



# 4-H Rabbit Fitting and Showing Member Guide





Thanks to the photo models (from left to right in photo left): Lydia Chamberlain, Sierra Jezuit, Tyler J. Jezuit, Kenna Gebissa, Stasa Wade, Carlos F. Ríos.

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- ▶ Jane Burt, Michigan 4-H Rabbit Judge, former 4-H Volunteer Leader, MSRBA President
- ▶ Edward J. Carpenter II, Michigan 4-H Rabbit Leader
- ▶ Mike George, Michigan 4-H Judge
- ▶ Darrell Howe, Michigan 4-H Youth Advisor
- ▶ Neil Kentner, 4-H Youth Development, Michigan State University Extension
- ▶ David C. Moll, Michigan 4-H Rabbit Judge and ARBA Registrar
- ▶ Angelina M. Taylor, Student Employee, 4-H Youth Development, Michigan State University Extension
- ▶ Mary M. Taylor, 4-H Volunteer
- ▶ Pam Travis, Michigan 4-H Judge, Michigan 4-H Leader
- ▶ Larry Walthorn, Michigan 4-H Rabbit Judge

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- ▶ Dr. Carl A. Broady, Extension Specialist, 4-H Youth, Purdue University
- ▶ Dr. Amanda Chrzanowski Bolyard, Michigan Veterinarian

- ▶ Alissa Coldwell
- ▶ Angie Coldwell
- ▶ Sherry Garrett, State 4-H Rabbit and Cavy Events Committee Member
- ▶ Bonnie Gustafson
- ▶ Kathy Gustafson
- ▶ Kelly Hansen
- ▶ Jeff Harthy, State 4-H Rabbit and Cavy Events Committee Member
- ▶ Ed Mercer
- ▶ Dr. Randy Showerman, Associate Professor, Community, Agriculture, Recreation and Resource Studies, Michigan State University

### Project Coordinator

Dr. Jacob DeDecker, Program Leader, 4-H Youth Development, Michigan State University Extension

### Curriculum Coordinator

Katherine Raphael, Curriculum Coordinator, Michigan State University Extension

### Editor

Rebecca McKee, Editor, ANR Communications and Marketing, Michigan State University

### Designer

Marian Reiter, Graphic Artist, ANR Communications and Marketing, Michigan State University

# 4-H Rabbit Fitting and Showing



Rabbit fitting and showing gives 4-H'ers the chance to compete with other members in their county or from other parts of the state and to be recognized for their accomplishments.

In most rabbit shows, the rabbits are judged, not the 4-H'ers. In a fitting and showing contest, however, the judge evaluates exhibitors on the skills they demonstrate and their general knowledge of rabbits. This may include the participant's knowledge of rabbit breeds, the care and fitting of his or her animal, and its condition, health and nutritional status. The judge also considers each participant's presentation, attitude and behavior.

## Fitting

"Fitting" refers to choosing a rabbit for show and caring for it to enhance its condition and appearance. Fitting also includes any preparation of the rabbit before the contest, such as checking its general health, trimming the toenails and removing dead fur. Practicing good management techniques (such as proper animal care and cage or hutch care) will improve the health and appearance of the rabbit for show.

## Choosing a Rabbit

When you start a rabbit project, choosing a rabbit breed is a very important decision. There are many rabbit breeds to choose from, all of which have different temperaments and other characteristics. A 4-H volunteer leader or an experienced rabbit breeder can help you decide which breed is best for you.

Consider both your size and the size of the rabbit when choosing a rabbit breed. Having an appropriate match is less frustrating for both the exhibitor and the judge (see figs. 1 and 2 at right). It is best if you don't pick a running breed because they don't pose well and will cost you points. No matter which rabbit breed you choose, remember that what's most important is how well you work with the animal to demonstrate your knowledge of rabbits and your handling skills.

When choosing an animal, it's a good idea to choose a rabbit that's older than three

## Objectives

The objectives of 4-H rabbit fitting and showing contests are to help young people develop:

- ▶ Knowledge and skills to conduct an accurate examination of rabbit health and quality.
- ▶ Responsibility, communication skills and decision-making.
- ▶ Leadership qualities.
- ▶ Competition and sportsmanship skills.
- ▶ An interest and positive attitude about raising and working with rabbits.
- ▶ An appreciation for rabbits and knowledge of how to handle them in a humane way.
- ▶ To learn and grow from challenges and accomplishments.



