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EASTER
 Pets as gifts
Opt for chocolate, not bunnies

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 By April Scott-Clarke, [CBC News](#)



Many animal shelters across the country report an increase in rabbit surrenders just after Easter. (Craig Ruttle/Associated Press)

Season Wong, a third year Guelph University student, has had her Holland Lop rabbit, Pico, for six months.

"I got him from a breeder when he was eight weeks old," she recalled. "When I decided to get a rabbit a year ago, I told myself that I will play with him everyday so that he would follow me and love me like a dog."

After months of spending countless hours with Pico, he is litter-trained, follows her around her room and recognizes his name. Wong admits having a rabbit as a pet is more work than she initially thought, especially in the beginning.

Wong had the patience to train Pico, but unfortunately many others find out that they just aren't ready for the commitment.

With Easter only weeks away, many pet stores will see an increased number of parents and boyfriends looking to bring home a special Easter morning surprise. They envision a rabbit providing the same type of companionship for their kids or girlfriends as Pico does for Wong.

But that relationship often doesn't materialize, and interest from the owner wanes, which is why animal shelters, rescue groups — and even some retailers — suggest giving rabbits only of the milk chocolate breed for Easter.

"We see a little bit more interest in rabbits [around Easter], but we try to filter out the serious from the non-serious and make sure it's not just an impulsive purchase," said Jeff Stanke, co-owner of Critter Jungle, an independent pet store in Ottawa.

"There's no application process, but it's about asking the right questions: have they had pets

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before; what are their expectations of having a rabbit and what is the commitment level. Rabbits can live 10 years. We will refuse to sell a pet to someone to we feel it's really not the right thing." He says most pet stores are well intentioned and discourage pets as gifts. Nevertheless, many animal shelters across the country see an increase in rabbit surrenders just after Easter.

According to the most recent statistics available, Ontario's Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) branches take in more than 1,000 small animals a year, most of which are rabbits. In 2007, 14.1 per cent of small animals in Ontario SPCA shelters were euthanized due to over-population.

British Columbia's SPCA says its shelters also have an abundant supply of rabbits, so much so that in 2007, retailer Petcetera agreed to stop selling rabbits at 11 Lower Mainland stores. Nova Scotia's SPCA shelters took in only 20 rabbits last year, but admit that many people simply turn their unwanted rabbits loose in the closest park.

"[Adopting] any pet is a large responsibility and it needs to be entered into with full knowledge with the person who is going to be responsible for that animal," said Kristin Williams of the Ontario SPCA.

She adds that when animals are given as gifts people are often unprepared, and unaware of the animal's needs, so it ends up being surrendered to a shelter. "You need to be very careful when giving an animal as a gift," she said.

Things you should know

Although rabbits are small, cute and potentially cuddly, they are not low-maintenance pets. They are very active animals that need exercise and lots of stimulation.

Rabbits also like to chew — furniture, rugs, drapes, electrical cords — so if your rabbit is going to roam, be prepared to **bunny-proof** your home. Proper bunny-proofing will keep the animal safe and you sane.

Also, your common house rabbit isn't hypoallergenic — uneducated owners may be surprised at the amount of hair they can shed. Experts suggest regular grooming.

'They are wonderful pets but they aren't as social as one might believe they are. They aren't cats, and I think people think they have the same attributes as cats.'

—Kristin Williams, Ontario SPCA

Like all household pets, rabbits should be spayed or neutered. If you choose not to, remember that unaltered rabbits have a tendency to mark territory. And if you have two rabbits and they are not fixed, you may unintentionally end up with more. Many more!

While rabbits can be easily trained to use a litter box, their urine has a potent scent so litter boxes and cages need to be cleaned often. And like any animal, rabbits should have regular veterinary check-ups and shots.

Jumpy critters

"They are wonderful pets," Williams said, "but they aren't as social as one might believe they are. They aren't cats, and I think people think they have the same attributes as cats. They also aren't particularly good pets for young children."

Rabbits enjoy attention and affection from people, but most get frightened when held because it mimics being caught by a predator. Rabbits often try to escape — normally by kicking, bucking and scratching — leaving the cuddler searching for a first-aid kit.

Getting a rabbit, or any pet, is a decision that shouldn't be taken lightly and it should never be a surprise. If you do want someone to have a bunny as a pet, experts recommend that rabbit-care essentials such as a cage, bedding or food is a better gift than the animal itself — these things can be returned if the person decides a rabbit isn't the ideal pet for them.

To be on the safe side, chocolate rabbits or those of the stuffed variety are likely the best



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Saffron wrote:

Posted 2009/04/12 at 4:51 PM ET

Rabbits don't communicate vocally, so are more vulnerable to neglect by owners with busy schedules or less self-discipline. It's easier to fall into a habit of forgetting to regularly care for a pet who doesn't tell you when it's hungry or thirsty. (My rabbits will bang their dishes and shake their rattle toys if I'm not with the program, but they learned this over several years of interaction with me.)

All too often, rabbits end up in the basement because they were destructive when let out, and due to hair and odour that build up when their cages aren't cleaned several times a week. There, they become even more neglected because they're no longer in the family eye.

If you must have a pet bunny, know that the smaller "dwarf" breeds (despite being the type stocked by pet stores) are the most delicate and high-strung, and the least suitable for small children. Generally, the larger the breed, the more laid-back. In my experience, males are more affectionate and once neutered, more fastidious about using a litter box.

Some rabbits will let you hold them. But they always need to feel that their feet are resting on something or they will flail and can scratch---hard. Most socialized rabbits *love* being petted without being picked up, since it mimics the social grooming of other rabbits.

Have at least one sizeable rabbit-proofed area that can be closed off where the bun can be let out to run around. Spend the money to spay or neuter; most nipping/biting and territorial marking is due to hormones. Get advice or do your homework before you introduce rabbits; these little tribbles can fight like you wouldn't believe. Take a shelter bunny off death row before you plunk down your money for the one you fell in love with in the pet store (source of all the shelter bunnies).

6 0

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Joe Calgarian wrote:

Posted 2009/04/09 at 2:17 PM ET

Oddly enough real rabbits don't taste anything like their chocolate counterparts.....kinda gamey if you ask me.

18 9

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Allniter wrote:

Posted 2009/04/09 at 3:59 AM ET

Under no circumstances should an animal be a surprise gift at Christmas, Easter or any other time of year. Obtaining a live animal needs to be preceded by research and an agreement by all household members regarding their proper care. I don't care if it's a cat, dog, rabbit, iguana, goldfish, tarantula or whatever.

The preceding does not apply to pet rocks.

59 0

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