

Why Alpacas?

There are as many reasons to raise alpacas as there are alpaca owners. We each make this decision based on a whole host of personal needs and history. Some of the most often cited reasons for considering alpaca ownership include the tremendous business opportunity, a love of luxury fiber, a desire for a rural lifestyle, the desire to show animals, and simple companionship and community.



Alpacas have a gentle beauty and mystique that's hard to deny. Domesticated for over 6000 years, they're the oldest domesticated livestock. Producers of the fiber of the gods, sole property of the Incan rulers, they were nearly driven to extinction by the Spanish conquistadors. Until 1993, they were classified as a national treasure in Peru and export of live alpacas was illegal.

Now in North America, alpacas continue to transfix us. Long elegant necks, large eyes, gentle humming, rich colors, bright whites, gorgeous fiber, and playful antics all make them irresistible to those of us who catch the "alpaca bug." In addition, their ease of maintenance and low impact on the environment makes it possible to raise them on small acreage with little previous livestock experience and restores the hope for many of a viable family farm.

The potential markets for an animal with the characteristics of the alpaca are vast. Alpacas are loved by their owners and respected by those who process or wear products made from their fleece. Give us a call today at 608-669-6651 or e-mail us at info@offbeatacres.com to "talk alpaca" and find out what we can do for you!

Alpaca Fleece

Alpacas are first and foremost fiber producing animals. They've been domesticated for thousands of years specifically because of their gorgeous fiber. As in the past, the future value of the breed will continue to be determined by their fiber producing capabilities. So whether you're interested in show animals, breeding stock, studs, or pets, all alpaca owners should understand alpaca fiber, its production value, its uses, and processing options.

Alpaca fiber exhibits the finest features of the world's natural fibers—it is strong, soft, warm, light, lustrous and has a good hand. Alpaca is as soft as cashmere yet stronger and warmer than wool. In addition, having evolved in freezing temperatures at high altitudes has given alpacas more thermal capacity in their fiber than nearly any other animal. Alpaca fiber contains microscopic air pockets which give it powerful insulating value while remaining light weight. All of which makes it ideal for fine clothing.

Alpaca is a naturally beautiful and unique fiber. It's silky and soft, but still durable. It's light, but warm. It's naturally colored, but takes dyes well. Alpaca owners who focus on the fiber quality of all of their animals will always be assured of having a commercially viable end product and a more valuable herd.

Alpaca is classed as a luxury fiber (like cashmere, mohair, and angora) because of its fineness and relative scarcity. 90% of the world alpaca population is in Peru, so in North America, which has perhaps 2% of the world's alpaca population, alpaca fiber is especially scarce. This presents both an opportunity and a challenge for North American alpaca owners and breeders. Alpaca fleece commands high prices when sold directly to handspinners (around \$2.00 an ounce—compared to sheep's wool, which sells retail for \$6 to \$10 per pound). But because there's not enough fleece produced in the US to interest most commercial processors, many alpaca breeders must make their own arrangements for processing the fiber. Fortunately, several fiber co-ops have been started by alpaca breeders and many small processing mills will work with specialty fibers like alpaca. Offbeat Acres is a member of the Alpaca Fiber Co-op of North America, and also uses Willow Bridge Fiber Mill in Mazomanie, WI for yarn & roving. Alpaca fleece is unique in that the blanket does not contain guard hair. The fur covering most other animals is of two types, a soft undercoat and a coarser overcoat. In fiber producing animals such as kel goats (which produce cashmere) the coarse guard hairs must be removed, a costly and tedious process. Alpaca fleece is also devoid of

the lanolin that sheep produce. This results in a fleece that can be spun immediately after shearing without any further processing if desired.

The two alpaca breeds--huacayas and suris--produce distinctly different fibers. Both animals produce long staple lengths (the length of the shorn fiber--generally between 4 and 6 inches), but huacaya is generally soft and crimped while suri is slick and straight. In commercial processing, huacaya can be spun either using a woolen or worsted process, while suri is spun almost exclusively as worsted. Huacaya can be knitted into sweaters or woven into cloth. Suri is used exclusively in cloth, as gabardine and crepe.