**Figure 1.**

Choosing a rabbit that is too large for you will make handling difficult. (The rabbit above is likely too large for this exhibitor.)



**Figure 2.**

Choose a rabbit that is a size you can comfortably handle. (The rabbit above is a better choice for this exhibitor.)

months. In general, younger rabbits tend to get excited more easily than older ones. Either sex can be used in a 4-H contest. It's important that the rabbit you choose for the contest doesn't have any disqualifications. Please refer to the American Rabbit Breeders Association book, *Standard of Perfection*, for your rabbit's breed standard.

If possible, choose your rabbit at least 4 to 6 weeks before the contest so you have enough time to work with it and to familiarize the rabbit with the showmanship process.

## Caring for Your Rabbit

To prepare for the fitting and showing contest, handle your rabbit often and expose it to other distractions such as unfamiliar sounds (for example, music and conversation), and different lighting and movements (such as other animals and humans moving nearby). Give it quality feed and fresh, clean water daily.

If your rabbit has a minor disease problem (such as ear mites) treat the condition immediately so that the problem is completely gone by the time of the contest.

In some breeds, it is helpful to remove loose fur by wetting your hands and running the palm of your hands back and forth over the rabbit from head to tail.

All rabbits need regular toenail trimming, especially before a show. Use a heavy-duty nail clipper and be careful that you don't cut too close or into the pink (or quick) or the nail will bleed (see fig. 3).



**Figure 3.** Trimming the rabbit's toenails with a nail clipper.

## Participant Appearance

Your appearance during a 4-H rabbit showmanship contest is a significant part of your presentation. The guidelines on exhibitor appearance that follow apply to state-level 4-H rabbit events. The superintendent or show committee at a county 4-H rabbit fitting and showing contest may specify a dress code. Failure to meet these guidelines will cost you appearance points.

- ▶ **Clothing** – Different events may have different requirements, but your clothing should always be neat and clean and should include long pants, slacks or a knee-length or longer skirt. Your shoes should have closed toes and be tidy. Shirts, blouses and lab coats should have long sleeves. Female exhibitors should avoid low-cut shirts. If you wear a tie, secure it (see fig. 4 on page 3).
- ▶ **Hair, Skin and Nails** – Your hair should be neatly combed. If you have long hair, tie it back to keep it from falling into your face when you're standing over the table handling your rabbit. Your face and hands should be clean. Your fingernails should be clean, neatly trimmed and unpolished.

## Your Rabbit's Condition

Condition is defined by ARBA as "The overall physical state of a rabbit in relation to healthy cleanliness, fur, and grooming." (Page 6, 2011–15 Standard of Perfection, ARBA.) The rabbit's condition is a sign of its health, meat and fur qualities. Its breed characteristics will also be considered. The judge will examine each rabbit on the table in a general way.

► **Jewelry** – It is recommended that exhibitors not wear jewelry (with the exception of medical identification bracelets and tags.). Your show clothing should be free of names, patches, pins and other distractions.

## Showing

Showing is presenting an animal in a manner that highlights the positive attributes of the animal and demonstrates the person's husbandry (animal care), knowledge and skills. Rabbit showmanship doesn't start the week of the contest; you should begin practicing showing techniques weeks before the show. The judge will be evaluating your care, knowledge, skills and ability.

## Beginning the Show

Participants are silent during the showmanship part of the competition. You should speak only in response to the judge's questions.

The showmanship competition begins when the judge asks you to pose your rabbit to the table (see "Posing Your Rabbit" on pg. 5). Stand behind the table with your rabbit in front of you, facing the judge. When the judge tells you to begin by saying "handle your rabbit," that's your cue to perform the steps described in the "Handling Your Rabbit" section that follows.

