

Grooming the Angora Rabbit

Proper grooming of the Angora rabbit is as important as feeding to maintain good health. The coat of the Angora rabbit grows continuously up to a certain point and then naturally starts to shed out; this is commonly referred to as the rabbit “blowing” its coat. At this point new hair is growing in to replace the shedding hair. The length of this cycle varies among breeds of Angora rabbit, but is typically in the range of 10 to 14 weeks or approximately 4 cycles per year. At this time it is necessary to remove the rabbits coat by either combing it out or cutting it off. If the coat is not removed the rabbit will ingest large quantities of hair in their own grooming efforts and the coat will become matted. Ingesting large amounts of hair is one factor that predisposes a rabbit to develop wool block.

Clipping vs. Combing

Whether the coat is best removed by combing or clipping depends on the breed and bloodline of the particular rabbit. Clipping is required for Giant and German angoras because the coat does not shed out rapidly enough in a sufficiently short space of time to remove it efficiently by combing. This trait is not accidental. The German angora (from which the Giant angoras in the U.S. were derived) was bred for commercial wool production purposes to “hold” their coat. This facilitates removal of the entire coat by clipping in one session, which is more efficient for a commercial operation and often less stressful for the rabbit. German angoras are best managed by clipping on schedule every 90 days.

Combing is also known as “plucking,” a term I dislike because it sounds painful and the process should not be if done properly. When combing it is easiest to simply use your fingers to remove the ripe wool which is already being shed. If the rabbit jumps or winces during this process, a more gentle approach is needed. French, English and Satin angoras may be either clipped or combed. My own is experience is that how well combing works depends on the bloodline of the rabbit. English angoras are very variable. A partial explanation for this may be that some lines of English have been bred to “hold” their coat for longer periods because they need to be in full coat in order to be exhibited at rabbit shows and holding the coat longer makes this easier to achieve. French and Satin angoras are similar, except that with Satin angoras their first or baby coat tends to matt very easily and so should be checked often and removed by clipping before matting becomes a problem. It is best to obtain advice on grooming methods from the breeder from whom you purchase your rabbits as they will be most familiar with the traits of their own bloodlines.

There is disagreement among spinners as to whether combing vs. clipping angora produces the superior spinning fiber. My own experience is that there is no significant difference in quality between combed vs. clipped. Problems may arise with shedding of yarn produced from clipped fiber if there are many “second cuts.” Second cuts are shorter lengths of angora getting in with the long angora that result from going over a previously clipped area a second time.

The Grooming Process

The rabbit is ready to be combed/clipped when the coat reaches around 3-5 inches in length and you start seeing more wool in the cage. It is a good idea to record your grooming dates on a calendar to aid in planning future grooming dates and learning the shedding cycle of your particular rabbit. The basic tools you will need are: scissors (3-4 inch blade length with slightly blunted end is best), wide-tooth metal comb, and slicker brush. Grooming is also a good time to check and clip toenails. If you will be mainly clipping and have many rabbits, then investing in good quality hair-dressers’ scissors will make the job much easier.

Grooming can be accomplished either with the rabbit on your lap, on a grooming table (purchasable from most rabbit supply catalogs) or a combination of both. My preferred method is to use a grooming table when doing the body and head and then do the belly and legs last with the rabbit lying on their back in my lap. When placing the rabbit on their back in your lap it helps to wear an apron or use a towel to create a hammock type effect as this helps the rabbit feel more secure and thus more relaxed. Similarly providing a non-skid surface, such as carpet, on the grooming table makes it much more likely that the rabbit will stay still grooming. When clipping a rabbit with scissors I generally remove the long high quality spinning fiber first, then cut out any matts around the ears, face and feet and then finish by removing leg and belly wool as necessary. It is generally easiest to start at the head and then work down the sides towards the back. Clipping with the flat of the blade against the skin and keeping the scissors pointed outward will help to avoid cutting the rabbit. If you accidentally cut the rabbit, an antiseptic dusting powder can be applied.

The above method works for me. However, I have seen people do the entire clipping process with the rabbit on their lap. A quality breeder will show you how they groom and be willing to give you a lesson as needed. Beyond that, successful grooming is a matter of patience and practice.

Interim Grooming

The need for grooming between shearing events is another area of debate among Angora rabbit breeders. This is because the need for interim grooming is very dependent on the breed of rabbit and within bloodlines for any given rabbit. A quality German angora rabbit should not need any interim grooming with the exception of checking for cleanliness around the vent area and for matting on cheeks and behind the ears in very humid weather. French and Satin angoras should also require little if any interim grooming. It is good practice to check cheeks, behind the ears, inner legs, belly and vent area very carefully about 45 – 60 days after the last shearing.

English angoras, because of their relatively higher proportion of wool to guard hair, often benefit from interim grooming, especially the use of a blower. This is also true of some lines of French and Satin angoras. Blowers can be purchased from rabbit/pet supply catalogs, e.g. Air Force Metro™. It is important to use a blower, not a dryer as heat is bad for the angora coat and stressful to the rabbit. The best description I have seen for proper use of a blower is: <http://home.pacbell.net/bettychu/grooming.html>. If the goal in using a blower is simply to remove dust and debris from the coat and locate matts, then a reasonable substitute for a blower is a shop vac that blows or a hair dryer with a cold shot setting. Angora coats can be amazingly dusty so wearing a mask and doing this outdoors is a good idea.

Using Electric Clippers

The question of using electric clippers on rabbits often arises when owners have arthritis or problems with repetitive motion injury. Clippers can be successfully used on angora rabbits, but it is more difficult to do a good job than with scissors, especially if the goal is to produce high quality spinning fiber. The clippers must be high quality and in very good condition with sharp new blades; inexpensive family hair trimmer type clippers generally give very poor results. I have had best results using Oster Golden A5 clippers with a No. 40 blade, (No. 10 or 30 blades also will work fairly well). Premier 800c and Aesculap clippers are also reported to work well. If there are problems with the blades not cutting through the fiber than it is most likely due to dull blades or blades not being properly set at the factory or after sharpening. Blades that have been used on dogs or other animals are generally too dull to work on an Angora rabbit. When using clippers take extra time to check frequently that they are not “running hot” and are adequately lubricated (e.g. using a product such as Kool-Lube™). Since clippers leave very little hair on the rabbit, it will be very important to protect them from extremes in temperature and direct exposure to sunlight.