

More Than Just A Chew Stick

By Margo DeMello

As a House Rabbit Society fosterer, I often receive calls from people who are trying to find homes for their rabbits. Except for those who didn't really want a rabbit in the first place, the number-one reason for discarding the rabbits is destructiveness. Even more frustrating are the calls from people wanting to adopt a rabbit as a house pet, even though they already have a rabbit, who lives out back in a hutch. When I ask why they can't bring their outside rabbit in, the answer is always the same: "Oh, she chews on our furniture. We're looking for a rabbit that won't do that." These phone calls are particularly heartbreaking because many of these lives could be saved if the callers provided the proper environment for the rabbit, an environment which centers around toys.

Why Playthings Matter

Toys for rabbits are necessities, along with a proper diet, a well thought out living set-up, and excellent medical care. Why? Toys are the key to three fundamental aspects of life with a house rabbit:

Mental stimulation.

Without challenging activities, your rabbit will get bored, especially if she has no nonhuman friends to keep her company. This feeling of isolation often leads to depression and/or destructiveness. Even senior and disabled rabbits need an environment that gives them things to do besides eating and sleeping.

Physical exercise.

Your rabbit needs safe activities to keep her body in shape as well as her mind. She needs things to climb on, crawl under, hop on and around, dig into, and chew on. Without outlets for these physical needs, she may become fat or depressed, or may create jumping, chewing, or crawling diversions with your furniture. My foster rabbits have used carpeted ramps for years, to enter and exit high cages, to get from one floor of a cage to another, and to enter--via the window--our rabbit-proofed back yard to play. These days, they have a Little Tykes playground with a ramp (actually a slide) whose only purpose is to climb on, and the rabbits appreciate the extra exercise.

Bunny proofing for your home.

Toys are not just for your rabbit; they also keep your house safe. By providing him with a selection of toys chosen to meet his age, sex, and temperament, you will fulfill most of the requirements for bunny-proofing your home. When people call me to complain about their rabbit's destructiveness, I always ask what they have done to bunny-proof their home. While many have done the obvious--covering phone and electrical cords, eliminating poisonous plants--they have not provided safe chewing and digging alternatives. It is not enough to remove all dangerous chewables from the premises. These must be replaced with safe toys; otherwise the rabbit's needs will not be met.

Important as toys are, they are no panacea. A rabbit who is frustrated because he never gets out of his cage, never gets any attention, or because he craves the company of a rabbit friend, is going to be a destructive rabbit. Make sure that you provide lots of stimulation, in the form of exercise and social contact, as well as toys.

How to Choose Toys

If you have ever bought a new toy for a cat, and, after removing the wrapping (and price tag!) found that Sweet Pea would rather pee on than play with her new ball, tunnel, mouse, or fishing pole, you know the frustration of having your toy rejected. Because all rabbits are different, all will not like the same kinds of toys, and some rabbits will use a toy differently than others. Rabbit toys can be extremely elaborate or very simple and can cost anywhere from nothing to hundreds of dollars. Luckily, rabbits don't care whether you spend your daughter's tuition funds on their toys or if you build them yourself out of discarded wood, cardboard and paper. Your rabbit will tell you what her own toy needs are. Does he like to hide in the stuffing under the recliner? Does she like to climb on top of the desk and poke around the printer? Does she dig furiously in the corner of the carpet? Does he run up and down the stairs with abandon? Have you ever noticed that the minute you let him out of the cage in the morning, he races to the refrigerator or the couch to continue the redecorating job he left off yesterday? HRS fosterer Holly O'Meara has pointed out that many rabbits are project-oriented and are only interested in an activity if it is going to occupy their mind and body for quite some time. I imagine it must be very satisfying for a bunny to finally complete a major architectural or interior-decorating job with which he has been occupied for a period of days or weeks. All of these behaviors warrant different kinds of toys.

Providing a lot of toys to an untrained or young rabbit doesn't mean that you can leave him loose for 8 hours and come home to an intact apartment. Don't give too much freedom too soon. Work with your rabbit and his personal tendencies, to set up a schedule of freedom that suits both of you. As he gets older, and after he's been neutered, he won't need as much discipline and he can be left out alone for longer periods of time, but don't rush it!

Toys and Temperaments

Here are some ideas based on types of activity. These are natural behaviors that need an outlet. By providing safe, non-destructive opportunities, you ensure that the rabbit will not be forced to improvise.

Burrowing.

Rabbits are tunneling animals, and most enjoy digging tunnels, or digging at the end of pre-made tunnels. You can get cardboard concrete forms from building suppliers (or from

contractor friends), which make great, inexpensive, chewable tunnels. You can also stuff newspaper into one end of the tunnel, providing lots of digging opportunities. For rabbits who like to lie in, rather than dig in, a tunnel, you can buy cat tunnels made of nylon and synthetic sheepskin. These are extremely comfy, and one or another of our three bedroom rabbits occupies ours at all times. You can give your bun a long, narrow cardboard box, open at both ends, or just open at one. You can create a tunnel by setting up a running space between your couch and your wall, just big enough for Phoebe.