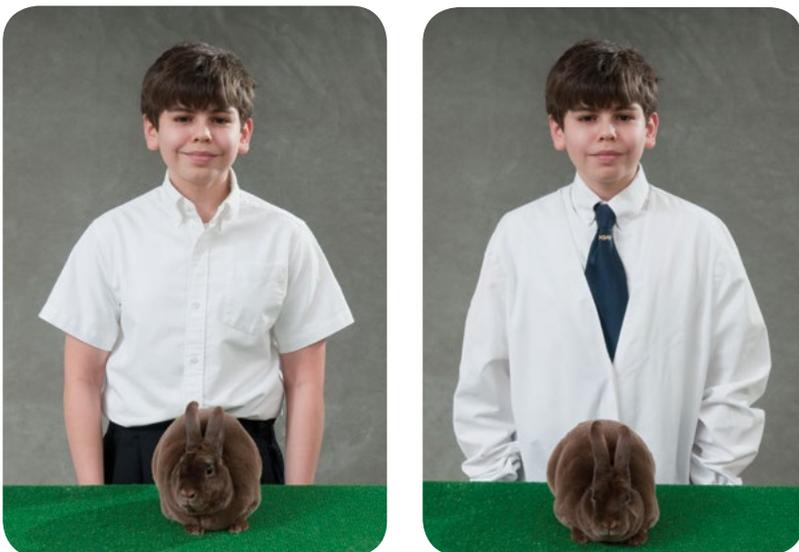
## Dealing With Rabbit Misbehavior

Since you are dealing with a live animal during the contest, almost anything can happen. It's important to keep a cool head. Don't overreact if your rabbit does something that embarrasses you (such as leaving feces or urine on the table or on your show clothes).

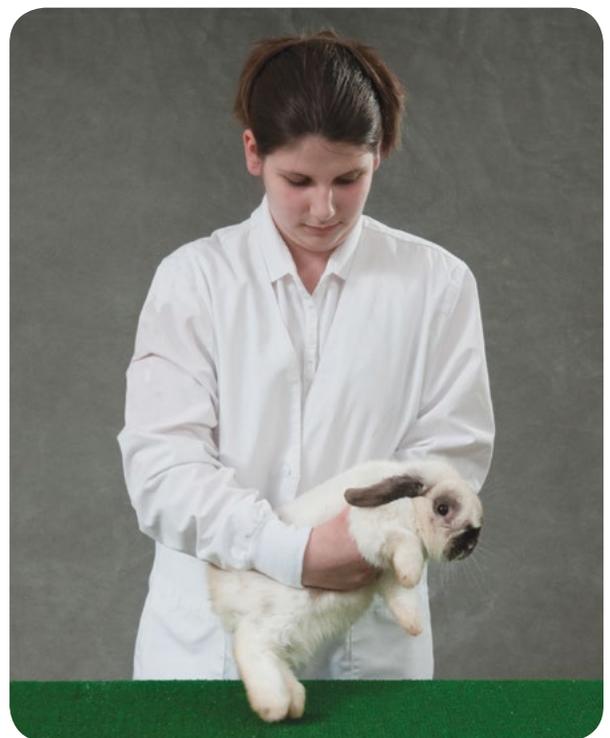
Just remember these are natural activities for a rabbit and treat them discreetly. Calmly continue through your steps. If your rabbit becomes agitated and stressed while being shown and bites or nips you, try not to overreact. If your rabbit tries to breed or fight with the rabbit next to you, quickly separate the rabbits and repose your rabbit on the table. All participants must try to control their rabbits on the table.

When examining your rabbit, you'll do better if you don't let the rabbit sense that you are afraid of its behavior. Fill yourself with confidence and take control of your rabbit and you will do well. Rabbits are creatures of habit. The more you practice with your rabbit the easier it will be to show. Practice, practice and practice some more.

**Figure 5.** Lifting and supporting your rabbit. (right)



**Figure 4.** Improper(left) and proper clothing (right).



# Handling Your Rabbit

## Step 1.

Lifting and supporting your rabbit, turn it sideways without dragging its toenails on the table.

## Step 2.

Place the palm of one hand directly in front of the rabbit's face. Cup your other palm around the shoulders of the rabbit, directly behind the base of the ears and with your fingers in the appropriate place. (This will depend on which of the finger placement options you choose from the list that follows.) Support the animal by gently holding its shoulders with your cupped hand. If at all possible, try not to grasp the rabbit's skin and fur (see fig. 6). (This is why it's easier to exhibit a smaller rabbit if your hands are small.)

