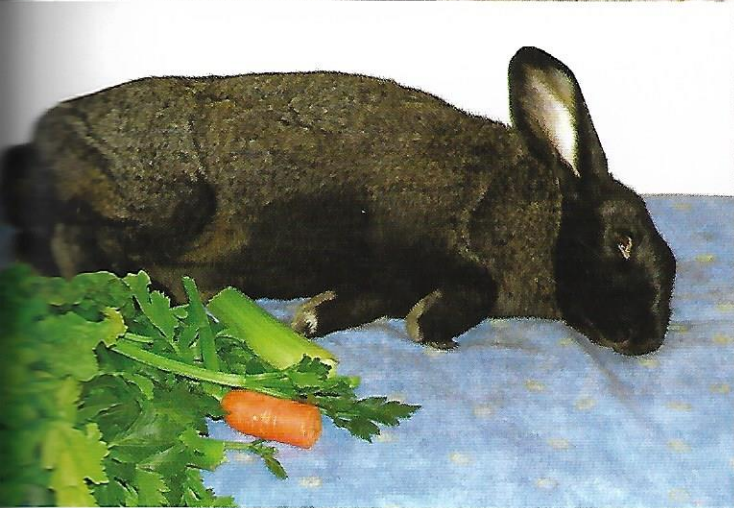


Giant Love

WORDS & PHOTOS BY SKYE BOTHMA



Introducing Flemish Giant rabbits into my home and heart



The arrival of our first rabbit was unplanned. My partner and I love animals but we weren't allowed pets in our flat. However, my partner is not one to worry about technicalities and he simply couldn't resist a sentimental story on TradeMe about a Flemish Giant needing a new home.

When I got home from work that day he told me to sit down and close my eyes and then placed Buddy on my lap. 'Can we keep him?' he asked. The moment I opened my eyes and saw the great fluffy ball twitching his nose at me, it was love at first sight. How could I say no?

Reality set in that first night, as we sat watching him on the living-room floor and wondered if we were doing the right thing. We weren't prepared for a pet and had no idea how we would hide a rabbit hutch in our flat. Buddy was oblivious to our concerns and happily munched on a piece of apple. On a sudden impulse, he tore around the room at top speed and then, screeching to a halt, tossed himself down, landing stretched out on his side, and promptly fell asleep. We looked at each other bewildered and then laughed, realising that there was no turning back – we were hooked.

We quickly learnt what we needed to know about rabbit care. Flemish Giants, we found out, are not called giant for nothing. They are a large-breed rabbit that can grow up to 13kg, though they average around 6kg. At six months old, Buddy was already the size of a fully grown domestic rabbit and

We were also surprised to find out that rabbits are becoming increasingly popular as house pets overseas because they can be trained to use a litter box. So we decided to give Buddy free run of the flat, though his litter tray had to be an extra-large shallow basin. Keeping him as a house rabbit certainly solved the problem of having to find a giant-sized rabbit hutch and made it easier to keep him hidden from the landlord – not that we had long to worry as we were moving in a few months.

Living with a house rabbit is a bit like living with a toddler – everything goes in the mouth. We soon learned not to leave things (especially shoes) on the floor or within his reach – this included things on the coffee table and bookshelves that he could sneak off when standing on his hind legs. We also made sure chairs were properly pushed in under tables to prevent him hopping up to steal grapes from the fruit bowl, lick the salt shaker or shred papers left on the desk.

Buddy's favourite activities include exploring cupboards, hopping up the shelves in the wardrobe and crawling under our bed to hide, making an audible 'oof' sound as he squeezes his rump underneath! We discovered that he had a set routine of being active during the morning and napping in the afternoon, always in his favourite spot under the desk.

It is true that rabbits are notorious chewers. Their teeth grow constantly so they need to chew to keep them short, although they will also chew things out of curiosity and boredom. Rabbits find electrical cables particularly irresistible



bought plastic tubing to cover the cables. Having a plentiful supply of hay helps to distract him from chewing things he shouldn't and is also an essential part of his diet. Neutering can also reduce destructive behaviour and other undesirable habits such as the territorial spraying of urine.

The good news, though, is that rabbits are surprisingly clean animals. They groom themselves obsessively, even more so than cats. Their droppings are hard, dry and odourless and can be swiftly swept up with a broom. And, if they do accidentally piddle on the carpet, it can be easily cleaned with soap and water and does not leave a smell, unlike cat urine.

Our new home has a wonderful garden with an enclosed yard that's perfect for Buddy so we made him an outside enclosure with access to the yard. However, he was not impressed at first and still prefers to come inside the house if he gets the chance. We even had to tape shut the cat flap in the kitchen door when he discovered it – not because we didn't want him getting in the house but because the cat flap was just a bit too small for him and we were worried about him getting stuck!

To make up for exiling him to the yard, we got a second rabbit to keep him company. At six weeks old, Misty was tiny compared to Buddy and at first he was rather aggressive towards her, so we kept them separated until she got bigger and he got used to her.

Now, nearly eight months later, Buddy still acts as if he's only really tolerating her, but when I check on them in the

afternoon and see them cuddled up together, I know that he's fond of her deep down.

Before we got our rabbits, I'd assumed, like most people, that rabbits aren't terribly expressive. While they are largely silent, they do have an extensive body language. And once you learn this language, you discover that they have fully developed emotions, personalities, tastes and moods. Much of a rabbit's language involves running, jumping and flicking of the back legs, and so 'free range' rabbits do tend to be more expressive than caged rabbits.

The ultimate rabbit expression of sheer bliss is the binky. I'm not sure how the name came about and although I had read about it, I was still startled when I saw Buddy do his first binky. It's a kind of running jump with a convulsive midair twitch. If rabbits could talk you'd hear them cry 'yippee!'

Affection is expressed in a quiet, gentle manner with nose nudging, licking, a kind of breathy 'foo foo' sound and tooth clicking. The tooth clicking sounds a bit like snapping your fingernails together and I will often have long loving conversations cuddled up to Buddy and Misty, snapping my fingernails in reply to their tooth clicking while I stroke them and scratch them behind the ears.

People are always amazed by the size of our rabbits and to learn that there is so much more to them than they thought. If you are looking for a loving companion pet that is quiet, easy to look after and a joy to get to know, then consider a rabbit. 🐾