

Litter Training Your Rabbit: Reality 101

“Rabbits can use a litter box?!!” Why sure they can! Most rabbits are easily litter trained, however, the training process and litter box set up is somewhat different for a bunny than for a cat. So how do you go about litter training your rabbit? Let’s find out:

Spay/Neuter: The First Step

The most important thing to remember is that your rabbit is very unlikely to retain reliable litter box habits upon reaching sexual maturity unless she is spayed/he is neutered. Sex hormones give a rabbit an uncontrollable desire to mark the territory with urine and specially scented fecal pellets. Spay/neuter will eliminate or greatly reduce this drive (as well as eliminate the risk of uterine/ovarian cancer and unwanted pregnancy in females and testicular cancer in males). And let's not forget the huge relief from endless sexual frustration that spayed/neutered animals enjoy.

Get the Right Box!

To train your rabbit to use a litter box in a selected area, choose a litter box that is the right size for the bunny. Don't force a tiny dwarf rabbit to leap into an enormous, high-sided box designed for a gigantic cat--and don't make your French Lop squeeze his big frame into a toaster-sized toilet. The litter box should be comfortable, and located in a quiet, private place.

What Type of Litters are Safe for Rabbits?

Be sure to use ORGANIC litter in the box. Clay litters--especially clumping litters--are inexpensive, but very unhealthy for two reasons. First, the inhaled clay dust can cause respiratory problems. Second, when ingested as dust licked off paws or as a crunchy treat straight from the box (yes, some rabbits eat this litter!!), the highly dehydrated clay litter absorbs vital fluids from the intestine itself and can cause serious impactions and intestinal slowdowns. Clay litter is not healthy for rabbits!

Organic litters include those made from recycled paper products (e.g. Carefresh, Nature Fresh), pelleted wood sawdust (e.g. Feline Pine, Aspen pellets, Cozy-N-Fresh, or Woody Pet) or other pelleted organic products. We strongly advise against the use of CatWorks organic litter, however. This particular brand of litter contains a binder with a very high zinc content. We know of at least one confirmed death due to zinc poisoning in a bunny who ingested CatWorks. Do NOT ever use cedar or pine *shavings* (even those cute, dyed green ones!), as these produce potent aromatic compounds which cause liver damage when inhaled!

Setting Up The Box

To set up a rabbit litter box, simply put one or two inches of litter in the bottom of the box. Then cover this with a generous layer of grass hay such as Timothy, Orchard Grass or Bermuda grass for bunny to munch as she “does her business”. That’s it! Now – how to get the bunny to use the box?!

Getting Bunny to Use the Box

When you have set up a safe, comfortable box, put it in an area where the bunny can be comfortably confined for a few days, except for brief excursions for run and play. You can place the box inside the indoor hutch, tuck it behind the john in the bathroom, or place it in a corner of the laundry room: whatever is convenient as well as attractive to the bunny.

Use a baby gate to enclose the bunny in the selected room with his litter box, and be sure to provide plenty of toys, food, water and comfortable places to sleep. This will be bunny's home base and should be as inviting as you can make it. It may take a few days for the bunny to reliably use the box, as he may mark the area thoroughly as he settles in.

You will probably find that after a few days Bunny will pick a spot that he likes, and begin to reliably go there. If this happens, simply put the litter box in that spot. Voila! Bunny should begin using the litter box rather than the floor. Don't worry if it's not a spot you appreciate (like the very center of the kitchen!). Once Bunny is reliably using the box, you can gradually move it to another area.

It may help to soak or sweep up "accidents" (they're not accidents – but just Bunny claiming his territory) with a bit of tissue and put the tissue in the box. He'll get the idea! Like cats, most rabbits prefer to do their biz in a nice, absorbent spot such as a clean litter box.

The hay which you've put in the box will encourage the rabbit to use it. A rabbit will often sit in the box, happily munching at one end, while the processed product comes out the other end. This may seem a bit disgusting to a human, but rabbits don't consider their feces to be dirty. Some rabbits will even nap in the litterbox! As long as the litterbox is changed regularly, this should pose no problem: rabbit fecal pellets are hard, dry and relatively odorless.

In fact, rabbit litterbox leavings are just about the best natural, organic fertilizer you can get for your garden! Grow an herb garden, fertilize with bunny's litterbox leftovers (including the organic litter) and enjoy the ultimate in recycling!

Once your bunny is reliable about using the litterbox in his area, you can gradually increase his freedom. Be sure that he can always get back to his litterbox when he's free in the house. There's a possibility that he may pick a second area in the house as a toilet corner. If the behavior continues you may have to raise the white flag and provide another litterbox or two.

And how to clean bunny boxes? Warm water and dish detergent will work on most boxes, but on those with a layer of urine crystals a soak in white vinegar works wonders!

Good luck!

Adapted from an article by Dana Krempels (copyright 1998 - Dana Krempels)