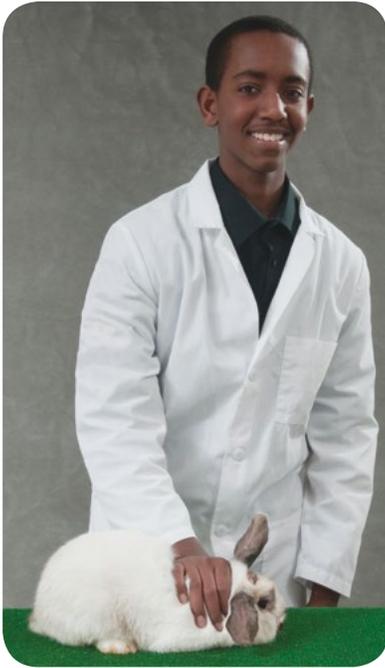
- ▶ **Option A:** Holding only one ear between your thumb and pointer finger (see fig. 7).
- ▶ **Option B:** Holding both ears between thumb and pointer finger (see fig. 8).
- ▶ **Option C:** Holding one ear between your thumb and pointer finger and the second ear between your pointer and middle finger (see fig. 9).

## Step 3.

Keeping your hand cupped on the rabbit's shoulders, lift it by the shoulder and ears, raising your hand so its front legs are slightly off the table (see fig. 10).

## Step 4.

Use your other hand to support the rabbit's lower hindquarters (see fig. 11), OR gently place one hand under the chest and the other under the rump.



**Figure 6. (Step 2)**  
Holding your rabbit.



**Figure 7. (Step 2)**  
Holding your rabbit — Option A



**Figure 8. (Step 2)**  
Holding your rabbit — Option B



**Figure 9. (Step 2)**  
Holding — Option C



**Figure 10. (Step 3)**  
Lifting your rabbit



**Figure 11. (Step 4)**  
Supporting the rabbit as you lift

**Step 5.**

Lift the rabbit and bring it toward your body so its head is in your elbow bend. Lower your other arm to your side. In this position, the rabbit's head is hidden in your elbow bend and the rabbit's weight is completely resting on your arm and hand. The rabbit's front feet should be on your forearm, and the back feet in your hand (see fig. 12).

**Step 6.**

After the judge instructs you to "pose your rabbit on the table," gently return it to the table. (see fig. 13). The way to do this will depend on the size and breed of the rabbit and your size. Next, pose it facing the judge as described in "Posing Your Rabbit" (see fig. 14).

The important thing is not how fast you pick up the rabbit, but whether the judge sees the various steps you use and how well you perform them. However, don't expect the judge to acknowledge each step as you perform it.



**Figure 12. (Step 5)**  
Holding your rabbit



**Figure 13. (Step 6)**  
Setting your rabbit down



**Figure 14. Posing your rabbit facing the judge**



Pose the rabbit facing the judge. Pose your rabbit at least one foot away from the rabbit on either side of it. Posing the rabbit is done according to breed standard.

When you practice posing your rabbit, make sure you have a table and a rug or piece of carpet on which to place the animal. Don't try to pose the animal on a smooth surface because it won't have firm footing and may slip.

**To pose your rabbit, complete the following steps according to the breed standard.**



**Step 1.**  
Cover the rabbit's head and eyes with your hand.



**Steps 2. & 3.**  
Set each foreleg even with the eye.





**Steps 4 & 5.**

Set each hind foot in line with the stifle (the back knee).



**Step 6.**

Set the tail so that it is not underneath the rabbit.

