



Raising Backyard Meat Rabbits

Transcript – Module 5

Thank you for joining me for module five. This module is going to be all about preparing for those babies and the birth of those babies on the homestead. I'm going to show you how to support mom during that pregnancy and keep her in good condition when she's nursing those babies. We're going to talk about what can go wrong with a first-time mom and how to foster those kits to another mother. But if you don't have a foster mother, I'm going to show you how to successfully raise those babies yourself and give them a fighting chance. And lastly, we're going to talk about how soon is too soon to breed. Again, talk about scheduling your breeding so that you have room in the grow out pens for your babies. Alright, let's dive back into the adventure of raising backyard rabbits.

So, you've bred your does and you marked your calendar for 28 days to put the nest box in. So, how to prepare for the babies? Well, first of all, I'll leave a plan in the resources to build a wooden nest box. And I breed in the winter so, a winter nest box looks like this with a flat bottom. And then a summer nest box might be more something like this. Maybe you could even use metal or you could use even a netting in the bottom like a hardware cloth in the bottom for ventilation to help with those, that summer heat. And then, you put the nest box in, like I said, on the 28th day, put hay in it and don't worry, she'll arrange it just how she wants it. She might take it all out and put it back in again. So, now it's important to note that the bottom, whatever you do decide to put in the nest box, needs to be rough. We had an experience where we put some tile in there thinking that would be a good bottom. It was something like board with a smooth ... anyway, I can't remember, but the kit ended up with splayed legs because one of the kits, because they couldn't get a grip on the bottom here. So, you want just something rough on the bottom.

Alright, and then most does give birth in the middle of the night, somewhere between the 29th and the 31st day. Now if your doe goes, you know, 35 days out, she's not pregnant unfortunately, and you need to breed again. The last week of pregnancy, she gets all the food that she wants but her appetite will decrease right before she gives birth. That's one of the signs of birth, but you're probably not even gonna know it's going to happen. It can be ... she's probably going to do it right in the middle of the night. Now remember your baby saver wire. Please don't forget that. If you're using wire cages that have a bigger wire, then please put that on there before the 28th day when you put your nest box in. Now when the does gives birth, she does all the work. You should not have to be involved. In fact, you'll probably be asleep.

She will pull fur from her underbelly. A lot of fur sometimes, and she'll make it nest for the babies and that also uncovers her teats for the babies. So, a good mom will pull lots of fur, but she probably won't pull it until the very last minute. So, and then she'll nurse the babies and rabbits are funny. They only nurse the babies about five minutes, you know, three to five minutes sometimes once a day, sometimes twice a day. So, they're just in there like they hunch over and the babies climb up and nurse, they don't even lay down and nurse like a cat or dog does. And so, you might think the babies are not being fed. You might worry about that cause you never see her in there. Well her instinct is to actually in the wild to leave the babies so that it won't attract a predator to the nest. So, she feeds them really quick and then leaves the nest and then she'll come back in the evening maybe and feed them really quick again and leave the nest. So, you won't see her in there very much. Don't worry about that. You can check the kits and see if they have full bellies. You'll be able to see a rounded full belly and that will tell you that they're being very well fed.

Now when you come out in the morning and you find the babies, hopefully they'll be all of the nest box snuggled under fur. So, mom's going to need a little sugary treat like a apple slice. She'll love that. And while she's eating her apple slice

or a little piece of bread, you can check out the babies and you can just move the first side and just take each baby out one at a time and check it out, remove any that are dead, that have been still born of course, and just settle them back there under the hair and let mom take care of them.

Hopefully everything goes great your first time breeding rabbits and you'll know that you have a good mom to hang onto there. But what can go wrong? There are some things, especially with first time moms. Your mom can lay on the wire, not use the nest box and if it's in the middle of the night and it's winter time, you know, the babies can quickly freeze or get too cold before you can get out there. So that's hard. And then, sometimes the mom doesn't pull hair at all and lays them, you know, in the hay in the nest box but doesn't really make a good warm nest for them. And again, if it's in a winter that that can be tough. And then sometimes she just doesn't feed the babies. And you can tell that by when you go examine the babies, they're just, they look skinny and their belly isn't puffed out and swollen. So, you know that they're not being fed.

Sometimes, we had a rabbit once that just jumped on the baby. She kept jumping in and out of the nest box and just jumping on the baby and she just didn't seem to know what to do. So, all those situations can be tough. And sometimes it just takes her a few days. So that's why I said to breed both does at the same time because then you can sometimes have a foster mom. Now, rabbits only have eight to 10 teats and so, you know, you can only give her so many babies, the foster mom, but maybe if she's had a small litter, she's had three, then then you can give her, you know, most of that litter. And sometimes the mom will come around, she just needs a few days. So, you can take the thinnest and the smallest ones, put them with this foster mom and leave the biggest ones in there with mom a little bit longer and see if she comes around.

