



Raising Backyard Meat Rabbits

Transcript – Module 6

Join me for module six. In this module we're going to talk about grow out pens and rabbit tractors. I'm going to show you the first grow out pen I ever made and then show you the other one I made, that made a lot of improvements to show you what exactly you want to look for in a grow out pen. I'm going to show you how to get your rabbits to mow your lawn without digging out in the process and lastly, when to harvest your rabbits. I'm going to share my breeding schedule for the South to show you exactly how much meat I can get for my family in one breeding season. So, join me as we dive back into the adventure of raising backyard rabbits.

So, we're at the learning stage in our journey where you've got those babies and mother has weaned them four to five weeks old and you need to take them out and put them somewhere else. Well, when I first started rabbits, we used cages for that and even though they were big cages, the babies grew really fast and overcrowded ... overcrowding happened really quickly. So, I decided my solution would be a grow out pen and give them more room, get those babies on the ground and give them a lot more room to grow out in. So, this was the first grow out pen that I'd built and while I like the size of it, I built it eight by four to go on top of raised beds by wanting to put them in my garden so I could maybe grow forage for them, then put them in the garden, put this on top of it in the garden. I thought that would be a good system, but there were some major drawbacks. So, the first draw back I ran into was I made these hoops too high and they didn't fit through the gate. So, as an urban homesteader, you just always have to think about that because my front yard garden happens to be in the front yard and the pens that are eight by four that I wanted it on top of are in the front yard and all my grass that I have left is in the front yard, in the side yard. So, couldn't get my pen through the gate. That was my first problem. The second problem was I'd built a frame with two by fours, just eight feet by four feet and then I took these PVC pipes, these PVC joints, and I stuck the PVC in there to put them over. And then I put a brace, one wooden brace in the middle just to hold it more secure. But the problem with these two by fours is they were too heavy, way too heavy to move all by myself. So that was a problem. And then the other problem I had was I had my water and my food in dishes on the ground and the rabbits pooped and peed in them. And it didn't matter how much I changed them. I don't know why you would poop in your water. I don't know even how they did it, but always there was poop in the water and they just jumped in the feed bowl and pooped in that when they were babies. So, no matter how much I changed yet, I couldn't keep it clean. And so, all of those features turned into the fact that it wasn't moved enough because I had to take out that food and water also each time I moved it and it was heavy.

And you know what, there was one other thing, it probably wasn't that secure. I made like a gate here to get into with a window screen but I really think a bobcat could have easily pushed into it. So, all these things that happened made it not very movable so it wasn't moved around my backyard very often. And that led to some real health problems for my babies because when you have feces in the water, when you have feces in the food and when they're down in their feces, you're going to have health problems and that's what happened to me. So, then I redesigned and I built another pen. I really like it and I used all the features that I wanted and I'm going to show you those features. What to look for when you're building a grow out pen to make it successful for you.

So, in my case, I need all my grow out pens to store in my backyard when I'm not using them and then I need them to go through my gate where I have grass for them to eat. And then I have my front yard garden up there, so, where I grow forage for them. So, this is where I really need my rabbit tractors to be and I'm going to show you some footage for

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spring, from spring. I don't use rabbit tractors right now because it is too hot. They would turn into rabbit coffins. So, I'm going to show you springtime, take you back to springtime with me and show you all about my grow out pens and my rabbit tractors and how I got my rabbits to mow my yard lawn for me.

Another option for your grow out is rabbit tractors. This is the first year I've done this and it's really working pretty well. I'm just about to move this one to a new patch of grass and my rabbits are mowing the lawn for me virtually and they are requiring a lot less food from me. Chicken. That's real. Yeah. She comes to lay her egg in the front yard every day. She probably already laid her eggs. She wants back in the backyard. Yeah. This is my life. Never a dull moment. Let me show you the path where they have mowed. Look at that. And then this little tractor, look at that.