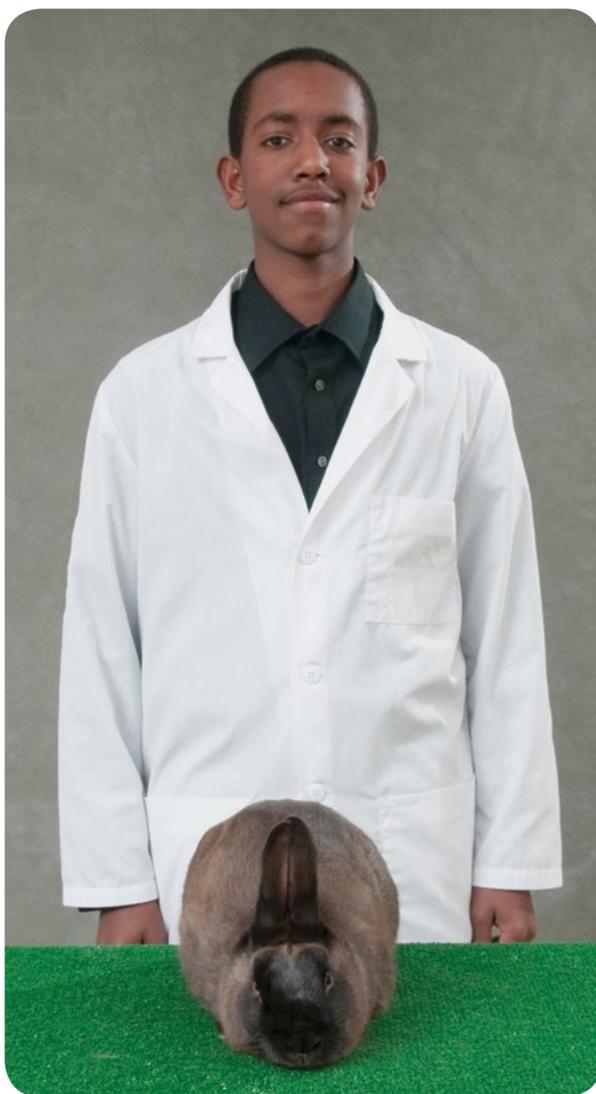


**Step 7.**

Set the ears according to the breed standard.

**Step 8.**

Smooth or fluff the fur according to the breed standard.



**Step 9.**

Stand back from the table and place your arms at your sides.

# EXAMINING YOUR RABBIT



## Step 1.

Lift and turn the rabbit sideways with one hand under its chest and the other under its rump.

In the examination part of the showmanship contest, the judge will attempt to determine each participant's knowledge of how to check his or her rabbit for disqualifications and quality. The judge will evaluate you on how smoothly, systematically and confidently you perform each of the examination steps. For each step, begin with the side you are most comfortable with. Be consistent however, and continue with the same side of the rabbit you chose throughout the exam. This way your movements are smoother and more systematic because you will always start with the same side of the rabbit.

The judge will say "examine your rabbit" when it is time to begin. The examination includes the following steps:



## Step 2.

Start with the head area. Gently squeeze the base of each ear one at a time.



## Step 3.

Open and examine each ear to make sure that the rabbit doesn't have ear mites. Also check for any nicks in the ears.



## Step 4.

Check the rabbit's eyes by pointing your pointer finger at each eye, but don't actually touch the eye. Do this to make sure the animal isn't blind, doesn't have weepy or cloudy eyes, and has the correct eye color for its breed.



**Step 5.**

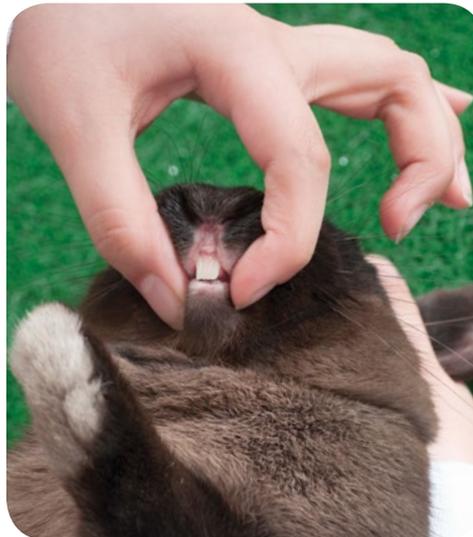
Turn your rabbit smoothly onto its back. Place the palm of one hand directly in front of the rabbit's face. Cup your other palm around the shoulders of the rabbit, directly behind the base of the ears. Appropriate finger placement will depend on which finger placement option you choose. Support the animal by gently holding its shoulders with your cupped hand. Try not to grasp the skin and fur. Holding the shoulders and ears, use the opposite hand to support the rabbit's hindquarters. Lift the front end and roll the hindquarters under. Do not let go of the shoulders. Release your hand from the rump to proceed with the exam. Make sure you provide adequate support for the rabbit when you turn it over. Don't allow the animal to struggle or kick.

**(Note:** This is a very important step, because the judge will observe whether the rabbit is under your control while you perform the examination. Slow and smooth movements help to maintain control.) The rabbit should now be positioned with its head either to your right or to your left depending on whether you are right- or left-handed.