Now, when you put the babies in with the foster mom, you want to do a couple of things. You want to put a little vanilla or lavender on her nose just so she doesn't smell any, you know, anybody else's scent. And then you also want to keep track of which ones are this doe's babies and which ones are her babies. So, I usually use a little Sharpie, black Sharpie marker and just put a little dot in the ear of the babies that I'm fostering. And you can also use a little tattoo kit. Just put a little dot there if you have a tattoo gun. We'll go over that later; how to use one of those. So, when you find the babies, and maybe they're on the wire, they're not being taken care of, you can put them in the nest and you know, and warn them up and put them in the nest and see if the mom comes around. If she doesn't within, you know, 10 hours, then you want to take them out, warm them up again, rub them, hold them, and then put them in with foster mom.

Now what if you don't have a foster mom? So that's tough. And we did have that happen to us before and just, you know, one of the moms wasn't pregnant, ended up pregnant and then the other one had seven kids. So, it was her first time and she didn't know what to do. So, what I've done is I put a video in the resources for you. I went to interview a wildlife rescue volunteer and she taught me how to raise babies from newborn successfully. So, while she was doing this for wild cottontail rabbits, we can just apply this to the babies that we're breeding and raising. So, there are certain tricks to it, what to feed them; there's a miracle nipple she uses. So, I'll put all that, the materials that she uses in the resources so you can just order those. What I did was just ordered them and then I'm going to keep them handy. So, if that ever happens to me, I'll have a fighting chance to raise those little babies.

Now babies are gonna stay with mom for four to five weeks and she's going to wean them. And sometimes babies can be clinging on to the mom when they're nursing and she can jump out and then they go with her. So, you might find a baby out in the wire. So, it's good to be out there, you know, quite often, especially if the weather's not good and you can easily and quickly get the baby off the wire and put it back in the nest with the others and they'll just keep each other warm there. And you can handle them. Don't worry about handling them. We've handled all the babies. Mom doesn't seem to get freaked out about it or worry about it at all. When the babies get a little older, they're getting up to weaning age three weeks, then they come out of the nest box and they're jumping around and bothering mom and wanting to nurse all the time and she's trying to wean them and cut them off.

And so I just, the way I do it is I just take mom to the exercise pen for the day and she gets her time alone and then put her back in at nighttime and then take her out the next morning after she's fed them or you know, and then put her back in an exercise pen. And, it's best to take out, when they're weaning, it's best to take out a few babies at a time and put in a different cage so her milk doesn't just, you know, stop all of the sudden so she won't get mastitis. So just leave a few babies in there for her and just take them out a little bit at a time and put another cage when they're at four to five weeks of age. You'll be able to see when mom's had enough and she's weaning them.

During this time, you want to give mom and babies plenty of food, all the food they want and remember what I said about how they poop in the water, the babies. So up water bottle. I switch to this during that four week period and then I switch to a feeder that I just wire inside of the cage so that I can fill it up with as much as I need to for the babies and mom and the babies aren't going to poop in it cause it's just off the ground a little bit and you can also add oats to the feed. It's a good time to add some oats to put some weight on babies and mom. Now, after four weeks, your babies are gonna ... four to five weeks, your babies are going to come out and go in a grow out pen and I'll talk about that in the next module; show you all about grow out pens and rabbit tractors, where you're gonna put your babies.

So, let's talk about breeding your doe again. How soon is too soon? Well, technically you can breed her right after she gives birth, a couple of days after she's given birth and she's in a very fertile time at that time, believe it or not. And a lot of people will do that. And that was kinda my plan because I have a very short breeding season in the winter and then I have to wait the long, warm periods that I can't breed. So, that was kinda my plan, but then when I went to breed the doe again after like a week after giving birth, she was just outta condition. It takes a lot of that doe to nurse those babies. So, and you can see she's out of condition by just when you feel her. You can feel her spine. She's lost her dewlap here, her fatty deposit here, you know, her coat is looking dull and she just, she's just looking haggard.

