, it's screwed down, so I just have to unscrew them. I can take out the dividers if I need a bigger cage. That's really nice. The back is made out of just pallet planks. So that was free, and I think it gives a lot more shelter to the rabbit than the wire hutch. So, let's see, it's a pretty simple design. I will leave a list in the resources showing you a plan to build one and the materials that you will need. I just used half an inch hardware cloth and my son just uses these big screws with a, I mean big washers with screws to hold it on everywhere if you can see. That was probably one of the most expensive things in the project.

So, and then our neighborhood, we live in an older neighborhood and I don't know, people are always replacing doors, so we find doors by the curb. So that's just what we decided to adopt for our lid. You could also use plywood, but we just hinged the doors in, and we do have to change them out about, you know, every couple of years. And so, but we just find some doors by the curb, we put them in our garage and then when we need to change it out, we change it out. We could also probably try to protect this somehow where it, where it lasted a little bit longer. We just haven't gotten into that yet. And this is a good weight though. I really like this because the predator, it's too heavy for a predator to get in there and yet it's light enough for me and my son to lift it. And then you do need to be kind of up against something to lay the hutch there. So, I always have mine up against the fence, but if you don't have that, you can always put ropes going, you know, from here to the cage, they would just catch it there. I think that would work.

We have the same thing as the other hutch. In here we have the cage mat, we have the flat bottom dishes, flat bottom water and we have a hay rack here. I'll show you how to make that in another video. So now there was just one little tricky thing was I think we had to make the back leg longer than the front leg. So, it would kind of slump, slant forward and the rain would roll off the roof just right. But that, you know, that wasn't too hard. If my 12-year-old can do it, you can do it too. I think he was maybe 13 when he built this. I'm not sure. Alright, so to sum up. There's some advantages to this cage, the wire cage. It's cheap, they're easy to disinfect, easy to make a free stand for it and then this cage, the advantages to this cage is it's so much easier to get the rabbit out. I think it's more sheltered from the elements definitely. It's moveable so you can move it around your property. Oh, you don't have to worry about fitting the nest box in it and it already has the baby saver wire on it because the whole thing is made of this smaller wire. So, no babies are going to get out of this.

So those are kind of the two hutch designs that most people use, either wire or kind of a wooden wire combination. I really prefer this one, so that's what I use. One thing you want to think about when you're designing your cages is do you have little helpers? It's great to have little helpers that come along beside you and do chores with you and it helps them learn responsibility of caring for the animals, which is great. So, well, me and my 12-year-old could do this hutch just fine. We had a little helper that came after him that had a little bit more trouble. So, one thing we did was we just added a pallet stool for him to stand on so he could reach the rabbits to feed them. So, you can reach in to pet them. That's a good perk to that too, huh?

One other trick to having little helpers with your rabbits, hang on, leave that open for just a second. I'm gonna show them the carrier cage, is to have a cage like this and they can just lower it down in the hutch and push the rabbit in. We've got someone trying to escape. We can just lower it down in the hutch and encourage the rabbit to go in and then pick it up and take it where it needs to go, where they need to take it. And that way they don't get scratched because rabbits can scratch, especially if they don't feel like they're securely held. They can really scratch a child's arms up and

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give them like a negative experience and then they're not gonna want to help with the rabbits as much. So, this has definitely been nice for us to have for little helpers.

So, one thing to think about is predators when you are designing your cages, unfortunately, and if you ... our lids are heavy enough so predators can't really get into them, but if you use plywood, you'd probably need to put a stone on in each evening or you would need to install some sort of a hook to keep it down because if this were light enough for a predator to slip in, then obviously that wouldn't work. And one thing also that we've learned the hard way is the higher off the ground the hutch is the better because if a predator comes up to the cage here, like we had happen. We've had a bobcat that's terrorizing our homestead from time to time, so when he comes up here, sometimes the rabbits can run around and round in their cage and they can get panicked and they can hurt themselves or just have a heart attack and die. And so, one thing, since we couldn't really, we'd already designed these hutches why we found that out and we couldn't really raise them up anymore and still make it easy access for the kids to open and get into them. So, what we did was we started putting these little, these little boxes or even a nest box would be good in the cage, so that way if the bobcat comes, she can just hunker down in here and feel safe and just be still and she won't get too panicked and hurt herself.

One thing you need to think about when designing your cages is space requirements. And I have about a little over three square feet for each rabbit and I have kind of a medium, medium to large breed. I do keep in mind that I have exercise pens for my rabbits. I like to take them out and rotate them in the exercise pens. So, I'm, that makes me feel comfortable that I don't have them sitting in a cage their whole life, but you know, that's up to you. If you did have them sitting in a cage, you know, and you didn't ever get them out and exercise, then you might think about giving them more of a space requirement in their cage, making the cage a bit bigger.