**Step 6.**

Point your index finger to the rabbit's nose area, gently touching it to look for any discharge.



**Step 7.**

Approaching the rabbit from above, pull its lips back with your thumb and index finger to check the condition of the teeth.

Carefully check for cracked, chipped, broken or buck teeth (malocclusion).



**Step 8.**

Check the throat or dewlap area for abscesses or tumors by stroking under the chin with the flat of your fingers.



**Step 9.**

Gently pull each front leg up separately to see if the legs are straight, crooked or bowed.



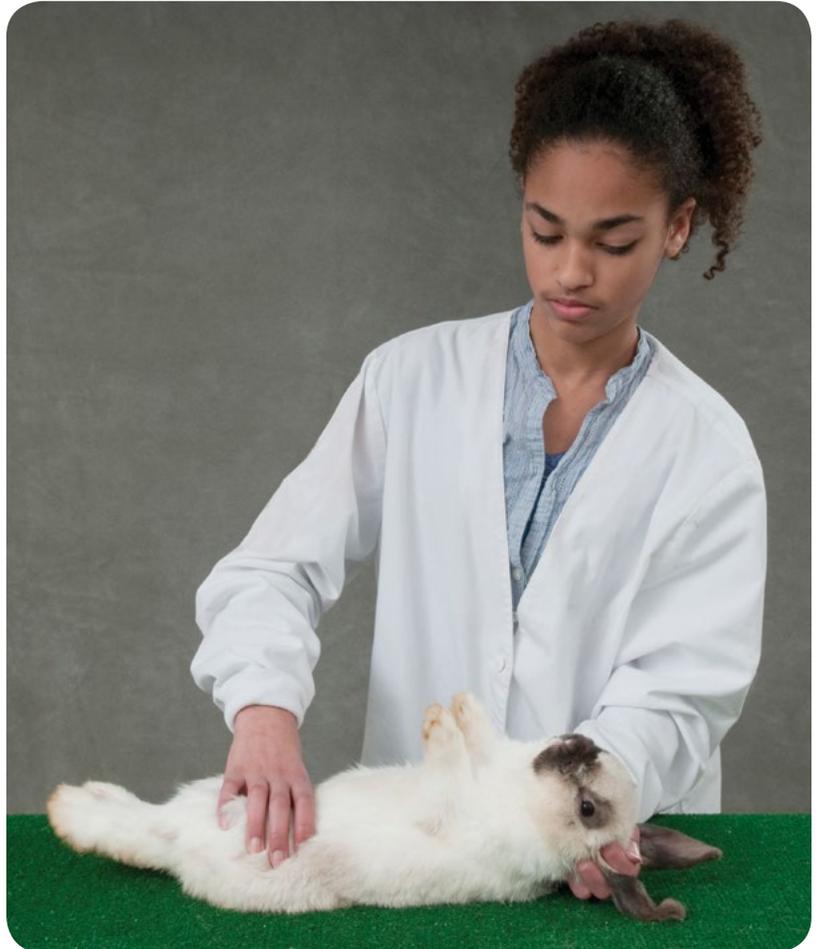
**Step 10.**

With your thumb, gently press the footpad to extend the front toenails to check the color and to look for missing or broken toenails. Check each toe and don't forget the dewclaw. With some breeds, you may need to pull the fur back to expose the nails.



**Step 11.**

Cup and slide your hand over the chest and abdominal areas to check for abscesses, tumors and other abnormalities.



**Step 12.**

When your cupped and sliding hand reaches the thigh area, gently squeeze the hind legs together to determine the straightness of the hind legs and to note whether they are parallel.



**Step 13.**

Supporting the hind legs with your hand, use your thumb to examine each hock area for signs of sore hocks. You may also grab each foot individually, as long as you use your thumb to examine it.



**Step 14.**

With your thumb, gently push on the rear footpads to extend the toenails to check the color and to look for missing or broken toenails. With some breeds, you may need to pull the fur back to expose the nails.



**Step 15.**

Check the animal's sex by holding its tail between your pointer and middle fingers and pressing down lightly in front of the sex organ with your thumb. Also examine this area for signs of any disease.



**Step 16.**

While still holding the tail between your two fingers, slide your fingers from the base to the end of the tail to determine whether it has been broken.



