

Rabbits make hopping-good pets for seniors

By Daniel Casciato
For *Beaver County Senior News*

Cats and dogs aren't the only shelter animals seeking new homes. If you're looking for a household pet, consider adopting a rabbit. February is Adopt a Shelter Rabbit Month; many rabbits abandoned at area shelters are in need of new homes.

For seniors, a rabbit can be a wonderful indoor companion. Not only do they get along with cats and dogs, they are also intelligent, affectionate and inquisitive, and can readily learn to use a litter box.

Organizations like the Pittsburgh House Rabbit Club, a local group that educates

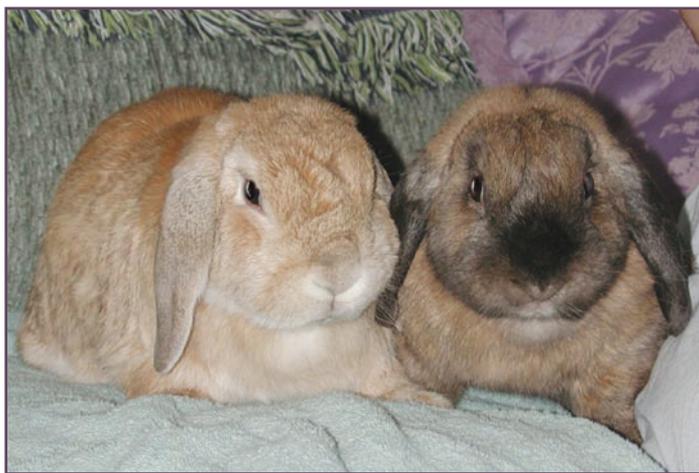


Photo provided by House Rabbit Society

Furry friends Angel and Melanie.

owners and supports shelters, is encouraging people around the region to adopt rabbits. If you're considering doing so, Rabbit Club co-founder Mary Cvetan says that having two rabbits (spayed and neutered,

of course!) is preferable because they like to have a companion.

"That way if you're gone for the day, your rabbit has another rabbit to hang out with," she says.

Mary adds that you can easily put two rabbits together and expect everything to be harmonious. "We do something called Bunny Blind Dates for owners who want to introduce their pet rabbit to a second rabbit. We introduce their bunny to shelter rabbits one at a time in a very deliberate and controlled way. We watch for signs of dislike, disinterest, aggression or love at first sight. We always tell people to let their bunny choose their own mate so that they will get along."

Owning a rabbit is similar in ways to having a cat or dog. "Like cats, rabbits use a litter box, are relatively quiet, are nice and soft, and like to be petted," Mary says. "It's

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very calming to sit and pet a rabbit."

Like dogs, rabbits are pack animals. In the wild in Spain, before they were domesticated hundreds of years ago, they lived in large colonies like dogs.

"Because they are pack animals, they acclimate very well to living with humans. They also learn body language and verbal commands."

Mary says that because rabbits are naturally social animals, they want to be with you. She recommends keeping your rabbit in the house. Rabbits need affection and can become wonderful companion animals if given a chance to interact with you.

"That's why we absolutely insist that people keep their rabbits in the house," Mary says. "That's the only way you can build a relationship with them. Plus, living indoors keeps them safe from predators and parasites."

One question that Mary addresses often from potential bunny owners is whether they bite. "Yes, they bite. Dogs bite, cats bite, and people bite, so of course rabbits bite, but only if they have a good reason."

According to the National House Rabbit Society, bunny proofing your home is another part of living with a house rabbit. It is natural for rabbits to chew on furniture, rugs, drapes, and, most deadly of all, electrical cords.

"Because they chew and dig, that could be a problem or it could not be a problem," explains Mary. "Every animal has an issue. Dogs bark. Cats walk on countertops after being in their litter box. All of those things are solvable, and with bunnies, you need to bunny proof your home. Don't have cords out where bunnies can reach them."

Giving your rabbits a safe chewable will distract them from chewing furniture and rugs. "It's like training toddlers; you have to give them a 'yes'. You can't say no to them chewing the baseboards or cords without giving them an alternative. I give them cardboard boxes to dig in; for chewing, they get phone books and cardboard toilet paper tubes stuffed with hay."

Mary's organization, which launched in July 2005, focuses on educating people who own rabbits – and those planning to bring one home – on issues and situations like bunny proofing. "There are plenty of resources available for people who have dogs, cats and birds, but there's very little for people who have rabbits, which are becoming a more popular pet. Because I live in a region where there are three shelters that take rabbits, we don't have to do hands-on rescue. We can focus on education and work with the shelters."

Before getting rabbit, Mary advises that you get the facts. "Do some research and talk to experienced

people first. That's why the club exists. People can email us via our website or come to the shelters, where we hold weekly events, and talk to us about the pros and cons of rabbits. Sometimes we try to talk people out of getting a rabbit – something pet stores are not likely to do. We make it a win-win for human and bunny." *BCSN*

To adopt a rabbit, contact one of the three regional animal shelters: Animal Friends at (412) 847-7000 or www.animal-friends.org; Animal Rescue League of Western Pennsylvania at (412) 661-6452 or www.animalrescue.org; or the Western Pennsylvania Humane Society at (412) 321-4625 or www.wpahumane.com.

Thinking of adopting a rabbit as a pet?

Rabbits live eight to 12 years. Before you get one, Pittsburgh House Rabbit Club encourages you to answer these questions to make sure you and your home are prepared to meet a bunny's basic needs.

Housing

Will your bunny live inside – safe and secure as a member of the family? There is no such thing as a safe outdoor cage. Rabbits can die from heart attacks at the very approach of predators such as dogs, cats, raccoons and owls. They can also dig under fences to escape.

Will your bunny have its own space, a large dog crate, exercise pen or rabbit-proofed room to use for downtime?

Diet

Are you able to provide hay? Some people are allergic to it, or dislike the mess.

Are you willing to buy several types of leafy greens for your rabbit each week? Hay, greens and plenty of fresh water are critical for rabbit health. However, you should give only a small amount of food pellets each day.

Exercise

Will your rabbit have at least four hours of free playtime every day? Bunnies were built to run, jump, dig, climb and explore. Life in a cage is physically and mentally stressful.

Healthcare

Can you afford and are you willing to pay for your rabbit's veterinary care? This includes spaying/neutering and treatment of illness or injury.

Are you willing to spend time grooming your rabbit? You will need to brush it daily to keep excess hair from being ingested, which causes dangerous blockages. Also, rabbits' nails need to be cut regularly.

For more information, visit www.pittsburghhouserabbit.org.