

# Bunnies aren't presents. Please don't give one for Easter

By Mark Hawthorne

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A pair of white bunnies await adoption at Animal Care and Control in San Francisco on April 19, 2017. Animal control officers seized 43 rabbits from a breeder in January who was selling them as pets or as meat and went up for adoption for \$19.67 each.

Paul Chinn/The Chronicle 2017

My wife and I adopted a rabbit a couple of years ago. We'd found him, not at our neighborhood animal shelter or rabbit rescue group, but on a residential corner near downtown San Jose. It was several weeks after Easter when we spotted the white bunny munching on grass beside the sidewalk.

After years of working and living with rabbits, I immediately surmised that this little bun, whom I guessed to be about five months old, had been given as an Easter gift and then abandoned by a family when they'd grown tired of him.

It took some effort, but we managed to scoop him up and bring him home. I contacted a wonderful local rescue organization, [The Rabbit Haven](#), which arranged for him to be seen by a veterinarian and neutered. They also gave us some bunny necessities, as it had been a while since we'd shared our apartment with a rabbit.

Within a week of trying to find him a permanent home, my wife and I agreed we were too attached to give him up. We named him Bunito and cherish him beyond description.

Rabbits are not for everyone, however, despite what so many well-intentioned parents may believe at Eastertime.

"Every single year we go through this," said Heather Bechtel, executive director of The Rabbit Haven, located in Scotts Valley. "We educate prior to Easter, we print materials, post on Nextdoor and Facebook. It doesn't seem to make a difference. People still purchase baby rabbits for their kids. We take in hundreds of rabbits a year, and 40 percent of them arrive after Easter. It's very frustrating."

Bechtel explained that many families have a tradition of including a baby bunny in their annual Easter basket, so they dispose of the adult rabbit from the year before. "Rabbits are simply abandoned in boxes on sidewalks and in front of pet stores or left in parks or out in the wild," she said.

"It's the baby bunnies acquired before Easter who three to four months later go from being the cute baby to the rascally adolescent that cause problems," added Beth Woolbright, executive director of the House Rabbit Society, a Richmond-based nonprofit that rescues bunnies from Bay Area animal shelters and rehomes them. "People need to do their research about rabbits first and then adopt rather than purchase on a whim."

In 2019, California became the [first state](#) to ban the sale of rabbits, puppies, and kittens from a pet store unless the animal comes from a shelter or rescue group. [The law](#) was partially meant to make it more difficult to acquire bunnies on impulse and thus curtail the lamentable tide of rabbits purchased just before Easter who flood animal shelters or get dumped soon after the holiday.

I asked a few Bay Area animal shelters how giving rabbits at Easter impacts their facility.

"We estimate that 95 percent of rabbits admitted after Easter to all shelters across the country as strays were bought as starter pets for children from backyard breeders or are dumps from breeders who quickly discard their unsold 'inventory' in neighborhoods, parks, empty fields, and schools when the seasonal sales stop," said Animal Care Attendant Cheryl Caccialanza of the City of San Jose Animal Care & Services shelter. "This is true for us here."

Among the Bay Area shelters that do not experience an increase in surrendered rabbits after Easter is San Francisco's Animal Care & Control Department (ACC). This may be due to the city having an [even stricter law](#) than the state's — it entirely prohibits the sale of rabbits as pets regardless of the source.

The law, which was enacted in 2017, "slows the rabbit traffic down a bit, but people can always buy rabbits elsewhere," explained ACC's Deb Campbell.

A nationwide law like San Francisco's might go a long way toward reducing the "Easter Bunny" problem. In the meantime, anyone who is committed to living with a rabbit should remember they have specific needs, including:

- A safe, indoor environment. That means not relegating them to a [cage](#) or backyard hutch, and it means [bunny-proofing](#) your home so they can't chew on wires and power cords.
- To be [spayed](#) or [neutered](#). This will not only prevent them from reproducing but will reduce the destructive behaviors that come with rabbit puberty.
- An unlimited supply of [fresh hay](#) and clean water.
- Plenty of enrichment. Rabbits are intelligent animals who get [bored](#) if not mentally stimulated. They love to play with toys and explore cardboard mazes, but they will especially respond to having a spayed or neutered bunny mate and interacting with gentle human friends.
- To have their nails trimmed and be [groomed](#) every two or three months to remove excess fur.
- A [veterinarian](#) who specializes in rabbit care, so find one in advance because health issues (especially [digestive complications](#)) can rapidly escalate to expensive emergencies.
- A litterbox, which should be regularly cleaned.

That's just a sampling of what a companion rabbit requires—and why most bunnies given as a well-meant gesture at Easter are so often abandoned outdoors, where they don't have the instincts to survive, or relinquished to animal shelters.

Rabbits deserve so much better. These highly social animals, who can live 10 years or more, deserve guardians who will give them a loving home and appreciate them as individuals. Like Bunito, they deserve to be treated as part of the family.

*Mark Hawthorne serves on the board of the rabbit rescue nonprofit [Save the Buns](#) and is the author of "The Way of the Rabbit."*