**Step 17.**

Place your free hand under the rabbit's rump and gently roll it back onto its feet so that it is facing sideways. Cover the rabbit's eyes to control it and keep it calm.



**Step 18.**

With your free hand, gently pull the tail out and release it to examine the tail for abnormalities. Check for proper tail carriage and to be sure the rabbit does not have a wry or screw tail.



**Step 19.** Place the rabbit's ears according to its breed standard, checking for proper ear carriage.



**Step 20.**

Check the quality of the animal's body type and flesh condition by cupping the rabbit over the shoulders and slowly sliding your hand down to the base of the hindquarters.



**Step 21.**

Examine the fur quality, texture and density by running your hand from the tail to the head and back to the tail (left). If you have a wool breed rabbit, do not run your hand on the animal. Instead, gently fluff the wool from back to front to check the length and condition. Then gently grasp the wool on the sides of the rabbit to check the density.



If you have a rex-furred rabbit (above), gently press into the fur to check for resistance.



**Step 22.**

Pose the rabbit facing forward and stand with your hands at your sides. This completes the examination.



## Scorecard

	Points Allowed
1. Handling of Rabbit	15
2. Posing Rabbit on table	15
3. Examination of Rabbit	40
4. Condition of Rabbit	10
a. Fitting of Rabbit	
b. Flesh Condition	
c. Fur Condition	
d. General Health	
5. Rabbit Quiz	10
6. Appearance and Attitude of Participant	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

### Your Attitude and Behavior

This should be a fun time for you. You have the chance to demonstrate to the judge and your peers that you're competent and proud to be a part of the contest. Look at the judge from time to time to make sure you have his or her attention. Be on your best behavior and be courteous. If the judge asks you questions, answer politely. Be a good sport, and congratulate your peers on their achievements after the contest.



### The Quiz

At the end of the contest, you may be quizzed to check your rabbit knowledge. The quiz may be written or oral. The number of questions the judge asks you will depend on the age division you're competing in, the number of contestants, the contestants' skill level and time available.

## Lead to Succeed With Your Rabbit!

Along with learning responsibility and showmanship skills, you can take advantage of many other opportunities through your 4-H rabbit project, such as:

- ▶ Setting up a visit for you and your rabbit to a local retirement home. "Pet therapy" isn't just for dogs and cats!
- ▶ Participating in state 4-H Animal Science events such as the 4-H Rabbit and Cavy Show, 4-H Rabbit and Cavy Expo, 4-H Rabbit and Cavy Youth and Adult Leader Workshop and rabbit and cavy sessions at 4-H Exploration Days.
- ▶ Meeting with local, county, state and national government representatives to discuss animal welfare issues.
- ▶ Developing a rabbit-related business such as selling products that come directly (including fur, meat or fertilizer) or indirectly from your rabbits.
- ▶ Developing a rabbit-related commercial service such as a boarding facility or teaching new rabbit owners to care for their rabbits.
- ▶ Working with other 4-H'ers to use social media to advocate for rabbit-related information.
- ▶ Creating and leading fun educational activities that help younger 4-H'ers learn to care for and show their rabbits.
- ▶ Cross training to learn fitting and showing techniques for other animal species so you can compete in sweepstakes showmanship contests.
- ▶ Arranging a 4-H club visit to the office of a local veterinarian to discuss rabbit health issues and tour the facility.
- ▶ Studying rabbit genetics to plan the best pairings for your rabbits.
- ▶ Visiting a meat processing facility that handles rabbits to learn to judge carcass and meat quality.
- ▶ Arranging a visit by a Michigan State University Extension manure management specialist to discuss proper handling of your rabbits' waste products.

## Rabbit Reflections

Have you ever thought about . . .

- ▶ What is a stifle? What other body parts do rabbits share with other mammals? How are they unique?
- ▶ What does good condition mean?
- ▶ On how many of the earth's seven continents are rabbits a native species?
- ▶ From what species of rabbit are all current rabbit breeds and varieties derived?
- ▶ Can you name some of the diseases that can infect both rabbits and humans?
- ▶ What types of diseases can a rabbit inherit from its parents? What types can they get from their environment?
- ▶ What types of nutritional diseases or deficiencies can a rabbit have?
- ▶ Why do you think rabbits have developed physical characteristics such as long hind legs, long or short ears, and different types of fur?