These are my exercise pens I talked about and for me it's important to let my breeders get out and be able to jump around and dig. They like to, there's a patio on the other side of this, so they like to dig down under the patio and they just feel the earth under their feet and the sunshine, the fresh air and can move around and be rabbits. So, that's why I designed these because after all, one reason I decided to raise my own food was because I wanted to do it humanely, I wanted that rabbit to have the best life and these are my breeders. They're with me for years. And so that was important to me. So that's what I did instead of ... I did think about raising rabbits in a colony setting and I haven't been able to make that work yet, but Marjorie has a great video about her colony and it's just amazing. So be sure to check that out, but this is what I do to give my rabbits the life that I want them to have.

It's important to know that you only want one rabbit in the exercise pen at a time. I didn't know before I got rabbits, but males will fight to the death and females will also fight over territory. And so just one at a time for these mature rabbits. And so obviously I have two pens, so I have to rotate my breeders to give them some time out to move around. Hey, Buddy. Do you like getting out and getting some exercise? You like it, don't you?

Now we're going to talk about what difference climate is gonna make in raising your rabbits and that is going to be so important. It's gonna make such a difference in how you raise your rabbits. So, every module I'm going to include a section on how climate affects that aspect of raising your rabbits whether it be breeding or feeding. You know, how is climate going to affect that? So today we're gonna talk about how climate, your climate affects housing your rabbit. So, obviously I live in Dallas, Texas, I'm down in the South, it's the middle of June and it's gonna be a hundred today. So, it's hot here and that really affects the way I raise my rabbits, but I also, I want this to apply to everyone, if you live up North. So, I'm communicating with a friend in Michigan and then another one in Canada, and just asking them as we go through this, you know, how does climate affect you? How do you protect your rabbits against the elements that you have to deal with, so I can give some real input into that too. So, let's start with down South. What you're going to need down South is shade and you're going to need, I'm just going to say in my opinion, natural shade. You're going to need trees and I have had friends that have tried to create shade for their rabbits. I had a friend in Austin who built his hutches, a wonderful hutch design right by his garden. He cemented the posts in and he put a tin roof on it that slanted

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and it was really a good, it looked to be a good situation and it was right by his garden because he was listening to those permaculture principles that say, you know, put your manure source right by your garden so you can just shovel it into the garden.

And then as summer, he started in spring and then as summer started to come on and the heat started to come on, his rabbits really started to fade and he lost a couple before he was able to rescue them out of those hutches. And he lost all the litters he had. I believe it was July cause he was breeding kind of late in the season. So, in my opinion it's really hard to create shade that's cool enough. I have had another friend, that one instance, where they used swamp fan. I mean they use this big fan, so with a three-sided structure. So, if you're using fans then I think it makes it a lot more possible. They were, they're successful. They do lose some rabbits every year still, but they are successful in creating that shade because they've got that ventilation going. But that also means you have to take electricity out to where you are and so there are some costs involved in that and purchasing the fan and everything. So, in my opinion, you need shade, just natural shade. And so, one important thing that is important to doing that, is to have your hutches moveable so you can move them to the shade. You can move your hutches to a tree line in the summer and then you can move them back to a more sheltered area in the winter. So, for me, that's been huge and being able to move if my hutches around. So, think about that when you're designing your hutches for your rabbits. The other thing that's important for me in the South is like I said, ventilation. So, my hutches are probably gonna look a little bit different than the hutches up North because I need that wind flow through them. So, shade and ventilation and then of course water.

I'm gonna have a safeguard watering system on my rabbits just in case they spill their dishes or they, you know, they run out somehow and I'm not there. So, I will have an automatic water on them as a backup and then the other thing that I do in the South is when the temperatures start to get, when they hit a hundred, my rabbits are really suffering. Rabbits are a winter animal. They love the cool weather; they do great in the cold weather. They're designed for the cold weather. So, it's really hard to get them through the summer. I think that is my biggest challenge as a rabbit raiser raising rabbits in the South. When temperatures start hitting a hundred and climbing above a hundred, I have to keep my rabbits cool. So, let me show you one way that I do that. What we do is we freeze two-liter water bottles and then we take them out to the rabbits at about the hottest part of the day, about three o'clock in the afternoon. So, my son used to get home from school and put them in and my little helpers used the wagon and they pull the wagon around with the ice bottles and they gave one to everyone.