One way to make sure that mom stays in good condition is to give her black oil sunflower seeds and dark leafy greens and I will leave a recipe in the resources for a little mixture that you can give her. It's basically wheat, whole oats, some barley and black oil sunflower seeds, and then you mix it all up with some wheat germ oil and that really helps her to keep on that fat and make sure she has enough nutrients to nurse those babies. So, my plan really didn't work to space them so closely together. So, what I ended up doing was waiting until those babies were weaned at four weeks and then I would take them to grow out pen and then breed her again after about a week of rest. And that's what I ended up doing for my rabbit. Now when you think about when to breed your rabbits again, you need to think about if you're going to have room in that grow out pen to house them.

So, one thing I did when I first had rabbits is, I bred them too closely together and I did not have room in the cage. I didn't have enough cage space or grow out pens for those babies. And if you put those babies in a cage, even though it's a large cage, they grow so fast and overcrowding happens really quickly. So that's why now I wait for the babies to be weaned at four weeks. I give mom one week to get back her condition and I breed her at five weeks. And that gives me plenty of time for those babies that are in the pen to grow up and harvest or sell them before I'm meeting that pen for the next batch of babies. So, you want to think about that when you're scheduling your breeding not to breed them too close together because then overcrowding can happen really quickly.

Now let's talk about how climate affects birthing and having newborn babies. It never seems to fail. They always have those babies on the coldest day of the year. It's crazy. So, I have been known to take the nest box inside my house and I just bring it out for mother to feed in the morning and then again in the evening it's called shelving cause you're taking that nest box and shelving it inside your house I guess. But I only do this during the coldest parts of the year like, we're talking temperatures in the teens and then negative temperatures, that I would do that when the babies are very newborn. About a week into it, they start getting fur. Two weeks into it, they've got fur and they can withstand the cold a lot better. Now a friend of mine uses heat lamps in her rabbitry. I personally don't because of the way my cages are designed. She has wire cages, so she's able to put that heat lamp above it.

I would have to put the heat lamp inside my cage. And speaking from experience, my son did a science experiment. He had dug it out an underground den and he wanted to measure the temperature readings. So, he put a temperature probe down in there and she attacked it every time and chewed it to bits. So, obviously can't put that heat lamp in there. And then I've heard of using heating pads under, well again, she's going to attack that wire so, I don't know how you'd make that work because obviously it's attached to electricity and she's going to chew it and that could be a shocking experience for her. So, I don't use heat lamps or under the nest box heating pads. And also, they can easily get too hot and then you don't want to cook those babies. So, I would rather see insulating the nest box using wooden nest box and then with hay and then you've got the mom's hair.

And then if temperatures are just really in the negatives and they're holding there, then I would rather to see the hutch closed in better or move to a shed or something then I would using those heat lamps on the individual cages. Now, what about the hot months? Well, as I've said, I don't breed during the hottest months, but I think using a wire on the bottom of that nest box and getting ventilation in there and the mom will uncover the hair. She'll uncover those babies as the temperature rises so she will take care of them that way. So that's kinda how climate affects birthing and having newborn babies on the homestead.

Thank you for joining me for module five. Now I'm confident that you have a better idea how to prepare for those babies. Don't forget, put that nest box in on the 28th day and the moms should do all the work. I taught you how to check on those little babies. Don't be afraid to handle them. Give mom a little sugary treat of apple slice and she will be occupied while you check out to see if all those babies are alive and healthy and strong. Now, there are things that can go wrong with that first time mom and I kind of have the rule that I give my mom's two chances and if she just continues to be a terrible mother and not pull fur and lay her babies on the wire and not feed them, then she needs to be removed from the rabbitry. I taught you how to foster those kits to another mom and so don't forget, put a little lavender on her nose and she will accept those kits right away and feed them for you.

Now if you don't have a foster mom, I've left a video in the resources where I've taught you how to successfully raise those baby rabbits yourself. I also shared in the resources a recipe to keep mom in good condition while she's nursing those babies. That takes a lot out of her so you can do this to keep the fat on her and then weaning at four or five weeks. Don't forget to take a few babies out at a time to dry up that mom's milk gradually. We talked about breeding again, how I let the babies wean at four weeks and then I give mom one week of rest, five weeks and then I breed again. And one reason I do that is to keep the doe in better condition and the other reason is because I need to schedule my breeding so that I have plenty of room in those grow out pens for the next batch of rabbits.

We talked a little bit about how climate affects having new babies on the homestead and how you can shelf your babies inside if you need to keep them warm and those single digit temperatures. So, join me again next time for module six where we're going to answer where are you going to keep all those babies? They grow fast. We're gonna learn about grow out pens and rabbit tractors. I'm gonna show you how to build a grow out pen, and how to get your rabbits to mow your lawn for you without digging out in the process. Lastly, we're going to talk about when to harvest. So, join me next time as we learn more about raising backyard rabbits.