Wambui finds out...

SUNGURA IN THE SHAMBA

Illustrations by: Joseph Kariuki
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...So you see, rabbits are easy to look after and give you a chance to help feed your family.
But Wambui, we have never kept rabbits, we know nothing about them. Would they not escape, become a pest and eat all our maize?

No they wouldn't, we've been learning about them at school. I know how to make a good cheap cage and how to feed them.

Did you know that with just two mother rabbits and a male, we could produce over 100 kilos of meat a year - That's as much meat as five or six sheep!
Well... the extra meat would be nice...

And if they did escape, the dogs, mongeese and snakes would soon kill them before they become a pest.

So give me two girl rabbits...

They’re called does, Wambui.
OK, you give me two does and later on I’ll give you back three young does when mine have had babies. Njuguna will lend me his male...

It’s called a buck!

Njuguna lends me his buck to mate with the does and thirty days later I’ll have six to eight baby rabbits from each Doe!

Cool.

So... Who got the better deal?

I better go and look for the materials to build the cage.
To start with, I need two cages one for each doe, about 75 cm square will be big enough for the mother and babies up to weaning. Later I will build another one slightly bigger for when I wean the babies from their mother.

But the good thing is that I can build the cages out of materials that are lying around. This bamboo will make a good floor if I split it and weave it into a mat...
...And these sticks will make strong walls to keep out the dogs and mongoose but still let plenty of light and air in...

Then I put the bamboo mat to form the floor.
The roof needs to keep the rain out so I am going to use this plastic sheet and cover it with grass thatch.

That will keep the inside nice and dry.

And since the cage is under the tree, it is out of the worst rain.

Could you use these debes for food or water?
Yes! These old debes will make great nesting boxes if I cut them down and fill them with dry grass and leaves. The door needs to be low enough for the babies to get back into the nest if they fall out!

These old tins and plastic jars will be good for food and water and if I make sure that I don't leave any sharp edges when I cut them. If I loop some string round, I can tie them to the cage so that they don't fall over.

The cage is complete, where are you going?

To bring the rabbits of course.
These young does have just been taken away from their mother so it will be another two months before they are old enough for me to introduce them to Njuguna's buck. But that will give me time to get used to looking after them.

It's amazing what these rabbits will eat! There is so much good rabbit food on the shamba and some of it we were not using before!

That's true, Wambui.
The rabbits only take a little of all the food that we chop for the cow. There are weeds from the shamba, leaves from the mugumo tree, mulberry leaves, mango leaves...

Maize stalks, sweet potato vines, and there is always grass! I just take anything green, chop it and put it in the cage.

If the rabbits don’t like it they leave it and it is composted with the rabbit droppings and the cow manure.
And now that they are mated and going to have babies, I sneak a little of hen's food...

...And a little of the cow's salt lick from time to time...

...After school I remove the old food from the cage and put in the fresh stuff. Rabbits eat mainly at night so they get the food while it's still fresh.
The baby rabbits are now six weeks old, so it is time to wean them. Next week I'll get Njuguna's buck and mate the two does again, that way I should be able to get four litters a year.

While am cleaning out the old food, I brush out the droppings and replace the water. You can use the droppings as fertilizer on the plants straight away, although I add them to the compost heap.

I've got nine young rabbits in this cage now and there is a risk the males will start to fight each other as they get older. If that happens I'll make sure that we eat the trouble makers first!
Mother invites uncle Silas on Saturday.

Hello Silas. Hello.

Uncle Silas will kill the rabbits for us.

It's important that the rabbit is not frightened or else the meat will not be as good. See how I hold the rabbit and hit it hard on the back of the head with a heavy stick.

I then cut it's throat and hang it up by the back legs to let the blood drain out.
Some weeks later

Well, Wambui how will we cook the rabbit this week? Fried? Stewed? Roasted? Rabbit soup...? I am amazed how good it is with whatever is ready in the shamba.

Mmm! My favourite was the time you fried it with a little honey and we had it with sukuma wiki and ugali!

We've had so may good meals from these rabbits, we never had meat so often before.

And it is all coming from plants that were already on the shamba.
Sungura in the Shamba

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