

Winter Production

Bobbi Larimer

Rabbits if left alone, have their babies in the late spring and early summer. This makes sense. The weather is warm and there is plenty of food and water available. We humans want our rabbits to have babies all year. Our big national shows are in the spring and we want to have 4 and 5 month juniors to show. Juniors in the spring means babies born in January. Not a normal rabbit activity, this is the challenge of winter production.

Since our rabbits are part of a show herd, food is always available. fresh unfrozen water is critical for the well-being of the entire herd. If your barn is unheated, give your animals fresh water twice a day. The increased daylight of spring and summer can be mimicked by leaving lights on in your barn 12-14 hours a day. A timer works well. Extend the daylight both morning and evening.

A nest box warmer is a good thing to have if your nights get below 25 degrees. A lot of people use heat lamps over the nest box. This make me nervous. There is a great danger of fire from a heat lamp. Try to put your heat source below the cage where the rabbit can't get at it. By having the heat at the bottom of the nest box, the babies will burrow into the nest material and stay warmer. I use nest box warmer made from heat tape and cage wire. White pine shavings is a good nest material. They are absorbent and will mix with the fur to make a fluffy nest.

OK, you have done everything that I suggested and you still are having trouble getting winter babies. Maybe you have does that don't like having babies. Does that like to have babies are the key. I breed for 6 litters a year and if a doe doesn't keep 4 litters, she leaves my barn. It is rare for me to have a doe older than 2. If she is doing her job, I have her granddaughters having babies by the time she is 2. If everything is progressing the way I want, her granddaughters are prettier than her and cage space is always a problem. A younger animal is more fertile and if the good mothering instinct is present, a young doe will give you more babies, most every time.

Now, what to do with the grandmother who has done such a good job for you? I have found that there is always a market for brood does, especially for mothers. If you are a new breeder look for the older does. If she has been doing her job, she wouldn't look like much. Look at her daughters before you buy and then buy as many as you can.

The keys to winter production are good food, plenty of fresh, unfrozen water and does that like to have babies.