



7826 NE Sandy Blvd., Portland, OR 97213-6467 P. 971-361-2209 F. 971-361-4359
www.avianexoticvetcare.com

Outdoor Rabbits

Many people enjoy housing their rabbits outside, which can provide a rabbit with wonderful environmental enrichment. Many different options for types of outdoor enclosures are available. If you choose to keep your rabbit outdoors, you should keep in mind a couple of health concerns.

Toxic Plants

If you choose to house your rabbit outdoors, you should be aware that some plants that you may have around your house or in your garden could be poisonous to rabbits. Following is a list of some common plants thought to be toxic to rabbits. It is by no means a complete list. Further information on toxic plants can be obtained from the ASPCA website <http://www.asPCA.org/pet-care/poison-control/plants/>.

If your rabbit is provided a wide variety of healthy foods and plants to chew on, it is unlikely that it will choose to eat something that is poisonous. Toxic plant ingestion is more likely in a rabbit that is not offered enough healthy alternatives to satisfy its need for foraging or chewing.

Common Toxic Plants

Agave (leaves)	Elderberry (unripe berries)	Philodendron
Amaryllis (bulbs)	Foxglove	Poison Hemlock
Apple (seeds)	Holly (berries)	Poison Ivy
Azalea	Horsechestnut (nuts)	Potato (green)
Buttercup (leaves)	Hyacinth	Privet (berries)
Black Locust (seeds)	Iris	Ranunculus
Boxwood (leaves/twigs)	Ivy, Boston & English (berries)	Rhododendron
Buckeye (seeds)	Jack-in-the-Pulpit	Rhubarb (leaf blade)
Buckthorn (berries)	Jimson Weed	Sweet Pea (seeds)
Caladium	Lily-of-the-Valley	Sweet Potato
Calla (rhizome)	Lupine	Skunk Cabbage
Castor Bean (seed)	Mistletoe (berries)	Tomato (leaves)
Christmas Rose	Morning Glory (seeds)	Tulip
Daffodil	Mustard (root)	Virginia Creeper (berries)
Delphinium	Narcissus	Water Hemlock
Dumbcane	Nightshade	Wisteria (seeds/pods)
Eggplant (plant)	Oleander	Yew (berries)

Information cited from:

Mayer, J and Donnelly, T., eds. Clinical Veterinary Advisor: Birds and Exotic Pets. Elsevier, Philadelphia, PA. 2013. ISBN: 9781-4160-3969-3

Predators

In the wild, rabbits are preyed upon by birds of prey, ferrets, weasels, cats, foxes, and badgers. Hawks and other birds of prey can attack rabbits from above, and predators such as foxes are capable of jumping over fences or

digging underneath fences to get to rabbits. If you choose to keep your rabbit outdoors for even part of the day, it is important that you provide it with an enclosure that prevents predation from above and below. In an outdoor run, rabbits require wire netting overhead to prevent attack from birds, and underground fencing (at least 1.5 feet) to prevent predators from burrowing in and rabbits from burrowing out of the enclosure. Movable runs (such as foraging arks) can be unsafe because rabbits can dig themselves out, and predators can burrow in. A rabbit in a foraging ark requires supervision. If kept in a hutch, it is important to invest in a predator-proof hutch.

Fly Strike

Unfortunately, many rabbits are being euthanized because of fly strike, or maggot infestation from flies. Flies lay their eggs on the fur of the rabbit (usually around the anus); the eggs then hatch into larvae, which start to eat their way through the skin, causing significant damage, which often leads to fatal problems. Discuss with your veterinarian whether to put your outdoor rabbit on preventive medication, which will also protect the rabbit from fleas and ticks.

Heat Stress

Rabbits are adapted to survive in temperatures that can be quite chilly, but they are less likely to be able to withstand excessive heat. Rabbits cannot sweat, and they can quickly become dehydrated when panting. In the wild, rabbits are able to find cool places to hide during the heat of the day, including underground burrows. In an outdoor enclosure such as a rabbit hutch or even a run, your rabbit may not be able to find adequately cool, well-ventilated areas in which to rest during the heat of the day. On very hot days, it might be better to keep your rabbit inside during the hottest part of the day (11 am to 3 pm) and to allow it outside only in the early morning and in the evening, when it is cooler. It is also important to provide your rabbit with plenty of fresh water and an area in its enclosure that is protected from direct sunlight.

Clinical Signs of Heat Stress

Respiratory distress Weakness Incoordination
Open-mouth breathing Depression Convulsions

You should make sure to check on your rabbits during the day; if they show signs of heat stress (excessive panting, lethargy, etc.), you should contact your veterinarian immediately. Before you can get your rabbit to a veterinarian for treatment, you can try spraying your rabbit with water to help it cool down.

AUTHOR: Emily Finn

Information cited from:

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