

## ***Boost Your Garden Yields with Rabbits***

By Jodi Perez, BCMG Intern



Are you looking for a new way to improve your organic garden yields? Are you a sustainable home stead enthusiast or have an interest in raising small livestock or pets? I'd like to introduce you to rabbits! Rabbits are a great way to give your garden a maximum organic boost with a minimal investment. Rabbits are easy to take care of and with simple husbandry practices, your rabbits will remain happy and disease free, while producing what some of us call **Bunny Gold**.

This Bunny Gold I'm referring to is rabbit manure. Rabbit manure is approximately 3 percent nitrogen, 1 percent phosphorous, and 3 percent potassium. You can use rabbit manure fresh from the source. It does not need to be composted and will not burn your plants. Rabbit manure can be used in gardens, pots, as a top dressing for your lawn in its convenient pelleted form or it can be soaked in water and used as a 'tea'. Pour the *tea* around the dripline of plants. Rabbit manure has little odor, an added bonus because spreading it on the lawn or used in your garden won't offend the neighbors. Rabbit manure is less likely to contain pathogens that can cause illness in people than other manures. However, it is still recommended that it be composted for at least four months before adding it to vegetable gardens, to reduce the risk of foodborne illnesses.

The beginning of our most recent journey with rabbits presented a small problem. We now live in Texas and we needed to find the right rabbits. Due to the hot summers here, most rabbits do not fare well, unless they are indoor pets. This was not an option for us, so we set to work doing research. That's when we found the Texas A&M University-Kingsville Rabbit Program. They raise and sell their project rabbits to the public. These rabbits are selectively bred to withstand the high heat of Texas, to produce large litters, and for quick weight gain. We drove to Kingsville to get our rabbits.

We now have two adult (9-lb.) Texas A&M University-Kingsville rabbits. Our two breeding rabbits produce a five-gallon bucket of manure every two weeks. This has consistently been enough manure to enrich my garden plots, pots and worm composter at home. When we are raising kits, we have enough left over to donate manure to the Bulverde Community Garden.

We also discovered an added bonus. Our rabbits eat our fruit and veggie kitchen scraps and plant stalks from the garden after harvests. Instant compost!

Our breeding pair of rabbits also produce litters on average of nine kits. We offer some of our kits for sale to others interested in using rabbits as a sustainable food source. Selling our kits pays for our rabbit and gardening related costs so we operate for free or a slight profit.



Rabbit hutches in the Perez family's backyard.

Rabbit care is relatively simple. Our rabbits have hutches off the ground for sanitation and disease/parasite control. We built the hutches from reclaimed lumber, providing a learning environment for our son. They have shade and air flow in summer, wind block in the winter. We feed the rabbits pellets, hay, and fruit and veggie scraps from the kitchen and garden. They get plenty of fresh water. Our rabbits have been happy and healthy.

Rabbits have provided my family a rewarding and tangible learning experience. Raising our rabbits is part of a full circle of sustainability. My job with our little rabbitry is overall husbandry and management. My 9-year-old 'trains' our kits to be gentle before they go to new homes through daily handling. Together, my son and I gather manure and distribute. We all watch our plants and animals grow and thrive.

I highly recommend adding a rabbit or two to your gardening plan. Rabbits are a relatively inexpensive and enjoyable way to add outstanding organic material to your garden. Rabbits also provide an enjoyable way to bring your garden into the full circle of sustainable management.

Whether you are raising rabbits as pets or for meat, I recommend the following AgriLife Extension publication for more information on raising rabbits in Texas: [Backyard Production of Meat Rabbits in Texas by Steven D. Lukefahr, Joe C. Pascal, and John E. Ford. AgriLife Extension publication E-138.](#)

For more information on using rabbit manure in your garden: [Bunny Honey: Using rabbit manure as a fertilizer. Dixie Sandborn, Michigan State University Extension.](#)

Photos courtesy of Jody Perez, BCMG Intern