

# MAKE BUNNY'S HOUSE A HAPPY PLACE TO BE

by Joy Gioia, HRS Educator

Look at any pet catalog and you'll see new and innovative ideas for most pets. Bird cages are larger with more toys as people acknowledge the needs of their avian pets. Fish aquariums have decorative pebbles, sunken ships, and water filters. Reptiles get sleeping rocks, sun lamps, temperature gauges, and special flooring. Cats have play towers and automated waste removal systems, Even dog collars can be replaced by special head halters and the family pooch can use dog sized litter pans. Look at rabbit housing, however, and what do you find?

I cringe every time I see those little pet store starter cages with wire floors, small doors (some even open inward which is really dumb) and which have a picture of a baby bunny on the box. Some starter kits even include cedar or pine shavings, a box of very poor food (nutritionally speaking,) and NO hay. There are no signs advising that the tiny baby you bring home could grow into a 10 pound adult or that the small door could promote fear and cage protective habits.

Ordinary rabbit cages are the product of manufacturers catering to old ideas developed by breeders who prefer the least amount of work possible in cleaning. After all, it's much easier to empty a tray of shavings and not worry about pain in rabbit feet or open sores on their hocks. Rabbit feet are actually more sensitive than cat and dog feet. However, once established, ideas are difficult to change. A person who didn't like the idea of a house rabbit vehemently declared that if rabbits weren't supposed to live outside, then pet stores wouldn't sell outside cages. Somehow, the idea of profits never entered her head. If something will sell and make money, then it will certainly be made available.

A few places do offer better cage designs. [Leithpetwerks.com](http://Leithpetwerks.com) is one (they developed one, two, and three level condos with solid floors and carpet covered ramps.) They are worth the price, but may be out of reach for some. A few newer types have developed slatted floors which provide more comfort, but small breeds, such as Netherland Dwarfs, may have footing problems with slats too far apart for their tiny feet. Don't despair, though. All it takes is a little imagination and bunny can have a real dream home.

Over the last couple of years I've seen some wonderful homemade designs. One was built of wood and screening with two condo style home-made cages on opposite ends of a wood and screen fenced play yard connecting them. Another was a large metal dog crate (left over from a family pooch) fixed up with a second floor to take advantage of the wasted height and provide more room to run and play. Even medium sized metal dog crates provide large doors, hard plastic floor trays that can be covered with a towel or small rug, and space to move around and sprawl. Another terrific cage arrangement involved two 36" tall puppy pens attached together to form a large pen area in a basement where a bonded pair had two litter boxes, a large cardboard box for playing, digging and chewing, a cardboard tube for running through, and a hard plastic lawn chair with a large cover over it. The cover provided comfort for snoozing on top as well as a place to hide if bunny went under the chair. Even a single puppy pen provides more space than the largest of single story cages.

If expense is an issue, browse garage sales for a used dog cage or puppy pen or try making your own some ordinary items. For around \$50 a terrific house or great play area can be created for some lucky bunny with shelving grid panels (Target, CostCo,) cable ties, and tile board (Home Depot, Loews) for a floor.

Floors for puppy pens may not be an issue on a plain basement floor, but used in other areas of the house a protective floor covering may be desired. Here are some options. For bunnies good about litter box habits, only some throw rugs (without rubber backing) covering the floor may be necessary. For other bunnies, a sheet of acrylic or a plastic chair mat can be used as a floor with some throw rugs to provide a non slip surfaces. Tile

board (mentioned above) is a thin sheet of plywood type board coated with a white plastic surface. A regular sheet of plywood covered with contact shelving paper to make the surface washable and protect the wood is another possibility, but be sure the bunnies don't try eating through to the wood. Likewise, a piece of good quality linoleum (some stores offer leftover pieces at reduced prices) or plastic tarp can be used with an inexpensive area rug over it. The key is to prevent bunny from chewing on these items. Covering the wood or linoleum with an old or inexpensive area rug works well. In addition, providing bunny with other things to chew like a cardboard box, hard plastic toys, toilet paper rolls stuffed with hay, an old phone book, and/or a nice sized piece of white pine (building grade and not treated, ) etc., can help a lot.