So, they are definitely eating my grass. Now I can't do this all over my yard certainly. I'm in the city, so I do have to worry about complaints and if people see animals in cages, they get very emotional sometimes and you know, they worry about overcrowding and so I'm just doing it kind of back here out of the way in my side yard and the rest of the yard I have to mow. But maybe you don't have to worry about that. Let me show you one thing about the tractor that I have learned. Sometimes when there are gaps, sometimes there are gaps like in the back because the ground isn't always even, so I've put a board here against the back to keep the gaps from happening. You know, cause sometimes you roll over the ground and it's just, there are divots that you're gonna run into. And since this is in my front yard, if the rabbits get out here than it is game over, I don't think I would ever get them back. So far so good. Let me show you how I move it. This time I put some bricks against the front of it because I need to make a board that just sits across the front of it. I think that would work out better. It would be much easier to move. But right now, I'm going to take these bricks off.

I just don't want to take any chance of somebody will get out and sure enough one was digging. Sure enough, somebody was digging a little hole there. So, I'm glad I have those bricks up. There we go to a new patch of grass just like that and you can see where they were and they're fertilizing for me also. So that's great, the lawn should look better than ever. This is my last little patch of grass that I've got to my name. The rest of it is garden as you can see. Alright, let's move this one. This one's a little bit more complicated and yet it is an old chicken coop a friend gave me and I picked it up and voila, it's a rabbit tractor at least for now. Sometimes I use it as a chicken tractor, but that's another story, another video. But I do have to reach inside and get this ramp out. As you can see, I put it on wheels. We just put a rod, a rod right there and attached it and put it on wheels so it'd be easier to move.

Great. Let me check the perimeter of it, make sure there are no divots. It looks good. Now I'm also feeding them pellets. We're not just on grass, so let me go get those. I almost forgot to put their rent back in so they can get back up into the top part. One note about that. I just put the ramp back in so they can get in the coop part or the nesting box and I ... so, this is a good design in that they have that because I did have a couple of neighborhood dogs get loose and came running down here and they just ran up the ramp and into their nest box. So that was great, but the rabbits in this set up did not have that.

So that's just hard and it's only happened one time. And we quickly, you know, got the dogs and returned them back to their owner so it wasn't a big deal. So, I'm hoping that won't happen more. I don't think I'm gonna change my pen for that cause that would be a lot of work. But just to note that that might be something you have to worry about having them in your front yard. Of course, if you've got property and you've got tractors going on your property, the main thing I have to worry about with my tractors is, does it fit through the gate? Because when the heat starts coming in and I can't keep them out here, I can't have these in my side or my front yard, so I need to take them into the backyard or I'm quite sure the city would complain at me. So, if you don't have those restrictions then you're going to have a lot more freedom with the size of your cages.

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I lock it up for the night with these carabiners just so no predators are going to get in here. Even in the city, we do have to worry about cats and possums and I don't know if a possum would go for a rabbit. They go for chickens though. So not going to find out the hard way. And alfalfa pellets for everyone.

The good things about this cage is the feeders off the ground so the babies cannot jump in it and poop. I probably need to put another feeder cause it looks like there are too many for that feeder and then the water is off the ground. And this is just a two-liter bottle with a, you know, a pet store nipple on it. And I just rigged it up in a bubble wand that I stole from my son, so I need to go fill that up. Also, with this rabbit tractor, the feeder is off the ground and I've taken out, it did have like a pan here and I put this wire here so they could get up here and their poop would just fall down so they wouldn't be standing in their poop. I think that's the best way to go if you can do it.

Then for their water also just a pet waterer. As you can see on this one, I've utilized some signs from church, some tarps. Those are my tarps. When they're done with the message at church, they lend them to me or they give them to me and I can utilize them for my farm. They don't go in the trash and I get good use out of them, so recycling. These babies are 10 weeks old. They've almost turned completely silver, so they are for sale and then harvesting day is coming up in two weeks. That went fast.