But then of course they have to be collected at the end of the night and put back in the freezer. So, you gotta go get them. So, it's a lot more work in the summertime for us because we have to do this every day, but we have to do something. I'm not sure the rabbits would make it past a hundred degrees for consecutive days if we didn't do this. One way to help keep your rabbits stay cool in the South is to raise them in a colony setting. And I watched Marjorie's video about raising her rabbits in a colony and that really inspired me to see if I could do something like that on the scale of my backyard. So, the colony is under construction and we're going to give that a try. We were just going along with it, building it really well, and then a bobcat attacked and killed all my chickens. And so, I really, we really stopped construction and we're backing off and we're rethinking security. We're designing again to keep it secure from that. So, but Marjorie has a really good way she shows in her colony video, a way to keep her rabbits cool. It's just ingenious and I really want to try it, so be sure to check that out and find out how she does it and how she keeps her rabbits cool.

Now, believe it or not, down South, a lot of people use air conditioned facility to house their rabbits and in Arizona, that's the only way to do it, to bring your rabbits inside the house and keep your breeders cool during the summer months so then you can breed again as the weather starts to cool down. So, I guess it makes sense to bring your rabbit in the house with you cause you're already air conditioning your house. But to build an extra space for them and to run an air conditioner unit into that is just, you're going to have to think about the costs involved in that. So, your rabbitry would have to be really profitable to make that, to make up that cost so that wasn't an option for me. And so, but if it's

only way to do it, like in a climate Arizona, then people do bring it in their house, and they have a room set aside for that. But yeah.

So, to avoid having rabbits in your house, the raising rabbits in the South, it's important to have good ventilation, natural shade and it's important to have movable hutches so you can move them around depending on the seasons. And one trick that we found is the ice packs really helps to keep them cool. Now let's move up North to the colder climates. What do you need there to keep your rabbits healthy? Rabbits are a winter animal, they do really well in the cool weather. They love the cool weather, they have a great fur coat, so it's really much, much easier to raise rabbits in the North. So, my friends tell me that there are couple of things that are important and that is to again have your hutches moveable so that you can move them into a structure of some sort. And my friend in Canada moves his hutches into a shed during the wintertime and then moves them back out again for the summer. So, keep the wind off them is the main thing. Block the wind somehow and keep them dry.

So that leads us to what if you have to deal with both extremes. So, one thing Dave said to deal with that is to make the back of your hutch totally solid and the sides like I've done and that way it can block the north wind and then put them up against a structure. So, the north wind is hitting this fence for instance instead of the hutch. So, find a microclimate and so to speak in your, on your landscape. So, it would be really if I had panels that I could put up here in the wintertime and I could just take off in the summer months. So that's one idea to deal with those, both those extremes of weather. If you're having to deal with both extremes in weather, I think it would be a good idea to try that.

I'm glad you joined me for module two and now I know that you probably have a better idea of how to house your rabbits when you get them home. As you can see the metal cages, there's certain advantages to them. They're inexpensive a lot of the time. You can find them for sale or for free and you can build a pallet stand for them. So that's a good cheap way to start out. If you do start out that way, remember the baby saver wire and then also you can disinfect them really easily. So those are some advantages to metal cages, but as you saw there were a lot of disadvantages to the metal cages and so I hope you enjoyed seeing the cage design that we use in our rabbitry and I can't tell you the difference it made to open up that lid and be able to just get your rabbit out really easily and without getting scratched up.

And then the rabbits were secure, both moms and babies and it's mobile. I can move it around my property and follow the shade during the different seasons. Remember your cage size, you're going to need room for the doe and maybe up to eight babies for four weeks, for one month before they're weaned and then they'll move on to grow out pen. And I'll do a whole module about grow out pens a little bit later on. You can get away with a little bit of a smaller cage for your bucks and you can get away with a smaller cage if you have exercise pens like I do for my rabbits. And it's really fun to set up something like this on your property where the rabbit can just get out and feel the earth under his feet and dig a little bit and it's really fun watching them just be rabbits. We talked about the climate. As you can see, climate makes a huge difference in the way you're going to raise your rabbits. Shade, glorious shade. So many of my friends have shade envy when they see the shade in my backyard and I hope you have some shade too, cause it's so important in the South, natural shade. But it is also important to be able to move your hutch around, as we talked about, so you can follow the shade. Also, you can block them from the north wind if you can move them around to different microclimates on your property.

Ventilation's important and those frozen water bottles have been a huge tip for us in getting through the summer. Next, join me for module three. We're going to talk about how to feed your rabbit, what to feed your rabbit. We're going to talk about what you can grow in your garden and what forage you might have around your property to feed your rabbit with cause that cuts down on your feed bill and you also end up with a healthier rabbit. We're also going to talk about water, and most of all, you're going to join me as I set up my automatic watering system so that I am assured that my rabbits are never gonna run out of water in the middle of summer when they need it. Well, that's it for module two. Join me next time in module three and we're going to dive back into the adventure of raising backyard rabbits.

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