Playing and sprawling are the key ingredients. Any cage can be comfortable if there's ample room for bunny to move around, stretch out fully, have a litter box, and still have room for food and water bowls. The smaller the cage the more time the bunny needs out of it for exercise. That exercise time also provides you with a great chance to clean the cage while bunny is busy elsewhere.

If you have one of the old style wire floor cages, don't despair. A piece of fake fleece over part of the floor can provide a place for bunny to have comfort when she chooses. A piece of flat cardboard or an untreated, not dyed straw mat can provide a place to get off the wire, too, while doubling as an item to chew. If the cardboard or mat gets messy, simply throw it away and get a new piece.

If the cage is small, though, only adequate amounts of exercise outside the cage can compensate (such as 3-4 hours per day.) If the cage is so small that bunny can't lay fully stretched out while having both dishes and litter box there, then the cage is too small and a new one should be obtained. Think of locking yourself barefoot in a very small closet with a wire floor all day long, every day, with nothing to do, no room for moving or stretching, and no where to find comfort for your feet and you may get an idea of what your bunny's life is like in a small, wire floored cage. Medium sized metal dog cages would provide better living space, but don't forget about lots of play time outside of the cage and that goes for bunnies in larger cages, too.

For the bunny blessed with more house space, sometimes a bathroom or laundry room can act as a contained living area with a baby gate across the entrance. Just be sure the area is bunny proofed. Likewise, some bunnies get free roaming privileges. If the rooms are bunny proofed, this bunny is sure to be in bunny heaven. However, many of us don't have that luxury and need a secure place for bunny to stay while we're not around to supervise. Making bunny's home a happy place to be during that time can make you happy and comfortable, too.

# AS WINTER COMES

By Joy Gioia, HRS Educator

Because you're reading a copy of the Missouri **HOUSE** Rabbit Society newsletter, it likely means you agree that a bunny's place is in the house where he can be a true family companion. However, not all people believe in that concept. As winter approaches, here are some things you can let these people know regarding rabbits kept outside.

First of all, there's a major difference between survival and being comfortable during cold temperatures. Very few rabbit hutches provide adequate winter shelter. A very sturdy hutch with an interior solid section, including a solid floor to prevent drafts from sweeping up inside, plenty of insulation to help retain heat, lots of extra food so bunny can generate extra body heat, and an automated, heated watering device (such as might be used for birds during the winter, but which exposes no electrical cords on which bunny can chew) MIGHT make a rabbit reasonably ok. Of course, providing a PERSON with all those things could help him survive a winter outside, too, but it probably wouldn't make him happy about it when a nice warm house is available only a few feet away.

Extensive observation by an experienced rabbit care giver of many rabbits who were allowed to choose whether or not they wanted to be outside found that, without fail, once the temperature dropped below 40 degrees the bunnies chose to be inside. That sounds like my cut off point, too, as I don't like being a snow bunny, either.

Major difficulties for domestic rabbits kept outside during winter temperatures include death from freezing, death from dehydration due to water bottles freezing (which will happen every couple of hours and who wants to thaw out and change water that often? ), death from predators trying to find a meal when game gets scarce (and hutches are usually easy for a fox, coyote, or raccoon to rip open,) death from fright or injury simply from a predator trying to get them, and death from illness because their humans spend so little time outside in the cold with them that symptoms of illness aren't noticed until it's too late. Problems with frostbite in ears and feet can occur as well.

Besides being miserable out in the cold, a social loving rabbit becomes isolated and lonely when all of the humans want to stay inside the house where it's warm. Perhaps it would be simplest to convince people with outside rabbits that it would be easier and more pleasant for THEM to care for their bunny INSIDE where everyone is comfortable. Talk to them about the fun of having an indoor rabbit companion and how they can be litter trained. Convince them that it's much easier to offer a fresh bowl of water once each day inside the house than bundling up several times a day to be sure there is available unfrozen drinking water outside. When they say rabbits have fur to keep them warm, remind them that they have coats and gloves, too, but do they choose to stay outside all the time? Domestic rabbits are just that; domestic. They are not wild rabbits who have better instincts about winter survival (and many cottontails still don't make it.) Domestic rabbits are the product of human breeding and manipulation so that they no longer have the same ability as their wild forebearers. They also don't have the option of digging a deep hole for protection inside that cold, drafty hutch.

All in all, maybe you can help some bunny have a safer, more pleasant winter.