Great alpaca fiber facts:

- Alpaca is found naturally in 22 distinct colors. The fiber can also be blended to produce an infinite array of natural colors. It also takes dyes well.
- The fiber from alpaca is unusually strong and resilient.
- Raised at high altitudes in freezing cold, the alpaca has developed more thermal capacity in its fiber than almost any other animal. The fiber contains microscopic air pockets which create lightweight garments with high insulation values.
- Alpaca has a natural, rich luster which gives garments made from 100% alpaca high visual appeal.
- Alpaca is easily dyed any color and always retains its natural luster.
- An alpaca produces enough fleece each year to create six to eight soft, warm sweaters.
- Alpaca fleece produces a high yield of clean fiber after processing: 87 to 95 percent for alpaca versus 43 to 76 percent for sheep's wool.
- Alpaca is easier and less expensive to process than sheep's wool due to its lack of grease or lanolin, and alpaca does not have to be de-haired like cashmere or camel.
- Alpaca can be scoured or cleaned without using chemicals.

Meet a Huacaya

When most people think of alpacas, they see in their minds eye the huacaya. Huacayas (pronounced wa-KAI-ya) have the fluffy teddy bear appeal that many associate with alpacas and are the more common of the two types. They comprise about 80% of the U.S. alpaca population. The [Alpaca Registry](#) (ARI) showed about 101,492 huacaya alpacas registered in the United States as of July 2009.

These beautiful animals are characterized by their fluffy fleece. The fiber grows outward from the alpaca's body and is so thick and crimped that it forms halo of fleece all around the animal giving them their "cuddly" appearance. The fiber is soft and strong and generally crimped throughout. It looks a lot like Corriedale and Romney sheeps wool (without the lanolin). At the microscopic level, the scales on follicle of the hair of the huacaya fiber are irregular and slightly serrated (though still smoother than sheeps wool) which helps it "grip" in processing and take dyes well.



When commercially processed, huacaya fiber can be processed either using the woolen or worsted process and produces a soft, lofty thread or yarn. It's ideal for knitted wear or soft tweeds.

Huacayas come naturally in a wide array of colors with white, brown, and black being the most common.

Alpaca Care

Like all livestock, alpacas require care and husbandry to prosper. But alpaca are easy to care for and place less stress on a farm and its environment than do most other livestock.

Alpacas were close to annihilation after the Spanish conquest of the Incas. They survived because of their importance to the Indian people and to the animals' ability to tolerate harsh climatic conditions. Today, alpaca farming is concentrated in the Altiplano--the high altitude regions of Southern Peru, Bolivia and Chile where conditions are often harsh and food is sparse. Alpacas not only battle a harsh climate--burning sun by day, freezing conditions at night, low oxygen throughout --but also receive few of the benefits of modern animal husbandry. Yet, they survive, although in relatively small numbers. In their homeland of South America, Peru has approximately 2.5 million, Bolivia around 500,000 and there are only some 50,000 in Chile and Argentina combined.

In the United States, where conditions are typically easier on the animals, our concerns are for their general health and well being and in enhancing their yield across a greater number of years. Because of their origins, they are easy keepers and don't require extraordinary care or facilities. But conscientious breeders need to provide adequate shelter, food and water and stay abreast of the latest developments and research in alpaca health, genetics, and husbandry.

You and Your Veterinarian

Your veterinarian is an invaluable partner in providing for the health, well-being and productivity of your alpacas. Know when veterinarian care is required, know what is an emergency. Be prepared for your veterinarians visit; have the alpaca stalled, have necessary tack ready. If you are unsure of any situation contact your veterinarian. Do NOT self-diagnose. If you are uncomfortable with any procedures, have your veterinarian show you how.

Our veterinary care is provided by Dr. Mike Etter from Lodi Animal Hospital. Dr. Etter is a camelid vet, and is very familiar with the care and treatments required by alpacas. For emergencies and more serious situations, we are less than ½ hour away from the UW Veterinary Hospital.

Pasture

Alpacas are gentle on the land and efficient users of feed. A couple acres of good pasture can support 4 to 8 alpacas. Feeding consists of pasture and/or hay. In order to be sure your animals are getting the nutrition they need, we recommend continuously monitoring the weight, frame/body score, and conditions of the alpacas and adjust feeding as needed. You can also have your local agricultural agent seasonally test your pasture, water and hay.

Alpacas do well on a combination of pasture and clean, grass-type hay. Overfeeding or dependence on protein-rich hays, such as alfalfa, are unhealthy. Our pastures consist of a mixture of orchard grass, timothy, clover, and alfalfa (no more than 20%). Pastures are periodically checked pasture for poisonous weeds & grasses such as fescue.

Pellets

We use Mazzuri UltimatE pellets. Bred & lactating females and growing alpacas get approximately ½ cup per day. Our adult males get 1 cup, twice a week. The animals are monitored and feed adjusted accordingly for overweight & underweight animals. Alpacas like cold weather and are well equipped to deal with winter. However, they may require more nourishment for severe cold.

Supplements

We use Mazzuri mineral supplements as well, to balance the nutrient deficiencies in our forage and pellets. Minerals are available free choice.

