

Cuddly Easter bunnies are more than just pets



BY BARBARA RADER
Staff Correspondent

Tomorrow, children around the world will be celebrating Easter. Among the traditions that mark this special holiday, is the hunting of brightly painted Easter eggs and baskets stuffed with chocolate candies, jelly beans, stuffed toys and perhaps a live, cuddly baby bunny.

Rabbit raisers will see their commodity sell at its peak, as children exclaim to parents, "Oh, mommy, can I have that one?" or "Ah, isn't he cute!" These phrases are heard over and over again as Audrey Thomas, Butler, takes her 4-H'ers to the Butler Mall to merchandise their product.

As a well-informed veteran in the rabbit business, Audrey can competently field all the questions she gets about rabbits. She has had rabbits nearly all her life. Her children had rabbits when they were little, but phased out of them as they grew. However, once Audrey's children had kids themselves, the rabbits came back and have remained ever since.

Since 1972 Audrey and her husband, Bob, have been showing and raising rabbits under the name Pant & Puff Hutchery. They've raised many varieties of rabbits, but say the Flemish Giants are their first love.

About eight years ago Angoras entered the couple's hutchery. The Thomases currently have around 100 Angoras and the same number of Flemish Giants. A few mini lops and Dutch have found their way into the hutchery as well.

Since rabbits of each breed come in a variety of colors, the Thomases usually have all seven colors of the Flemish Giants and several colors of Angoras.

"Easter bunnies are more than just pets," Audrey stresses. The combination is food, fur, fancy and fellowship — the four F's.

"All rabbits provide fellowship no matter what breed they are," she said, explaining that there are about 40 distinctive breeds of rabbits recognized by the American Rabbit Breeders Association.

"Fancy" she explained, are rabbits that meet the standards set by ARBA to compete in shows. Various classes for all the different

breeds have standards to meet. Usually four classes per breed are shown, consisting of senior does, senior bucks, junior does and junior bucks.

Rabbits weighing 10 pounds or more are broken into a six class breed. The classes consist of six months and under; six to eight months; and rabbits eight and over, with separate classes for does and bucks.

The most popular meat rabbit breeds come from the six class breeds; however, smaller rabbits do supply meat.

Domestic rabbits are a perfect food for dieters and for folks who must watch their cholesterol intake, Audrey explained. Rabbit meat contains a lot of protein and less cholesterol than most other meats.

The final "F" that Audrey attributed to rabbits is fur, which is used for clothing and novelty items. Angora rabbits are the only breed that do not bear fur; they wear a coat of wool. The Angora wool is usually brushed or plucked out, Audrey explained. Keeping the pen and the rabbit clean is the most important aspect getting top-quality Angora wool.

The wool is usually spun without being cleaned first, so people generally aren't allergic to it, she said. People who are allergic to wool are usually reacting to the cleaning aids and detergents used to prepare commercial wool.

Spun Angora is becoming increasingly available in stores, and is used mostly for clothing trimmings. There are two kinds of rabbit wool — the English Angora and French Angora. The English makes a fluffier and softer wool than the French, while the latter breed carries more of a guard hair. This makes the wool a little coarse, but it is still very soft.

The English Angora rabbits can be distinguished from the French Angoras by the wool tassels on the tips of their ears and toes. The French rabbits have no wool past the first knuckle on their front feet and they have clean ears with no bangs.

Rabbit wool spun into yarn usually sells for about \$7 to \$14 per ounce, Audrey said. Articles made from rabbit wool are lighter and seven times warmer than those

made from lambs wool.

Much rabbit wool is used with sheep wool or other yarns when made into garments or trimmings. Most of the rabbit wool is used in trimmings rather than complete garments because of its expense.

Audrey spins her rabbit wool using her own spinning wheel, loom, and carding machine. She took her wheel to the Butler County Fair last July, hoping to catch up on her spinning during the week. Her 4-H'ers were intrigued by her spinning and decided that they'd like to try it themselves.

Their interest sparked the beginning of the Cottontail Twisters 4-H Club. Nine of the youngsters traveled with two other Butler County spinning and weaving groups to enter the Sheep to Shawl Contest at the Pennsylvania Farm Show.

Under Audrey's guidance, these members made a scarf from sheep wool. They learn to spin on sheep wool first because it is heavier and easier to work with than rabbit wool.

