

# Hoppin' Down the Bunny Trail?

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Springtime is here, which means, as the lyrics of the song “Peter Cottontail” so memorably put it, that “Easter’s on its way.” During this wonderful time of year, in addition to visions of jellybeans, chocolate eggs, and other sweet treats, children often dream of having a real bunny in their holiday basket, a fluffy friend for them to love and adore.

If you decide to add a bunny to your household, plenty of options are available. The American Rabbit Breeders Association recognizes more than 50 breeds, each with its own variations in color, fur and ears. Nearly every shade of fur imaginable, from white or cream, tan, brown, grey, and black, is represented in the many varieties of beautiful bunnies. Some breeds feature additional markings that form patterns or rings, or just add random splotches of color. Rabbits can have short- or long-haired coats, such as the Lionhead breed, which has fur so thick, that it resembles a powder puff. Two styles of ears are present in bunnies: erect, which are the tall, pointy variety, or lopped, which are the floppy, low-hanging type. With its ears down and held close to the head, the Blue-Eyed White (BEW) Holland lop (pictured left), is an excellent example of the latter style of ears. Eye colors include brown, blue, grey, and, less commonly, pink or even ruby-red.

Rabbits run the full gamut of sizes from the Netherland Dwarf, which ranges in weight from a petite 1-3/4 to 2-1/2 lbs., all the way up to the giant breeds which can reach as much as 12 to 14 lbs. upon maturity. The biggest of the bunnies, the Flemish Giant, is only recommended for those who are well versed at working with rabbits, since it has a massive, long body and requires strength to handle.

## Bunny Basics 101

Before you hop down the bunny trail, though, it’s good to understand that, although bunnies may be small, adopting one is a big commitment. First, let’s look at the bottom line. According to RabbitInsider.com, you can expect to spend up to \$600 upon adopting or purchasing a pet rabbit and buying all the essential supplies like a litter box, rabbit cage, chew toys, a hutch, food, and more. After these initial expenses, you’ll probably spend between \$500 and \$800 annually on average for food, water, litter, and routine medical expenses. Keep in mind that these costs can vary greatly and will depend on how much medical care your rabbit needs and whether you need to spend any extra money on home and furniture repairs.

It’s important to fully appreciate the cost of keeping your bunny well fed. A common misconception is that the mainstays of a rabbit’s diet are bunny pellets and carrots; however, in reality, your bunny’s main source of sustenance is hay, which should be available to your pet at all times. Baby bunnies dine on a diet of alfalfa hay and alfalfa pellets until they are about six months old. As they mature, rabbits will transition to grass hays (oat, orchard grass, or timothy) and the cost of providing this essential material, which is vital to the rabbit’s dental and digestive health, may begin to add up over time. Individuals who are sensitive to grass or hay may find that having these products in the home aggravates their allergies, which may need to be treated, resulting in an extra item in your budget.



In addition to the hay, the rabbit’s diet is supplemented with timothy pellets and a small salad containing at least three fresh vegetables every day, plus thumb-sized servings of fruit given as a treat several times a week. Additional produce purchases of these items, such as dandelion greens, herbs, and romaine lettuce, need to be accounted for in your bunny budget.

It’s also important to know that having a rabbit will mean some expenses related to bunny-proofing the home. Rabbits naturally have an instinct to gnaw, which helps to exercise their mind as well as to file down their teeth. If you plan to give your bunny free rein to explore within certain sections of the home, you may need to purchase gates to fence off those areas. Then, look closely at the carpets, furnishings, molding, other household fixtures, and important papers that may be at their level, and take steps to protect these items from potential damage. For their safety, you will also want to keep electrical cords and wires out of their reach, by running wires through PVC pipe or other plastic tubing, wrapping cords, or tucking them under furniture or beneath carpets.

After these considerations, it is important to weigh the time you will need to invest in caring for your new furry friend. Contrary to what many people may believe, a rabbit is not a low-maintenance pet; bunnies are intelligent, energetic animals that require social interaction, lots of exercise, and other enrichment activities every day. They enjoy having their own little retreat inside the household, near the people they love. Having a multi-level cage or kitty tower will help to ensure that your bunny stays fit and trim. Getting playthings for your rabbit can be as economical as providing





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## Give "Some Bunny" a Good Home

Why shop when you can adopt? If you want to get a pet bunny, consider obtaining one from a rescue and providing it a loving "forever" home! To find a rabbit rescue, log on to PetFinder.com or RabbitRescueMe.org/Florida.

Cottontail with paper towel and toilet paper rolls, cardboard boxes, old phone books, pieces of junk mail, and other items you might otherwise recycle; however, if you want to buy them a special treat, they also like playing with parrot and cat toys, such as bat-a-balls.

Having realistic expectations and understanding the rabbit's unique personality are important, particularly if you are bringing one into a family with young children. Although they can often be affectionate pets, bunnies may not be as cuddly or huggable as some people may imagine, especially when they are first brought home and acclimating to their new living environment. Since they prefer being on the ground, rabbits may not enjoy being held and may try to actively free themselves from a person's arms, scratching that individual and possibly injuring themselves in the process. Rabbits also tend to be shy, so they may be less likely to come out when they hear loud noises such as children engaged in active play. With patience, encouragement, and time, however, it is possible to gently train most bunnies to become more affectionate.

Now that we've explored the "bunny basics," it is clear that, while they may require our care and patience, adorable, fluffy bunnies can be wonderful, fun pets.

## "Happy" Easter!

The advice provided in this article is general in nature and may need to be adapted for your specific situation. Always consult your veterinarian.

# Swonger | Waldoch

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