A little bit about how I built this pen. I had these panels, they're just wire panels, I don't really know what they were used for, but they were on my property when I got the property and I saved them for years. And then, so I just put them together with zip ties and then I covered it all with chicken wire and then I stretched the PVC pipes across the top to make a tunnel and I wired those in right there on the metal. And then my son helps me to make these PVC skids on the bottom. We just took PVC pipes and sawed a channel down the middle, just slip those grates in. No, when I say slip, it was pretty difficult, but we managed it. So that definitely makes it much, much easier to slide.

You can see the panels down in the PVC there and then the back doesn't have them cause I thought that might drag. And then this side has them. As you can see, they are enjoying the grass. That is so good for them and good for my feeding bill too. Alright, and then just as the door, I took this green stake and I just wrapped chicken wire around it and I brought it up and I just hooked it ... I just wired it here to the PVC right there. And then I put my tarps on and that was it. Oh, and I added a hay rack. I think they're getting enough roughage from the grass. I'm not giving them hay right now, but normally I would if I have this, for instance in my backyard where I don't have it on grass and I have rabbits in it. That keeps the hay off of the ground. Let me see if I can get a better shot of it.

I feed these through the upper door. Alright, I've got four rabbits in this one and then I've got seven in the other one. I'm still trying to find the magic number of how many is too many, but they seem to be doing well. Things I would watch for if I thought I had too many is fighting, they might be mounting each other, even girls, you know, to show dominance. So, I would want to watch for those signs and if I saw any of those signs, I would want to decrease the number immediately. Now couple of notes. I don't know how long I'll be able to do this into the summer. It's gonna get hot and I don't really know how hot is too hot. The hottest I've had them in here is 85 degrees, so I think I'm going to push it to 90. It's a hard call though cause I don't want to find out the hard way that it's too hot in the rabbit tractors for rabbits. Another thing to note is that if I put adults in here, it's just going to be one rabbit. Sometimes sisters can get along in this amount of space if they've grown up together, but not always, so they're really not meant to be together after they get to maturing age. So, these rabbit tractors are just for babies or just one rabbit at a time.

Now, the thing I was worried about is the rabbits digging out because this is in my front yard or my side yard. So, if they get out, it's game over, I'm not ever going to get them back. So, I just found that the babies did not dig that much and I moved it every single day. So, if they did start to kind of hollow out a little divot, well it was on new land the next day and they had that whole day. So, they just didn't seem to dig very much. And then, but I do think that you could use another cattle panel with wide spaces on the bottom of it. That way the grass would still come through, but you'd be

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assured that nobody's going to escape ever. So, they were secure from predators and it turned out to be a great pen for raising my springtime grow outs. So again, the thing to look for in a grow out pen is it's light, it's easy to move, you've got the food and the water and the hay rack off of the ground, it's secure from predators, it fits through your gate and makes sure it's easy on the eyes if you're going to have it in your front or your side yard. All right, well that is all about how I use rabbit tractors and grow out pens to mow my lawn and have healthier rabbits and lower my feed bill.

And my last batch of this season, when it got too hot to have them out in the rabbit tractors, because again, it gets very hot here and when the summer weather slams in, I'm talking over 85, 90 degrees, then you need to get those rabbits out of those tractors, out of the sun and put them somewhere where it's all shaded all day long. And the sun, the shade never moves away from them. So, this is what I did with my last batch of rabbits. I put them in this chicken coop that somebody gave me, so it's great. Unfortunately, it's not moveable, so I did have to clean it out a lot. So, I just cleaned it out. They were in here for 10 weeks, so I just cleaned it out at the midway point. And let them go through until harvest time and cleaned it out again.

So, I've got ... they could come up here, I would like ... I think I will change this pan probably to wire so that it will fall, everything will fall through, but they can come up here and have shelter. And then I have the feeder right here, right on edge of the door, out of the rain. And then my water again. So important to get those waters off the ground. If I want you to remember anything from this, it's keep your feeders and your waters off the ground and contained when you have babies so, you'll have healthy rabbits.

