

**pets** By Toni Brett

# Here Comes Peter Cottontail

**K**ids love Easter bunnies, and this time of year many yearn to have a fuzzy rabbit in their own home. As an apartment dweller and the proud "mother" of Riddles, my third mini-lop rabbit, I know firsthand that rabbits make wonderful indoor pets. I've seen my bunnies act like Pied Pipers as excited children followed their every hop—both indoors and out. However, rabbits also require special care to lead happy, healthy lives.

Unfortunately, many parents don't see rabbits as "real" animals, but rather as "low-maintenance, starter pets that can be owned by children," says Mary Cotter, Ed.D., a licensed educator for the House Rabbit Society (HRS), a national nonprofit rabbit rescue group. She stresses that parents should be the main caregivers.

HRS and other agencies discourage adoptions during holidays. "Often, bun-

nies get neglected when holiday excitement fades," Cotter says. Generally, rabbits live six to ten years—a lengthy commitment. Consider if this is the proper pet for you and your family.

- **Choose a pet carefully.** If it is the right pet, where should you get your rabbit? Rather than buying one from a pet store or breeder, try to adopt one from HRS or a reputable animal shelter. Some pet stores and breeders may be unscrupulous about care and sell bunnies with hidden illnesses.

Spend some time getting to know your prospective pet. Try to pick a calm rabbit over one that's high-strung (bunnies are naturally skittish, anyway), and never adopt a bunny less than 8 weeks old.

Most children do best with hardy, larger rabbits that will reach an adult size of at least six pounds. These include mixed breeds, mini-lops and New Zealand



"He gives so much love," says Toni Brett of her rabbit, Riddles.

Whites. Avoid the popular dwarf rabbits, which can get anxious around children.

- **Respect your rabbit.** "Our rabbit is part of our family," says Sue Fanis of Bloomington, Illinois. She and her husband taught their daughters to "treat the bunny as a living thing, not a plaything."

Designate playtimes and areas around your house where your child and rabbit can interact. Teach children to play with the bunny close to the floor to avoid dropping and injuring the pet. With proper supervision, rabbits can be appropriate pets for children age 6 and older.

- **Keep Flopsy fit.** Find a vet trained in rabbit care (HRS can recommend one) and schedule yearly checkups. Bunnies don't need vaccinations, but they should be spayed or neutered at 4 months old. Besides curbing population

growth, these procedures reduce the risk of uterine can-

cer (a common illness) in females and can correct aggression problems in males.

Rabbits also need several hours of supervised, out-of-cage exercise every day. Rabbits are runners and diggers, so even if yours plays in a fenced-in yard, keep him on a harness leash.

- **Provide a balanced diet.** "Most health problems in older rabbits are due to overfeeding and poor diet," says Karen Rosenthal, D.V.M., director of avian and exotic animal services at Antech Diagnostics in Farmingdale, New York.

Baby bunnies need unlimited amounts of high-protein pellets and alfalfa hay. At six months switch to low-protein, high-fiber pellets and a grass hay such as Timothy or Bermuda. (Hay is crucial for proper digestion.)

Introduce small amounts of dark, leafy green vegetables at 3 months; adults will eat up to 3 cups daily. Limit carrots and fruits; never feed a rabbit cereal or bread. ■

*Toni Brett is a freelance writer in New York City.*

## Home, Sweet Home

Some things you'll need to consider to make your rabbit's home safe and comfortable:

- Supply fresh water and food twice a day; clean bowls every day.

- The rabbit's cage or pen should be 4 to 5 feet long by 2 feet high by 2 feet deep. Never put a rabbit in an aquarium.

- Use newspaper and cardboard, not cedar chips or wood shavings, on the cage tray or pen floor.

- Rabbits can be litter-box trained. Put a litter box or tray in the "bathroom" corner of the cage or pen; clean it daily.

- "Bunnyproof" your home. Encase computer cables and phone wires in plastic tubing (available at hardware stores) to prevent chewing and electric shock. Other potential hazards include treated wood and houseplants.

For more information about caring for an indoor rabbit, contact the House Rabbit Society, P.O. Box 1201, Alameda, CA 94501, 510-521-4631, or visit their Web site at <http://www.rabbit.org>.



Ideally, the cage should be at least four times as large as your rabbit.