Water

Fresh, clean water should be available at all times. In winter months, ensure water buckets are not frozen over. Also, ensure water temperature is palatable to the alpacas. They may refuse water that is too warm or too cold. This is of special concern with heated water buckets warming the water too much or keep full systems that do not pump enough cold water into the already warmed water

Alpaca Facilities

Alpacas are hardy creatures that adapt well to all climates and have minimal requirements in the way of shelter. Access to an open barn, a simple overhang or a 3-sided shed is adequate shelter from the weather during adverse conditions and provides shade during warmer seasons. Your facilities configuration should promote easy care and handling of your alpacas.

Fencing

The perimeter fencing's main purpose is to keep predators out, rather than keep the alpacas in. Some ranches use five-wire high-tensile fencing; this may not be secure enough to keep herdsires away from breeding females or from having crias stand up on the wrong side of the fence after cushioning next to it. The most widely used fencing is welded or unwelded field fencing that has smaller holes on the bottom to keep out dogs and other critters. We use four foot welded wire fencing, which is readily available at Farm & Fleet or Tractor Supply. Look for “four foot no climb horse fence”.

Shelters

Shelters are mostly needed to provide shade in summer and haven from winter's cold wind and snow. Typically, a simple three-sided shelter is all that is needed provided it does not face into the wind or sun. There are several excellent plans available in alpaca and livestock magazines that have storage areas configured into the shelter. See your local lumber supplier for price estimates and other suggestions.

Catch Pen

This is a small area to catch your alpaca in to perform necessary procedures. It should be in a location that is readily accessible for you to herd your alpaca(s) into with a simple gated entry. A size that affords your alpaca room to pace but a comfortable reach to the alpaca for you is ideal; typically 8 by 10 foot.

Pasture

The alpacas' pasture should be kept free of harmful debris and regularly inspected for dangerous mole holes and such. Keeping dung piles mowed will help battle parasites by allowing sunlight to reach the larvae and deter alpacas from graze near them.

Alpaca Health and Care

Although generally hardy and disease resistant, alpacas benefit from appropriate preventive medicine and ready access to a veterinarian experienced in working with camelids. Health management programs may include regular worming and vaccinations specific to the geographic area. Selenium supplements may be required to prevent white muscle disease. Vitamin D supplements will prevent rickets in winter-born cria. Toenails need to be trimmed regularly and teeth should be inspected and trimmed if they exhibit excessive growth. Alpacas are sheared annually for their comfort and well being.

General Health

Continuously review the alpacas eyes, ears, teeth, feet and general demeanor; look for abrasions, build ups, or lethargy. Review the dung pile daily for signs of abnormal feces, mucous or diarrhea.

Feces

Alpacas generally eliminate in several designated areas. They have small, dark pellets. If feces appears runny, contains mucous or looks otherwise abnormal, this could indicate a parasitic infestation or other health problem. Contact your veterinarian for a diagnosis and treatment.

Teeth

Alpacas with excellent bites seldom need their teeth trimmed. Front incisors that protrude beyond the top gum line may need to be sawed. Mature males that have developed fighting teeth in the back of their palates may need these cut off to prevent injury to other alpacas. If you are uncomfortable with these procedures, have your veterinarian perform them. Check for swelling along the gum lines and for tooth abscesses which may be caused by course hay. Also, be aware that alpacas will loose their baby teeth at approximately two years of age.

Feet

Alpacas have a padded foot with two toes. Alpacas toenails grow and may require periodic trimming if they are not worn down naturally. Check nails by picking up the alpaca's foot and looking at it from the bottom. If the nail bends over the side of the pad or protrudes, it needs to be trimmed. Lay clippers flat against the pad and snip each side and then the point of the nail. Alpacas have a quick that supplies blood to the nail. If you clip too close, it will bleed. DO NOT PANIC. Use blood stop powder or spray and wrap the foot in gauze for 30 minutes. If you are uncomfortable with this procedure, ask your veterinarian, shearer, or breeder for assistance.

Grooming

The focus of grooming should be to keep the fleece free of debris which can become embedded within the coat and cause skin irritations and abrasions or hinder later shearing. One of the best ways to do this is to groom the environment instead of the alpaca. Remove waste hay and seed pods from pasture and barn. Occasional grooming may still be necessary. A fiber brush and pick are excellent tools. Avoid excessive brushing as this can cause damage to the fiber and stress to the alpaca.

Parasites and Worming

Alpacas like all livestock can get parasites, especially during warm weather. Parasites vary by geographic location. Talk to your veterinarian about a worming program specific to your area.

