

It's summer....are your rabbits cool dudes or hot, cross buns?

With summer well underway, we've had some stiflingly hot weather...how are your rabbits coping with the heat?

Even though rabbits originate from much hotter parts of Europe and North Africa, they are crepuscular, that is most active at dawn and dusk. In the wild, they would be able to hide from the more intense heat in underground burrows where the temperature varies by only a few degrees. Pet rabbits, especially those who live outside, are reliant on their owners to provide conditions where they can be safe and comfortable.

Shade from direct sunlight is essential, so consider where your rabbit hutch and run are situated. Is there any plant cover that will provide shade? A shrub or creeper will be a great help in keeping off the most intense rays of the sun. Plant a tree, but while you wait for it to grow and bush out, also plant something that is going to provide cover quickly, for example a [Montana Reubens](#). Ensure your buns can't get to it and eat it.



Shade provided by a cover on the run, and under a large bush. Make sure the rabbits can't nibble anything harmful. The mesh allows a cool breeze.

Is your hutch inside a shed? If not, that would be a good idea. Garden sheds can be fairly inexpensive – sometimes you might be able to get one from your local Freecycle or Freegle group - and that would provide an extra insulation against sun, with the extra bonus of being somewhere to store bunny possessions, winter insulation, somewhere you can sit with your buns, give them more living space and so on. Site it somewhere shady or plant some creeper/tree cover as above. Be wary as sheds can get very hot, so consider double-skinning it and putting insulation between the layers – cavity wall and roof insulation for bunnies. In fact, turf roofs provide excellent insulation and although you'd need to water them in the dryer parts of summer, they do a great job. Insulation keeps heat OUT as well as IN so whatever you do along these lines for the summer will be of benefit too in the winter months. To keep the shed cool you will need keep the door open, so it's a good idea to fit a wire screen to keep it secure but still let in the fresh air.



A shed with a mesh door for ventilation and under a shady tree. Shade also provided by the covers on the run and the den pipe.

Fans. These can be wind or solar powered, battery driven or connected to the mains. But be sure that if they are connected to a power source that your bunnies can't get to those wires and nip them. Rabbits have a natural instinct for snipping things that look to them like tree roots. Use some hosepipe or trunking to cover wires and keep checking it...you'd be amazed just what buns are able to nibble their way through.

Fill up plastic pop bottles with water and freeze them. Have a few so that some are re-freezing while one or two are in use. You can put one in the path of the fanned air to act as mini-air conditioning system. Bunnies might like one to lie on to keep them cool. You can buy ice pods too, from our RWA shop.

http://www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk/catalog/product_info.php?cPath=23&products_id=503

Once frozen, these will stay cool for hours. If you cover the pod with the upturned large terracotta drip tray from a plantpot, the temperature will remain low for longer. You can also freeze ordinary ceramic floor and wall tiles for hot buns to lie on and cool down. Some materials are naturally cool to the touch, marble for example – remember nothing's too good for your bunnies!

Obviously, always supply plenty of fresh cool water, as even though they only sweat through feet and tongue, a cool drink will make them feel better, and some will even find it helpful to lie in a water dish. Rabbits can access much more fluid from a bowl than from a bottle so it's best to provide both so they have the choice, remember to check and refill regularly. If you do find a bun panting, it is in distress, and should be brought immediately into a much cooler environment, but DON'T dunk them in freezing water as the sudden temperature change could do untold harm and send their system into shock. Cool but not cold water would be okay if this was an emergency, but generally just providing them with a much cooler space will be best.

Have they somewhere they could tunnel underground? Could you sink wide pipes under your garden? Buns could keep lovely and cool in these, but always think about being able to get access to the rabbit - this is less advisable if your bun is already hard to catch.

FLIES. The horror of rabbit owners. Flies of course, lay eggs, and those hatch out into maggots, which literally eat their way out – an often fatal condition for rabbits. If the eggs have been laid on your bun by a bluebottle, or worse a greenbottle, then there is the very real danger of flystrike. So do all you can to keep flies away. Plant herbs that will keep them away, keep bun and bedding/litter area scrupulously clean, hang up fly papers, buy a battery or solar powered bug zapper to hang in your shed, CHECK YOUR BUNNY SEVERAL TIMES EVERY DAY, and if you have the slightest suspicion of flystrike, IT IS AN EMERGENCY. Phone your vet to tell him or her what the problem is and get your bun there AT ONCE. Rather a false alarm in these circumstances than a dead rabbit. If your bun is prone to wetting itself or having caecal pellets stuck to fur, you need to work out the reason why and work with your vet on eliminating that....is your bun obese and unable to clean itself or to squat properly? Is there the possibility of arthritis? This is far more common than people realise in older rabbits. Your vet can prescribe Rearguard, Flyguard, or other similar products, which are applied at intervals of a few weeks and will inhibit the development of maggots, but nothing is better than regular checks of your rabbit's rear end, and scrupulous hygiene.

In summary – your buns need to be checked even more regularly in the hot summer months, and owners should always err on the side of caution. Best to take a bit more time than have the unthinkable happen.