

# RABBITRY IN HOMESTEAD COCONUT GARDENS

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Coconut palm, popularly known as "Kalpavriksha" or "The Tree of Heaven" having largest area (7.05 lakh ha) among the crops grown in Kerala has a pride of place in the economy of the State. It is mostly grown in homesteads, the average size of which is only 0.2 hectare at present. The income derived from such homesteads is not enough to sustain the family in spite of the fact that these gardens are mix-planted with several crops. In this context, mixed farming offers better scope for generating higher income and employment from such homesteads.

Mixed farming has several components such as dairy, poultry, fishery, piggery, bee keeping, rabbitry, etc. Even though rabbitry is a new introduction, it is best suited for many of the homesteads. The favourable features of rabbitry are:

1. Low initial capital investment
2. Smaller space requirement
3. Low maintenance cost (no special feed is required)
4. Easy to manage (even children

can look after)

5. Less risk from serious diseases
6. Very high feed conversion ratio
7. Fast rate of multiplication

Studies on coconut based mixed farming system have been in progress at Central Plantation Crops Research Institute, Kasargod since 17 years. These studies have revealed that rabbitry integrates very well into the system. The technical know-how of rabbitry in homesteads is dealt with here.

**1. Choice of the breed :** Though, there are about 35 recognised meat and fur types of breeds of rabbit, the commonly reared types are (1) New Zealand white, (2) Grey giant (3) White giant (4) Soviet Chinchilla and (5) Angora. The growth studies conducted at CPCRI Research Complex, Goa, indicated better performance of Soviet Chinchilla under humid tropical climate of West Coast. The weight of adult Chinchilla ranges from 2.5 to 4.0 kg. The annual wool production is about 450-1000 g per animal.

**2. Housing :** Rabbits are conveniently reared in cages commonly made either of angle iron and wire mesh or with thin wood rafters. A cage of 75 cm x 60 cm x 60 cm size is suitable for single animal. But for kindling (maternity), cage with 90 cm x 75 cm x 60 cm size is needed. It is advisable to keep the cages at a height of about 3' from the ground on angle iron support so as to facilitate regular cleaning. A nest box measuring 60 cm x 30 cm x 30 cm is also provided in the kindling cages. A feeding cup to hold about 250 g concentrate and a watering cup of about 500 ml capacity are provided in each cage. These cages can either be kept in one of the rooms in the house or in a thatched shed adjacent to the house well protected on all sides against dogs and wild animals.

**3. Feeding :** Rabbits are not very selective in their feeding habit. They can be maintained on the various types of green foliage available in the homesteads such as tender grass, cowpea, amaranthus, banana leaves, leaves of Erythrina, etc. Even they relish some of the common weeds like *Tridax procumbens* and *Ipomea*

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*biloba*. An adult rabbit on an average consumes about 400-500 g of green matter daily. During growth, gestation and lactation about 100 to 150 g of broken rice and commercial concentrate can be supplemented with green matter.

**4. Breeding :** The age at first mating is 5 to 6 months for doe (female) and 3 to 9 months for buck (male). After successful mating, the doe delivers in about 30 to 32 days. At each delivery, a doe delivers about 4 to 7 kitten (young ones). On an average four litters per animal per year can be obtained.

The doe again comes to heat about one week before it weans its litter which is about 25 to 30 days after delivery. Some does have been found to neglect their new borns or not preparing bedding for kitts before delivery. In such cases, it is advisable to keep delivery box outside with little paddy straw or wood shaving. This has been found to help in psychological preparation of the doe before delivery. It is advisable not to mix the kitts of different mothers. When different batches are mixed the animals are found to fight bitterly with each other.

**5. After care :** Some of the diseases encountered are (1) *Coccidiosis sp.* manifested by anorexia, pendulus and distended abdomen followed by progressive weakness, (2) body mange scratching scaling of the skin, loss of fur and self inflicted trauma and (3) heat prostration - this is observed in summer when the atmospheric temperature goes above 40°C. It is characterised by panting, oozing of blood from nostrils and finally the animal dies. The animals can be kept healthy by maintaining hygienic surroundings and proper

feeding. For keeping the animals cool in summer it is suggested to rear them in butch system. If it is cage system, it is advisable to keep them in well ventilated rooms.

Five pairs of doe along with two pairs of buck, can be conveniently maintained in homestead coconut garden. From ten females,

about 100 to 150 kitts can be obtained per annum. This in turn will be equivalent to about 250-300 kg meat and 40 to 75 kg fur. Deducting the expenditure involved on feed and labour, about Rs 3,000 can be easily earned per annum by the family. This will be in addition to the returns realised from the coconut and dairy.