Worming is avoided by many breeders in the first and last 90 days of gestation for females unless treatment is indicated.

We inject adult alpacas with Dectomax every 30 days. Vitamin D is administered to fall crias and other animals with extremely dense coats and full face coverage. Vitamin D is administered as a oral paste for animals getting daily pellets, and injected for adult males (the males do not have enough fat in their diet to properly ingest the paste).

Typical Care Schedule and Supplies

Each farm operates differently, but these are the routine care tasks we perform throughout the year and some of the supplies we find the most useful to have on hand.

Routine Care Schedule

Daily, ongoing

- Fill water buckets; wash if necessary
- Inspect and clean feces
- Feed hay, grain, minerals as needed
- Observe alpacas (ongoing)
- Dung clean-up (as needed)

Weekly

- Fiber inspection, picking, grooming
- Pasture inspection, debris removal (as needed)
- Record cria weights

Monthly

- Hands-on inspection
- Record adult weights
- Frame/body score
- Foot inspection, trim toenails if necessary
- Dental inspection, trim teeth if necessary
- Worm according to program
- Mow dung piles if needed

Seasonally

- Inspect shelters
- Test pasture, water, hay

Annually

- Shearing in spring
- Vaccinations according to schedule (CDT is administered annually)

Useful supplies

- Tack
 - Halters
 - Leads
 - Catch rope
- First Aid kit
 - Digital thermometer
 - Gauze
 - Stop bleed
- Other
 - Heat lamp or hair dryer
 - Towels
 - Fans
 - Fly traps
 - Measuring cup for food
 - Livestock scale
 - Shears
 - Hoof snippers, toenail clippers
 - Wormers (corid, panacur, dectomax)
 - Insect repellent
 - Syringes and needles
 - Water buckets
 - Food dishes

Getting Started

There are a number of things to consider before launching into alpaca ownership. First, talk to and visit as many existing breeders as possible. You'll gain insight into the variety of ways different farms have structured their operations and their businesses and you'll begin to develop an eye for the types of alpacas you like.

The key for any new alpaca owner or breeder is to understand what draws you to these animals and what type of business or lifestyle you want to create around that. You can choose to become a breeder and breed and sell breeding stock and services. You can invest in alpacas by buying them but keeping them on another farm (agisting) or by co-owning them with another buyer. You can enter the show circuit and raise and train show animals. You can raise pet quality animals for companionship and pleasure. You can focus on fiber and fiber arts. You can operate a farm store and sell alpaca end products (yarn and sweaters, for example) and by products (fertilizer, for example). Alpacas can be a huge additional draw to an agritourism operation or form the basis for creating one. Some of these could be big money operations, others are not.

Once you've defined your own interests and goals, look for shows and seminars and workshops in your area. The more you can educate yourself about all aspects of alpacas and the alpaca business, the more informed your choices will be. Then, based on this information, you can (and should!) develop a business plan to help you define how you can best meet your goals. Many existing breeders are willing to help new alpaca owners with this.

Some new alpaca owners begin with a few geldings to test the waters. Others begin with a few bred females and grow a herd slowly, learning as they go. Others begin with an entire herd, so that they are "in business" immediately. All of these (and many more) methods can be successful, the important thing is for you to understand what your own goals and expectations are and to choose a plan that can get you there.

Why Are They So Darn Expensive?

At this stage of the industry's development, price is based largely on the scarcity of the animals and is directly related to the individual breeding potential and the potential quality of the offspring.

For example, a gelding (castrated male) has no breeding potential and is therefore the cheapest alpaca to buy (often less than \$500). On the other hand, a high quality male with many good progeny (offspring) on the ground has a very high breeding potential and can be worth thousands of dollars. He can also command a high income from the stud services he provides. Young, unproven males are often considerably less.

A female's price is a reflection of her quality, age, breeding history and that of the herdsire to which she is bred. Females can be worth anything from a few thousand dollars to thousands of dollars. Currently, income from females is derived from selling the offspring. However, breeding and business plans should account for the growing fiber market.

Demand for alpacas has increased dramatically every year since their introduction outside of South America. Just as an example of the rising interest, the US breed association (AOBA) exceeded 3,000 members in 2002, when there were none in 1990 and only 1,000 in 1997. As it's grown, AOBA has spawned several important organizations within the alpaca industry like a national fiber co-op (AFCNA), the show division, and *Alpacas* magazine to name a few.

In 2000, the members of the Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association (AOBA) and the Alpaca Registry (ARI), voted to close the registry to new imports. This means that alpacas imported to the US cannot be registered (similar to a pedigree for other pure breed animals), which has had the effect of curtailing new imports. So, in the US, the animals themselves remain somewhat scarce.

