

Bunny Facts

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look at a grand champion that has just delivered a litter of rabbits, it makes me feel like I just went into the nursery and got my first child," she exclaims.

Presently, the Welches are raising six varieties of rabbits. For showing, they breed the Flemish Giants which are otherwise known as "the gentle giants", Judie says, because of their placid nature. Averaging 18 to 23 pounds, they are the largest of domestic rabbits. The Welches raise them in all seven colors: black, blue, fawn, light gray, sand, slate, and white.

They also breed New Zealand Blacks and New Zealand Whites and the rangy bicolored Checkered Giants as well as the Mini lops for show. The Mini lops with their irresistable lopped ears are sold for pets as well. The sixth variety is the New Zealand Baby Beef, a white pink-eyed variety, which is sold for meat.

"Seventy-five percent of our trophies were won by Lady Ruth," Judie notes.

Lady Ruth, their very first Flemish Giant, was a young sandy-colored doe which they bought and showed in competition. At a prestigious Berks County show she won everything in her class and almost took Best of Show in 1986. But in 1987, her son, Manna, captured the best of Show at the same important show.

Concerning the meat producing rabbits, Judie reports, when the New Zealand Baby Beefs reach a weight from four to six pounds, they are shipped to New York City to be processed. Some are returned to local supermarkets where they can be found in the meat department frozen and packaged as domestic hare.

According to Judie, rabbit in local stores sells at around \$3.00 per pound. The Welches sell an average of 50 to 75 rabbits per month, which makes about 700 pounds.

Judie says a lot of people, including themselves at first, experience what she call "the fuzzy bunny syndrome" and refuse to eat rabbit meat. But the Welches do butcher rabbits for their own purposes and consider the flavor of the meat delectable.

"Rabbit meat," Judie says, "is high in protein, low in cholesterol,

and very easy to digest. It is all white meat and when purchased by the pound there is not a lot of waste since all the bones are hollow."

"Further," she states, "it is recommended for people with cholesterol and heart problems. It is better for people than chicken or fish because it contains no iodine like fish nor fat like corn fed chicken."

Their rabbits receive one cup of dried pellets daily and are given water twice a day, according to Judie. Although they may give them a treat of apple or carrot or steam rolled oats, Judie stresses, they NEVER receive any grass. The grass, she explains, may contain parasites which can kill the rabbits although hay is considered a good source of roughage for the bunnies.

When they first started raising rabbits, Judie recalls, they went to a local feed mill and purchased rabbit feed. After awhile they noticed several of their rabbits were paralyzed in the hind quarters. Consulting with a veterinarian in the ARBA, they found the pellets were too high in protein which accumulates in a rabbit hip the way calcium deposits might in a human being.

Much like the average dairy farmer, the Welches have learned how to give medicine injections to their charges when necessary, but they use home remedies whenever possible. Learning how to care for their own sick animals became necessity because they soon found most area veterinarians possess little experience in rabbit care.

"We've saved a lot of rabbits with comfrey tea and apples," Judie says.

The comfrey tea, an oldtime human remedy for upset stomach also quiets the tummies of rabbits. And if a rabbit goes off its feed for any reason, their first line of attack, Judie reports, is a small slice of apple. For some unknown reason, she says, a rabbit will start nibbling the apple when it will eat nothing else.

When the Welches' rabbit population outgrew the family garage, they built a 20 foot by 60 foot rabbit hutch in teh backyard. Since excessive heat is one of the main banes of rabbit existence, both buildings are equipped with fans to keep the air circulating.

The gestation period for a rabbit is 28 to 30 days, Judie says, and the babies are born bald, deaf, and sightless. They "hair up" in a day and in seven to 10 days their eyes open. They cannot walk until the sixth or seventh day, and then, Judie says, "Watch out!" The does are bred every two months and average 8 to 14 in a litter. When they are born, about five little bunnies can fit into the palm of your hand.

Sometimes in the winter a doe who has given birth refuses to care for her babies. In an attempt to save them, Judie takes the newborns into the house and immerses them in lukewarm water up to their necks to bring their body temperature up to normal or she puts them on a towel and with the careful use of a blow dryer, is able to do the same thing. Many times she is able to save the rabbits.

Losing some rabbits, especially newborns, is a fact of life, but at times can be hard to accept. One evening when a friend came to visit, Judie recalls, they visited the

rabbit pens and discovered a litter the mother had rejected. Try as they might, they couldn't save them. Soon her friend began to cry and then so did Faith Ann who had become accustomed to the cycles of life and death.

"It's a fact of life. It happens all the time," Judie remembers telling them. And then she confesses, "The minute they went outside I started crying too."

According to Judie, the ARBA has 35,000 members nationwide with Pennsylvania ranking among the top ten states in rabbit production. Their local club, the Bald Eagle Rabbit Breeders and Fan-

ciers has a membership of 46 families with two to six in a family. Frank is currently serving a term as president of the club and Judie is the secretary/treasurer.

This year on September 5, Labor Day, the Welches' club is holding their annual ARBA sanctioned rabbit show at the Clinton County Fairgrounds, Mill Hall, PA, where they expect more than 2,000 rabbits to be exhibited.

On their annual vacation this year the Welches are heading for Madison, Wisconsin, in the middle on November. The big attraction? You guessed it - it's the site of this year's national ARBA convention.



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