

PRODUCTION OF RABBITS IN GHANA: EXPERIENCE, IMPORTANCE AND PROBLEMS INVOLVED

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Rabbit meat is one of the most nutritious white meats available for human consumption. Due to its nutritional attributes and easy digestion, it is often recommended for low-sodium and weight-reduction diets and in diets geared toward senior citizens, persons with heart disease, and those having difficulties digesting other meats.

Rabbits are characterized by small body size, short gestation period, high reproductive potential, rapid growth rate, genetic diversity, and their ability to utilize forages. Rabbits are highly adaptable to be reared under different production systems and consequently of considerable value for both small scale production and in developing countries.

Rabbit production is relatively important to the economy of some developing countries like Nigeria, Egypt, Ghana, Morocco, and Cape Verde. Rabbit rearing in Ghana has been socially accepted on the combined basis of the low space requirement, high reproductive rate, and no apparent competition with humans for the same foods, minimal zoonotic health hazard and minor capital investment as well as no social taboos affecting the consumption of rabbit meat.

Rabbit production in Ghana helps to supply sustainable animal protein and improve upon the standard of living of its people.

The domestic rabbit's diet depends upon whether it is a pet, a meat or a fur rabbit. Meat and fur rabbits are fed diets which will improve meat or fur production and allow for the safe delivery of large litters of healthy kits while minimizing costs and producing faeces which meet waste regulations where appropriate.

Rabbit production in developing countries is based on low cost feeding, using locally available feedstuffs. Rabbits are herbivores and will consume large quantities of forage (greens) which people do not eat and convert this forage into valuable meat for human consumption. In Ghana, feeds commonly given to rabbits include grasses such as Guinea grass (*Panicum maximum*) and stargrass (*Cynodon dactylon*); legumes such as Kudzu (*Pueraria phaseoloides*), groundnut haulms and cowpea haulms; root crops such as sweet potato leaves and cassava chips; and various herbs such as Tridax procumbens, Euphorbia

and Aspillia. This indicates that, unlike chickens, rabbits compete minimally with humans for grains.

Housing constitutes an important factor for a successful rabbit production. Modern methods for housing domestic rabbits vary from region to region across the globe and by type of rabbit, technological & financial opportunities and constraints, intended use, number of animals kept, and the particular preferences of the owner/farmer.

It is possible, however, to construct rabbit housing from locally available materials such as old packing cases, intermeshed branches or bamboo strips, or local hard wood or bamboo-like material. Housing made of wood would have to be renewed more frequently due to gnawing than that constructed from wire for example.

Rabbit housing in tropical countries should be designed and situated to keep the rabbits as cool and quiet as possible, to keep out predators such as python and cats, and to keep out dogs and children which may disturb the rabbit leading to general unthriftiness.

We carried out a sociological study, during which a survey was conducted of 40 farmers engaged in the production of rabbit meat. Tabl. 1 and fig. 1 show the demographic characteristics of rabbit meat producers, in tabl. 2–4 we showed the distribution of farmers according to the organizational and technological characteristics of production.

Table 1

Age distribution of farmers

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage, %
≤ 20	6	15.00
21–40	17	42.50
41–60	14	35.00
61 and above	3	7.50
Total	40	100.00

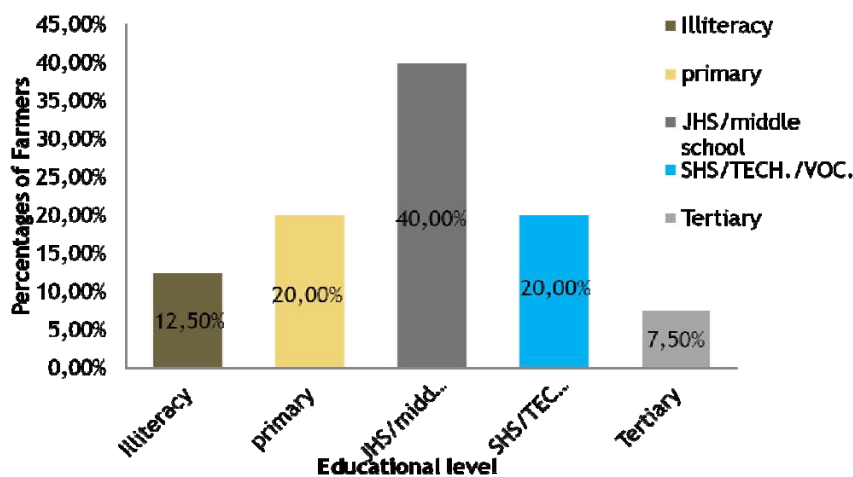


Fig. 1. Educational distribution of farmers

Table 2

Reason for keeping rabbits

Purpose	Frequency	Percentage, %
Meat (food)	3	7.50
Income	22	55.00
Hobby	1	2.50
Multipurpose	14	35.00
Others example: wool, research purpose, skin	–	–
Total	40	100.00

Table 3

Types of feedstuffs farmers use

Types of feedstuffs	Frequency	Percentage, %
Forage/ fodder	22	55.00
Hay	1	2.50
Kitchen waste	–	–
Agriculture by-products	–	–
Multi- feedstuffs	17	42.50
Others	–	–
Total	40	100.00

Table 4

Times of feeding of rabbits per day

Times of feeding per day	Frequency	Percentage, %
Once	1	2.50
Twice	21	52.50
Thrice	16	40.00
Others (more than three times)	2	5.00
Total	40	100.00

Importance of rabbit production:

1. Source of food. Rabbit meat as a white meat is relished by health conscious consumers, the elderly and people living with debilitating disease conditions due to its low fat and cholesterol content.

2. Source of cash income. According to USDA's foreign Ag service, live rabbit and hare export in 2012 were valued at \$ 582,000 down 7 % from 2011. Canada and the United Kingdom were the top buyers with purchases of \$ 471,000 and \$ 86,000 respectively.

3. Source of Manure. Rabbit manure is one of the best manures for organic gardens. It improves poor soil by improving soil structure and also improving the life cycle of the beneficial microorganisms in the soil.

Rabbit production is gaining importance as one of the major agricultural enterprises. Upon numerous benefits in rabbit production, there are problems affecting the returns to the rabbit keepers:

1. Disease and Pest. The common diseases of rabbits are scours (also referred to as bloat or mucoid enteritis), coccidiosis, ear mange, sore eyes (weepy eyes), sore hocks and vent disease (rabbit syphilis). In addition, the respiratory disease caused by *Pasturella multocida* is responsible for decreased productivity and a high mortality rate in does.

2. Climatic Condition Problems. Rabbits must be protected from the extremes of heat, rain, sun, strong drafts and winds. Semi-open, windowed and well naturally ventilated building may be suitable in hot climates. In the tropical regions, climate poses the main problem for breeders. Thus rabbits are very sensitive to heat. At temperature of over 30 °C, they lose their appetite and their growth rate slows down.

3. Labour Intensive. Management entails breeding, housing, equipment, feeding, health maintenance, record keeping and marketing. Failure in any one phase will negatively impact other areas.

Rabbit production does not need technical skills. Therefore any interested person can go into it without any complications. It is cheaper to embark on rabbit production than other ventures such as poultry, cattle and swine. It is cheaper to produce rabbits, and their meat can be a best substitute for highly demanded meat such as chicken, beef and pork.