

Cold Weather: it's on its way!

Remember how just a little while ago we were freezing water bottles and buying shadecloth? Well, get ready to do a reverse!. Winter is almost here in most of the country and REALLY arrived in others. What do we have to do to keep animals comfortable and in good shape?

I live in a mild area with few freezing days so for the most part winterizing the rabbitry is for the owners benefit. I have a fully enclosed barn that is all insulated and with a space heater or two. I am most comfortable working with my rabbits on the coldest nights. The rabbits are all in good fur (of course, Convention is over!) and are very comfortable but what if they were in an open barn or hutches? PLASTIC to the rescue! Rabbits need to be out of the wind and dry, dont forget the wind that blows up from underneath.

Most breeders increase the fat content and energy of their feed in the winter. Dont let the does get too fat or older animals too thin. Handle your rabbits daily to check condition, this is the stuff that makes one a real breeder. Hay is fed more in the winter..it heats rabbits up as they digest fiber. The real masters adjust for each rabbit.

Water is always a problem in the winter. No water, no eating...end of story. If you have a water system, now is the time to check heat cables and insulation. If you have crocks, have two or three for each animal. This way some can be thawing while others are in use. You will be watering 2 or 3 times a day in freezing weather. I used to haunt thrift stores for cups and bowls to use for stand in crocks. Have a lot of rabbits? You might consider a stock tank heater and insulated plastic garbage can in the rabbitry so you always have water ready to use. The hose has long since been frozen or put away and hauling water from the house is hard work. Make things as easy as possible and chances are you will do them well

Can you have babies in the winter? Sure...you just have to work at it. Does need 16 hours of light to be at their most receptive peak. You may need to put lights on timers for your does. You will need warm nest boxes, wood boxes are a plus here. Heat lights over the cages are sometimes used but have them checked and ready early. Safety is a big issue when you have heat and straw in the same place. Some breeders use under box heaters, some very safe ones are made for reptiles. This year I built a "Birthing Center" consisting of solid wood cages with just a small screen on the doors. These are filled with straw and the doe is placed in these a day or two before kindling. The babies are warmer and can stay in the solid cages until they are furred. I also find that the does make much better nests.

Many breeders, in very cold places, bring the nest boxes in the house and they are given to the does a couple times a day for nursing. This works great, just mark your boxes well as to which doe goes to which box. Check each baby to make sure it has nursed.

Check with the old time breeders in your area if you are new to rabbits. Remember, they have many winters under their belts and have learned how to provide for their rabbits the

best way possible. Just dont wait until there is a crisis...plan ahead...you know winter is around the corner.