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Kinuko Katayanagi at home with her rabbits

What's up, doc? Boom in rabbits, that's what

By Naohiko Takahashi

Yomiuri Shimbun Staff Writer

They do not make noise, they do not take much looking after, and they are as cute as stuffed animals. All this is making rabbits increasingly popular as pets, rivaling the two traditional favorites—cats and dogs.

Some rabbits now even come with a certificate of pedigree worthy of inclusion in Burke's Peerage. But, will the popularity of the rabbit, which is this year's zodiac sign according to the Chinese calendar, jump high enough to make the fluffy creatures an everyday pet?

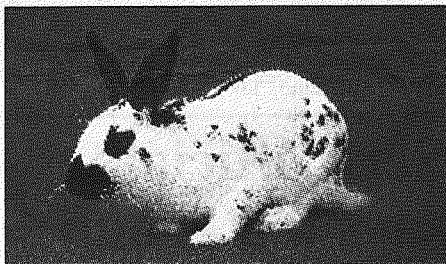
Kinuko Katayanagi, who works in advertising, keeps 12 rabbits at her condominium in Tokyo. She adores rabbits, saying they are quieter than dogs and less frisky than cats.

Katayanagi formed the World Rabbit Fan Club five years ago to exchange information on pet rabbits and its membership has grown from 100 to about 3,500.

According to Nihon Usagi Kyokai, an association of rabbit breeders based in Tokyo, rabbit fanciers have also been able to buy special rabbit food.

These factors have made it much easier to keep rabbits and the total number of pet rabbits in the nation is currently estimated at about 1 million.

There are many different breeds of rabbit, and recently foreign species have begun to vie with domestic breeds for pop-



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English Spot

ularity. The American Fuzzy Lop with its dangling ears, and the English Spot, which, as its name suggests, has a speckled body, are two popular examples.

In the United States and Britain, rabbits are already common pets and contests are frequently held to allow proud owners to show their animals.

A prize-winning rabbit with a pedigree can cost as much as ¥3 million, but rabbits priced at between ¥120,000 to ¥130,000 are the bestsellers, according to Rokko Usagi Kan in Kobe, a pet shop specializing in rabbits.

However, there is a downside to the pet rabbit boom. Due to repeated, ill-considered crossbreeding to produce rabbits carrying the prestigious bloodlines of prizewinners, some bunnies are born too weak to survive. Another problem is that people who buy rabbits, in much the same way as a child might buy a stuffed animal, often abandon them when they grow bigger than anticipated.