So how does climate affect your grow outs and harvesting your rabbits? Well, I can't emphasize enough that in the South rabbit tractors can quickly become rabbit coffins. It just, when that weather hits 90 degrees, you have to get them out of there and into a shaded all-day deep shade spot. And you want to definitely be done with your grow outs by the time the hot weather comes in. Also, because they lose their appetite, it just goes way down. So, it's going to be hard to get them fattened up, ready for harvest when they have no appetite and they're eating very little and then they are harder to harvest in the heat. The flies come, it's hot out. So, we just tried to make sure all harvesting is done and over with and everything is in the freezer by June 1st; that's our cutoff date when the weather really starts to get hot here in Dallas, Texas.

Then you're just left in the summertime with your breeders and you just have to get them through the summer heat. And then we also do usually keep a few young ones and make sure we have enough cage space to keep a few for those breeders that are aging out of our breeding program. They're getting too old to breed. Now in the North, the breeding season is exactly opposite of mine. They're taking a break for the winter, the coldest winter months. One reason they're doing that is there's just not room for all those baby rabbits. There's no forage for them. And then obviously you can't do rabbit tractors and grow out pens when you've got three or four feet of snow on the ground. So that's how climate affects your grow out and harvesting your rabbits.

One thing I wanted to tell you about your grow outs is if you're going to sell to the public, of course you want to separate those litters in different grow out pens. Your other choice, if you don't have enough grow out pens to separate the litters, would be to get a tattoo gun and just put a little tattoo in their ear designating what litter they came from. Also you want to be sure to space your breeding so that you have that grow out pen emptying when you had those four week old babies that need to go into it, cause you can't really put four week old weaned babies in with nine week old rabbits or 10 week old rabbits. And then that leads us to the question of when to harvest. Now it's between eight weeks and 12 weeks and the range is so big because some breeds just mature faster than others.

But what you're looking for ultimately is a five-pound butcher weight and then dressed out the rabbit will be three pounds. That's the ideal weight you're going for to harvest. Of course, the faster you get that rabbit there and the more forage you can give it that you grew yourself, the more money you'll get for your meat. And then I will leave a note in

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the resources about how many rabbits I can get in a breeding season. I'll put the exact dates of my breeding season in the South, exactly what I do to get 42 rabbits basically. And I have two does and a buck. So, I'm thinking about adding another doe so, I'll have three does. I breed my rabbits three times in the season and I can potentially get 42 rabbits. And of course, I sell as many as I can and then the rest end up in the freezer for me, for my family throughout the year. But of course, that looks great on paper, but it doesn't always happen that way. One time I had a bobcat literally scare my buck to death. So obviously that was not a good breeding season. So, things can go wrong, but that is the goal that I'm always shooting for and I'll share that with you in the resources.

Thank you for joining me for module six. We learned about all from where your babies are weaned, all the way to grow up pens to harvesting time. And so, we talked about what you want for a grow out pen. You want a couple of things; you want it to be light and easy to move first of all. You want the food, water and hay racks up off that ground so they can't poop in the water or the food. You want it to make it secure from predators and make sure that it fits through your gate if you need to move them into around your property. And then also if you're going to have it in the front part of your property or where your neighbors can see it, you want it to be easy on the eyes. Something ... the most attractive thing you can make so that you don't, won't get any complaints from your neighbors.

We talked about the harvesting time is between eight to 12 weeks depending on the breed of your rabbit. But what you're ultimately looking for is a five-pound rabbit at butcher weight and then processing weight after it's processed; you're looking at three pounds. So, rabbit tractors are affected by the climate because you can only use them in the cool season. And then, our goal breeding the South is to get all those rabbits harvested, either sold or harvested, by June 1st and then we'll have the summer with just our breeders to get through. Now I will leave the dates down in the resources of my exact breeding dates and the numbers of how many rabbits and how much meat I can potentially produce for you so, you can see that if you're a Southern breeder. Alright, join me next time for module seven where we are going to teach you all about harvesting your rabbit. We're going to teach you the most humane way to dispatch your rabbit and then we're going to walk you by step-by-step the butchering process and help you be confident when it comes to harvesting day. So, join me again and we learn more about growing, raising backyard rabbits.