## Sportsmanship and Leadership

- ▶ Win or lose, enjoy the process. You've worked hard to prepare and showing is a way to demonstrate what you've learned.
- ▶ Thank the judge.
- ▶ Congratulate the other exhibitors.
- ▶ Ask the judge how you can improve. Don't just ask what you did wrong. They'll be happy to help you!
- ▶ Be a gracious winner. No one enjoys a showoff.
- ▶ Part of good showmanship involves being helpful to other exhibitors. Support each other when you see a need.
- ▶ Practice your leadership skills! If you feel confident with something, share your skills by helping others.
- ▶ Remember that helping others makes you better at showing, too!



## Online Resources

**American Rabbit Breeders Association Inc.** – <http://www.arba.net/index.htm> – ARBA is a national organization dedicated to the promotion, development and improvement of the domestic rabbit and cavy. Two other pages on the ARBA site that may be helpful are:

- ▶ **Publications** <http://www.arba.net/publications.htm> – Includes price and ordering information for the ARBA book, *The Standard of Perfection*.
- ▶ Michigan State Rabbit Breeders Association, Inc. <http://www.msrbna.net>.

### Michigan 4-H Youth Development Web Site

<http://www.msue.msu.edu/4h> – The Rabbits and Cavies program page on this site has information on Michigan 4-H animal science-related workshops and events, along with species-specific resources and information. To find Rabbits and Cavies, go to the Animal Science area under Programs.

## References

American Rabbit Breeders Association. (2011). *Standard of perfection: standard bred rabbits and cavies 2011–15*. Bloomington, IL: Author.

Avery, J. A. (1992). *An exploration of several early Michigan county fairs as community arts organizations of the 1850s, 1860s and 1870s* (doctoral dissertation). East Lansing: Michigan State University.

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# From the Past to the Present: History of Early Fairs in the United States

**H**ave you ever considered why we exhibit rabbits and other animals? There are many reasons, but one man in particular, Elkanah Watson, had a great deal to do with it.

Watson was a wealthy business owner and banker who lived in New York at the end of the eighteenth century. In 1784 he purchased a pair of merino sheep whose wool quality was much better than that of the local breeds. Watson was a smart businessperson who saw the potential for breeding better wool.

Wool was often used for fabric and clothing, and many people in the United States were trying to rely less on England and English goods at that time. The ability to produce more and better wool on local land would be advantageous.

Watson knew he had to stimulate interest among his neighbors in the sheep, so he invited his neighbors to meet him and the sheep at the public square in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. He tied the merinos to an elm tree and gave a talk. This attracted the attention Watson desired. He described this event in his journal:

*"Many farmers, and even women, were excited by curiosity to attend this first novel, and new*

## Rabbit Show History

The first rabbit agricultural society, the British Rabbit Council, was founded in Great Britain in the mid 1930s. Fanciers had been developing specific breeds since the mid 1800s, though, and had begun holding rabbit shows in the late 1800s. The Council worked to guide breeding, supervise rabbit clubs and register rabbits throughout Great Britain.



The rabbit class. Judge examining an Angora rabbit. This class is always a popular and well-filled one

In the United States, domestic rabbits were mainly used for meat up until the late 1800s, when fanciers began breeding rabbits for exhibition. The National Pet Stock Association was formed in Detroit in 1910. This group was later renamed the American Rabbit Breeders Association. Today ARBA is the organization of record in the United States for registering and showing rabbits. (Ohio 4-H Youth Development, 2003).

Illustration from *Every Woman's Encyclopaedia*, Volume 3, p. 2135, London. Circa 1910 – circa 1912.

*exhibition. It was by this lucky accident, I reasoned thus, if two animals are capable of exciting so much attention, what would be the effect on a larger scale... and from that moment, to the present, agricultural societies, cattle shows . . . have predominated in my mind, greatly to the injury of my private affairs. In the fall of 1810, a public notice announced an exhibition of stock on October 1. It was addressed to the farmers of the county." (Avery, 1994).*

Watson created a new organization called the "Berkshire Agricultural Society" that became the model for similar groups in the United States. Farmers paid small membership dues to the societies, which held agricultural fairs to showcase new ideas and methods for improving crops and other agricultural products. All rabbit and other animal shows have their origins from that day in Pittsfield, when two sheep were tied under an elm tree!





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