Digging.

Along with tunneling goes digging. Some rabbits enjoy digging at the end of a tunnel; others will dig wherever they can. World-class diggers need lots of opportunities to dig, and fortunately, these are easy to provide. A cardboard box, large litterbox or dishpan, or even a large wicker basket filled with hay, shredded newspapers, old magazines or junk mail, and any other safe shreddable, should do the trick. If there is a particular spot on the carpet that your rabbit likes to dig, you can cover it with furniture, a carpet scrap, or a piece of grass mat, but make sure to provide a digging box as well. **Shredding.**

Does Zippy peel the wallpaper or sheetrock? Rabbits who like to shred need to have paper products aplenty. An urban Yellow Pages is one of the best shredding choices. Unless your rabbit eats a great deal of the paper, shredding itself is not harmful, except to your house and possessions. You can give him the Yellow Pages on their own, or in a box or basket, with other shreddable items. Like many other rabbit activities, unfortunately shredding is not particularly neat, so keeping the shreddables in a box may keep your home a bit neater. A whisk broom, or full size broom (made of straw, not plastic) also provides a fun shredding toy.

Throwing.

All kinds of rabbits, from aggressive to mellow, like to throw things. Baby toys, keys, batta balls, and slinkies are all throwable alternatives to the food dish or litterbox. Make sure the toys are made of hard plastic or metal and have no edible parts. Some rabbits will even play toss with you, if you start the game.

Climbing.

Outgoing, rambunctious rabbits like to climb furniture, challenging the general statement that rabbits are happiest on the ground. Like mountain climbers, they enjoy both the thrill of the climb and the view from the top. Set up a series of boxes which are stabilized at the bottom, so that your rabbit can safely climb from level to level. Some commercial cat trees are great for rabbits as well, as they provide perches at the top of each level. You can use ramps to help your little explorer get onto the tops of things (his cage, for example, covered with a rug), or you can use a ramp and perch combination as an end in itself. And you can easily build a little condo, out of wood or (for temporary use until it's destroyed) cardboard, with holes in the side for lookouts, ramps connecting the floors, and a "sundeck" on top to view the world.

Chewing

This is perhaps the central concern of most bunny caretakers. Rabbits need to chew, both for physical and psychological reasons. Wicker baskets, non-poisonous logs and sticks,

cardboard, paper, straw, and pine cones are all good choices. If Potato enjoys chewing holes into the back of the couch, give her a closed cardboard box filled with paper or straw, with a small hole in it to start, and let her finish the job. Be imaginative! Provide a toy box of untreated wicker or cardboard full of different sizes and shapes and textures of wood, dried-out pine cones, cardboard tubes or other safe items.

Do not give just a chew stick! People often buy these strange orange-and-green wooden sticks from the pet-supply store for their new rabbit, and are surprised to see that Thumper barely sniffs his before starting in on the baseboards. Especially for a young rabbit, or a particularly chew-conscious rabbit, chew-toys need to be interesting (which a chew stick is not, even if it's dyed orange and shaped like a carrot) and plentiful. The more toys, and the greater variety, the better. A rabbit who has only a stick, a log, or a piece of two-by-four to chew on, is going to be a bored rabbit. And a bored rabbit is a naughty rabbit.

Bunching.

Some rabbits like to "organize" rugs, bedding, pillows, or towels. If your rabbit spends a lot of time on the bed, pushing, pulling, and biting the sheets and blankets until they're just right, he will probably enjoy his own towel to bunch around on the floor. This could be an old hand towel, preferably with low nubs, or it could be more extravagant, such as a pillow or two. Make sure that he's not actually eating the towel, which would be dangerous, and is just biting, pushing, bunching and pulling it.

Hitting.

Aggressive rabbits who lunge, growl, threaten, snort, and box often enjoy having toys on which they can take out their aggressions. Anything that is partially immobile, yet is flexible enough to move when hit, is fun. Hanging parrot toys (don't get the small-bird toys, like those made for cockatiels, because the plastic can be easily chewed apart), hanging baby toys (a mobile is the best!), or plastic rainbow slinkies which have been hung on the top of the cage, all provide a high-energy rabbit with a suitable outlet for her emotions.

Rolling, nudging.

Some rabbits like to play with balls. The large, rubber balls work the best, the ones that you find in large baskets at drug/discount stores. Some people like to give their rabbits balloons, but these are too dangerous, given the loud noise when the balloon breaks, and the small pieces of plastic that result.

When it comes to toys, always give too much, not too little. Observing your rabbit's preferred activities, and devising toys that will engage him, can be a mutually enjoyable experience, a game within a game.