

Raising rabbits on pasture

Rabbits in pasture are managed exclusively in the meadow. The animals move daily, so that they **always have new grass that gives them their maximum nutritional value.** They move through a system of fences and mobile shelters that protect the animals against inclement weather and predators. **In addition, with this system the animals become the key tool to maintaining top-quality pasture.**

■ The system of raising rabbits on pasture

Grass raising rabbits is a relatively recent activity and, although it is still little known in Spain, it is having significant success in countries such as the United States. The lack of knowledge causes it to be confused with organic production, but there are very important conceptual and technical differences between these two ways of producing. Organic production focuses on the animal and its well-being and only requires a minimum surface area for the animal to be able to live during the last third of its life. On the other hand, **the production of rabbits on pasture takes into account both the animal and the pasture, so it involves a double objective:** (i) that the animal always has a new pasture with all the elements that it can take advantage of, and (ii) that the animal is the main tool to maintain the highest quality of this pasture.

This rabbit production system requires technical conditions that are very different from those of the organic rabbit, both in terms of facilities, where **it is necessary to work with mobile cages and fences to allow the continuous movement of the animals,** as well as the type of feeding, because **rabbits on pasture mostly only feed between 80 and 100% depending on the time of year, on pasture.**

■ Feeding and medicating rabbits

Rabbits are fattened exclusively in the meadow, since their diet is **100% herbivorous (Figure 1).** The grass is complemented with leafy branches of species such as hackberry and ash (in summer), holm oak (in winter), and aromatic plants (rosemary and oregano) to boost their immune system.

With this type of diet, **it is virtually unnecessary to use antibiotics** and vaccines are only used for viral diseases.



Figure 1. Rabbits are herbivores and basically feed on meadow grass. Photo: Marc Gràcia.



Figure 2. Mobile shelters for pasture-raised rabbits. Photo: Marc Gràcia.

Figure 3. Shelters serve as protection for rabbits from inclement weather and predators. Photo: Marc Gràcia.



■ Characteristics of the shelters and movement of animals

The weaning of the kits and their placement in the meadow occurs when they are 30-40 days old. From then on, the **rabbits are managed in a meadow divided into corridors**. The animals move through a system of fences and mobile shelters every day. Mobile fences keep rabbits in a limited space to get the right impact on the grass and ensure enough recovery time. **These fences can be moved without heavy machinery and can be moved by one or two people.**

Shelters must protect animals against inclement weather and predators. Both the shelters and the waterers and feeders should be easy to move. The structure is very similar to that of chicken shelters (see the sheet: “The Polyfarming system. Raising chickens on pasture”): an **iron structure with wheels to transport them, with a canvas or mesh roof that protects the animals**. The main difference is that rabbit shelters have a wood located about 25 cm from the ground that occupies the entire cage (**Figure 2**). This creates a space where rabbits can hide to avoid the summer heat or climb up to protect themselves when the soil moisture is excessive.

The basic element of this system is the movement of the animals along the meadow, so that the **animals are kept in a delimited patch of meadow, with a high density, but only for one or two days** (depending on the time of year). The animals are then moved to a new plot, and so on, until they return to the initial plot. **The time it takes to return to the same plot can vary between 60 and 80 days**. In this way, each patch of the meadow is subjected to a great impact when the animals are present, but then has a long recovery time.

■ Protecting rabbits against inclement weather and predators

When working in open spaces, animals are subjected to external climatic conditions that can occur throughout the year. Therefore, **one of the critical points of this system is to provide the means to protect the animals from climatic elements and predators**. This is the objective of the design of the different elements used, especially the mobile shelters (**Figure 3**). The daily movement of the animals also helps to avoid predators, since the risk of predation increases when the animals are kept in a fixed space, and keeps the spaces clean, **breaking the cycle of parasites and limiting problems of moisture on rabbits’ legs** (which are linked to moisture and dirt).

In addition to mobile shelters, we use **electric fences to protect rabbits from predators**, both on the ground and in the air. The fences are placed around the perimeter of the field where the grass plots are located. With this system, predators cannot access from outside. Trained dogs are also used, which can move around the plot where the rabbits are, but without entering it.

■ Benefits of pasture raising rabbits

The production of rabbits on pasture has clear benefits both for environmental aspects and for the nutritional value of the meat produced.

- On an environmental level, **by using this system, rabbits become the main tool to regenerate fertile soil and a quality meadow**. This is a very efficient way of capturing carbon in the soil and creating and conserving habitats with a high natural value.
- From the point of view of nutritional value, the **meat obtained has a higher density and a higher content of vitamins (A, D and K) and quality fats (Omega 3)**. Furthermore, feeding rabbits in the meadow makes it possible to reduce (practically eliminate) the use of antibiotics.
- **This production system is scalable; there are projects with small productions (100 rabbits a month) and larger projects, with more than 1,000 rabbits a month**. In any case, with this system, small-scale production (100 to 500 rabbits per month) is competitive with respect to larger projects. In addition, **the investment required to start it up is small compared to conventional projects**: many of the facilities can be self-built and small areas of pasture are required (from 2 ha).