

## Meat Rabbit Business Hopping

Raising rabbits can put meat on the table and money in the pocket. The easy-to-handle animals require very little in the way of start-up. Tammy Miller started her rabbit business with nothing more than 30 rabbits, cages, a tarp and some rebar.

"My husband had extra rebar around, so we welded it together to form a framework to hold cages and to support the tarp for an exterior," explains Miller, who lives near Ford City, Penn. "It's great to work with because you can expand as needed when adding more cages."

After three years of tarp-covered rabbit production, Miller was able to justify putting up a pole barn for her enterprise. The 24 by 40-ft. building will be able to house up to 400 rabbits at a time. She continues to use rebar for the cage racks, with each rack holding 48 rabbits in individual cages.

Currently, she carries water to the building; however, Miller is looking forward to plumbing in water lines and adding heat to her set-up.

"My biggest problem is water freeze-up," says Miller. "As long as it stays above 32 degrees, I'm in pretty good shape."

Successful rabbit production starts with having a ready market. Miller raises her rabbits to meet the 5-lb. weight the restaurant trade demands.

Successful rabbit production also requires understanding the cyclical nature of the business. "The biggest demand is in the winter, when we get as much as \$1.10 per lb., but that will drop to 60 to 65¢ by summer," says Miller, who drives truck for her husband in the summer months. "It's a nice part-time business, but it's no way to get rich quick."

Understanding rabbits helps, too, of course. When Miller first raised rabbits, she built her cages with wood and wire. Between the rabbits chewing on the wood and moisture rotting it, she learned that metal cages were the answer. Today she builds her own metal cages. She has also found a low-cost and easy-to-clean method for collecting rabbit manure from under the stacked cages.



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"In the past I used Dura-Pan beneath each cage to catch the rabbit waste," says Miller. "Now I recycle old conveyer belts used in mines. One length runs under each row of cages, and I can just scrape the manure off easily."

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Miller says she gets up to \$1.10 per lb. for rabbit meat during the winter.

## Herens Cattle Thrive On Low Quality Forage

"They gain weight on poor quality forage, they're highly resistant to disease, and their meat tastes great," says George Lemon about the rare Herens cattle breed that he raises on his Lewisburg, W. Va. farm.

Herens cattle are black with a dark brown tinge. They originated in the Herens Valley in Switzerland, which is located in the most rugged part of the country. They have a history dating back to Roman times.

Lemon first saw Herens cattle in the early 1970's when he traveled to Switzerland. He visited two agriculture schools where he learned that the Herens breed won most carcass contests, had very few health problems, were easy feeders, and were easy to handle.

He brought his first animal back to the U.S. in 1980 and has been breeding them ever since. He still has the only complete herd of full-blooded Herens cattle in North America. "I've sold some cows and bulls to Donald Sherwood of Binghamton, N.Y. But there are still only 75 Herens cattle in the entire U.S., and only about 12,000 in

the world," he says.

According to Lemon, Heren cattle are well muscled and attractive and don't seem to be affected by either extreme cold or heat. "My cattle have had no health problems. They have been wintered with several other breeds of cattle and have always entered the spring in better body condition and with more weight than other breeds."

He says the meat has very little fat and is extremely tasty. The bone structure is small and strong, contributing to rich carcass weights. "These cattle have the highest dressing percentage of any cattle I could find in Europe. They dress out one or two percentage points higher than any other breed I could find over there," he says.

Heren cattle can winter on low quality forage when most other cattle need grain and silage, says Lemon. "You can turn these cattle out anywhere. I had an 80-acre tract with nothing but brush on it. There was no good grass. I turned five cows out there one spring to see what would happen, and they thrived. It was almost like turning out a bunch of goats



Heren cattle are well muscled, attractive, disease-resistant, can eat low-quality forage, and don't seem affected by extreme hot or cold weather, says Lemon.

— they know how to get along where the getting's not so good.

"I used to also have a bunch of Herefords and Black Angus and shorthorn crossbreds. If I feed them all hay, the Herefords and Angus and shorthorns look like they're starving to death. But the Herens cattle look like they're feeding on grain."

Another positive is that the breed is disease resistant. "I've never vaccinated my cattle for IBR or PR3 or other viruses be-

cause these cattle just don't seem to get sick.

"I'm 66 years old and have been fooling with these cattle for 26 years. I'm at the age where I ought to sell them and let someone else promote them," he adds.

Bulls sell for \$2,500 to \$5,000.

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## Hog Barn Converted To Winter Plant Business

A personal need turned into an on-farm business for Anna and Ivan Zettle. When they decided to stop farrowing sows and buy feeder pigs instead, Anna had an idea for what to do with the old gestation building. In 2002 she and Ivan turned the barn into Anna's Plant Paradise.

"My potted plant hobby had gotten out of hand," she recalls. "I had more than 100 potted tropical plants that I needed to put somewhere over the winter."

Zettle decided that if she needed a place to winter plants, perhaps others did, too. Zettle and her husband decided to clear out the 30-ft. by 120-ft. building and replace the south facing roof section and south facing open front with double-walled, polycarbonate paneling.

Most people she told about the project said it would never work. However, a couple in a neighboring town had been overwintering plants in their commercial greenhouse and encouraged her to make the investment. They planned to discon-

tinue that part of their business and offered to refer customers to her.

Including the poly walls, two heaters, ventilation fans, louvers, vents and spray-on insulation on the north roof and wall, the Zettles invested \$15,000 to convert half the building.

"With the exception of three days of roof panel installation, we did all the work," says Zettle. "Initially, my goal was to have enough clients to cover the fuel bill, so I could keep my plants for free. It has more than done that."

The first year she charged \$20 a plant for the season. The second season she charged \$25 after propane prices climbed. This year she is charging \$30 for keeping plants over the winter. Pickup and delivery is extra.

"I figure, I have the plants longer than they do and for less than \$5 a month," says Zettle. "We put the greenhouse into our farm enterprise record keeping system, and it isn't showing a profit yet, but..."

In the meantime, she has a growing busi-

ness she enjoys, especially on cold January days. She has also found plants and people to be fun to get to know.

"I have a lemon tree that has fruit before, at all stages and two grapefruit trees a client's mother started from seed," relates Zettle. "Though they had never borne fruit, after the second winter in the greenhouse, both bloomed and set fruit."

Building the business has been a learning experience. "I did \$200 worth of advertising and got nothing out of it," says Zettle.

Most new clients find her by word of mouth and most are from the nearby city of Madison, Wis. One greenhouse manager near Madison sends clients her way, and she has a website for the business. She has also expanded the business to include short-term plant sitting, short and long term plant rental, and garden maintenance.

Zettle is considering expanding the space. "I could fill another 16-ft. section just with the clients I have," she says. "I had one client tell me this fall he was cutting back, and



Exotic plants fill the former hog barn.

he would only have five big plants and 7 small to overwinter. When we picked them up, he had 20 small and 8 gut busters on his back patio."

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