Audrey has joined her resources and talents with those of another woman to form to form "Bunny Hugs," a small, home business. They specialize in Angora wool, raw wool, spun wool, and crocheted and knitted wool garments. They attend a few craft shows to promote and market their items.

She has also found time in her busy schedule for another 4-H club. The Butler County Cottontails 4-H Rabbit Club was formed nine years

ago with Audrey being the sole leader. With as many as 60 children in the club at one time, she broke them down into three age groups, so she would have three meetings instead of just one a month.

More recently the three groups have been meeting together because their projects are similar. The actual project is to have two does and a buck and raise two litters of bunnies to merchandise. Most projects are with pedigreed animals.

When the club started the 4-H'ers needed a place to exhibit their projects. Audrey stepped in and arranged for both 4-H and open show competition at the Big Butler Fair and at the Butler Farm Show.

This talented lady is also an active member of the Pittsburgh/Butler Rabbitry Association, where she has served as the show secretary for the last eight years. This year's two-day double show, held last weekend, brought in well over 1,500 entries from Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York and Virginia.

The Thomases travel to many states to compete for premium honors. Their home is decorated with plaques, trophies and other special mementos from local shows and National ARBA Convention shows.

Audrey offers the following advice to children who receive little bunnies in their Easter baskets. "One thing that kills most Easter bunnies is rough handling and the wrong feed," she says.

"The best rule is to remember to feed no greens. Root crops can be fed, but without tops. Plenty of good pellets and hay with fresh water at all times will excel their daily diets," she explained. Treats such as grain cereals, fruit treats and Oreos are a favorite in preference to greens, and are fine if used correctly, she said.

Responsible handling is also a must. "Never, never pick them up by their ears. Get their feet onto something secure as quickly as possible," she recommended. In most cases, she continued, they should be picked up by the loose skin on the back of their heads, with the opposite hand supporting their back legs.

The rex breeds should be handled differently because their fur is very much like velvet. Handling becomes a major chore so as not to endanger their fur, she said.

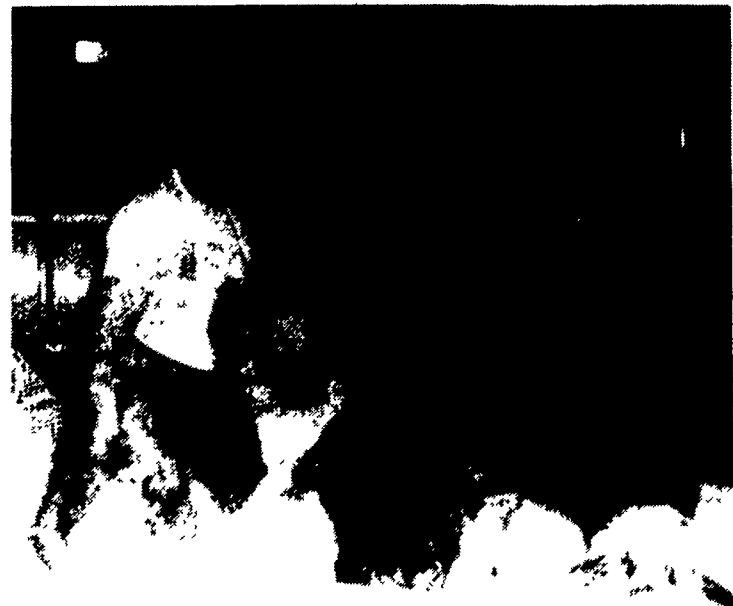
Housing is an important factor which is sometimes neglected. Rabbits should have a pen that is protected from direct wind and sun. Good sanitation is essential to keep the pen clean.

Bunnies do make good house pets, and can be easily litter trained when kept in a confined area with a litter box for a short period of time. But beware, Audrey warned, rabbits like to chew on wires.

So if you receive a cuddly, floppy-eared surprise in your Easter basket, take the advice of a woman who knows rabbits — "Your treatment of rabbits makes them what they are."



This English Angora rabbit is surrounded by items made of rabbit's wool. The items are knitted and crocheted by "Bunny Hugs."



Audrey Thomas holds an English Angora rabbit and spins. The rabbits in front of her are a Flemish Giant, Red Satin, and a Mini Lop with three of her babies. Behind her shelves hold just some of the many plaques and trophies she and her husband, Bob, have won.

Homestead
Notes