

# Raising rabbits takes a knack

**KEPT HOPPIN'** ▶ Caring for these prolific but nervous mammals keeps farm couple constantly on the go

BY HELEN MCMENAMIN  
AF CONTRIBUTOR | LETHBRIDGE

J&M Rabbit Farms is the biggest operation of its kind in Alberta, and possibly Canada, but Jim and Margaret Oosterhof are too busy to keep score.

"We don't care how big other people's operations are," says Jim Oosterhof. "We've just grown our numbers to work for us."

The couple from Wilson Siding, near Lethbridge, raises New Zealand White and Californian rabbit breeds for meat. Both types weigh 10 to 12 pounds when mature. The females can be quite aggressive towards one another, so they live in individual cages, each with its own manure tray. Cages are stacked two high in a barn that looks much like a chicken barn from the outside, but it needs no heat, even in the depths of winter.

"The rabbits keep it warm, even though the barn has only four-inch walls," says Oosterhof. "The babies always stay in a heap together. Even though I know how many are in each box, sometimes I still wonder if it's possible that many rabbits are in that cage. They only spread out if it's very hot."

Oosterhof is almost the only person who goes into the barn.

"Rabbits are very prone to stress," he says. "They're used to me and all the things I do, but a new person really upsets them and that means problems."

The rabbits live up to their reputation for rapid breeding, reaching sexual maturity at around 18 weeks. They don't have a sexual cycle — females ovulate in response to breeding. Their ovaries release eggs about eight hours after breeding and kits, or kittens, are born 31 days later.



Jim and Margaret Oosterhof supply rabbit meat from the farm near Wilson Siding, as well as to farmers' markets and restaurants. HELEN MCMENAMIN

## Regular routine

Oosterhof has a routine: breeding on Mondays and Tuesdays; kindling (birthing) on Thursdays and Fridays; and preg-checking on Saturdays. By 10 days after breeding he can feel through the abdomen wall whether a female doe is pregnant. For birthing, Oosterhof puts a box with shavings in the doe's cage. The does pull out her own hair to make a nest for the naked babies.

Weaning is a big job. Jim records

the weight of every kit and puts kits into groups with very close weights, a range of less than 100 grams among kits in each group. Litters range from very few to 10 or even more babies at birth, but only a few does can raise all their young. Oosterhof is more concerned about the consistency of the litter than numbers or total weight. He prefers a doe that raises six young that all weigh exactly the same to a doe that

weans 10 kits with a wide range of weights.

Rather than medicate to treat disease, Oosterhof euthanizes any sick animal and goes to great lengths to minimize stress that might foster disease. Changing feed from the 16 per cent protein doe ration to an 18 per cent protein grower ration causes stress and can lead to losses, so he sticks with a single ration with 55 per cent alfalfa for all the rabbits. He doesn't even change light bulbs in the barn until the batch of growers in that room is gone.

Kits reach butchering size (around 4.5 to six pounds) in about eight weeks. A six-pound rabbit dresses out as a fryer weighing about three pounds. Sometimes the Oosterhofs let them grow to 12 weeks old to fit their markets and their schedule for slaughter and inspection at a local Hutterite colony. They also ship a truckload of rabbits to a California rabbit plant once a month.

## On-farm sales

The Oosterhofs sell frozen rabbit at their farm, along with grass-fed chickens, eggs and lamb. They also sell through specialty meat shops,

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MARGARET  
OOSTERHOF

the Lethbridge Farmers' Market, and high-end restaurants in Calgary, Banff, and Canmore. Some slow growers go to pet stores as reptile food or are fed to carnivores at the Calgary zoo.

"We don't waste anything," says Margaret. "Everything has a use somewhere, but sometimes you have to think outside the box to find some of them."

The Oosterhofs have also developed a market for composted rabbit manure, which they say is the best of all composts. The rabbits produce about 150 tonnes a year. Jim turns it eight or more times, using a manure spreader to mix and turn the manure as it composts. The finished product is bagged and sold.

"We keep the rabbit manure separate and don't mix in any sheep or chicken manure," he says. "We can't compete with mass-marketed sheep manure, that wouldn't even pay for our bags."

"Rabbit manure makes the best compost for houseplants, trees and gardens," adds Margaret. "Nothing else is nearly as good. We sell it to greenhouses as well as garden wholesalers."

Margaret does most of the selling at the farmers' market. Fortunately she enjoys the work.

"It's a big commitment," she says. "You have to go every week, and be there by 7 a.m. with a freezer of meat and everything you need. I enjoy meeting the people."

Raising rabbits is demanding but, according to Jim, it's less taxing than milking cows, something he did full time for years and now does occasionally.

"Working with rabbits is intense hard because it's all manual labour," he says. "There's a lot of details to watch for. We probably work harder now than we did working for wages, but success doesn't come without effort."

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Margaret Oosterhof says rabbit manure compost is the best for house plants, trees and gardens. HELEN MCMENAMIN