However, the market for breeding stock has been leveling off in recent years, with the recession. As you work on your business plan, we strongly encourage you not to solely focus on the sale of animals as your only source of income. Here at Offbeat Acres, we actively market our fleece, fiber products, AFCNA products, and other alpaca products. We've also sell the manure!

Business Opportunity

Alpacas are often represented as "The World's Finest Livestock Investment." For most owners though, alpaca ownership should be thought of more as a business. You seldom have to trim the toenails on your stock portfolio or market your 401K. Alpaca ownership is more active than passive investing, but the results are in your hands and the rewards can be larger as well. (Though alpaca investment strategies, like agisting and co-ownership, are also available.)

Alpacas can be raised profitably on small acreage. Their high value and low maintenance needs make them ideal for both hobby farmers and full-time breeders. In addition, livestock offer unique benefits in the form of tax advantages, income deferral, and investment compounding. Alpacas are also fully insurable and can be depreciated. Many breeders also capitalize on the business opportunities presented by selling alpaca end products, support products, or services. See [theresource list](#) for this section for more information on these important topics.

Alpaca prices have been falling in recent years, so the key to profitability falls on you to actively market and promote your business. If you chose to sell breeding stock, consider the impact that offspring will have on your herd. If you start with 3 bred females, you could have a herd of 20 alpacas in 5 years. Assuming that half of your 20 are females, and females are selling for \$5000 each, your original investment of \$15,000 would be worth \$50,000 in 5 years.

The fiber market is still being developed in the United States. Fiber operations can be profitable if the the farm develops a strong market to cottage industry (hand spinners, fiber artists, etc.) or does value-added processing (carding, spinning, weaving, knitting, etc.).

Alpaca ownership can be rewarding on many levels. For owners who approach it as a business it can offer a significant return on investment in addition to the joy of owning these beautiful animals.

Breeding and Birthing

Birthing

The foretelling signs of imminent birth vary from dam to dam, but can include frequent cushing then standing, hanging around the dung pile, dilated vulva or any change in behavior. A normal unassisted birth usually takes about 45 minutes once started. It begins with the cria's nose peeking through the vulva. Next, the fore paws should emerge. Then, the entire cria. Dry the cria off in cold weather. Make sure nasal passage is clear and the cria is breathing freely. Cria should be nursing and standing on own within six hours post-partum. Dip the navel in iodine solution once a day for three days.

Now for dam care. Pacing, getting up and down, spitting and screaming are a normal part of the birthing process. After birth, the placenta should be expelled in its entirety within a couple hours post-partum; the dam may be uncomfortable nursing until then. Remove waxy plugs from dam's teats with warm wet cloth. Check for vaginal tears and monitor for signs of infection. Flushing your females' genital tract within the first three days after birthing can be beneficial to her reproductive health. Unless you have been trained on how to deal with these situations, contact your veterinarian immediately at any signs of stress or abnormal presentation in cria or prolonged and excessive straining by dam.

Cria Care

A healthy cria will be up and on its feet in less than an hour after birth. It's important for the cria to begin nursing on its own, so many breeders will separate other alpacas from the new mother and cria and minimize other distractions. Most mothers and crias work it out on their own, but occasionally will need help. Once the cria is up and nursing, routine care includes administering inoculations and monitoring feces, also recording the weights of growing crias. They should gain between 1/4 and 1/2 pound per day until approximately 35 pounds where their weight may temporarily plateau. Special diet and supplements may be needed for winter crias that are lacking appropriate levels of sunlight exposure.

IgG Testing

Blood is sometimes drawn from crias at 24 hours; the results will indicate the amount of antibodies absorbed by the cria during the passive anti-body transfer from the dam during the first few hours of nursing. This test may be indicated in crias that have trouble nursing or if the first nursing occurred over six hours post-partum, a first-time mom, or in any other instance where consumption of colostrum is not suspected. Some ranches perform this test on a standard basis in all crias in order to record a starting blood plate. Consult with your veterinarian to conclude test results and if further action is required such as blood transfusion.

Weaning

Weaning can be stressful for cria and dam. Ensure both are in optimal health at this time. Although cria has been grazing on hay and pasture, the rumen is not functioning 100% until about 3 to 4 months of age. Weaning can begin anytime after about 50 pounds but not before 3.5 months. Hopefully, cria has shown an interest in feeding



on the pellets. There are several methods to wean; the two most popular being cold-turkey and gradual separation. The cold-turkey method is simply removing the cria out of sight of the dam for at least 1 to 2 months. We use gradual separation and a creep feeder. First, we get the cria used to going into the creep for pellets. Then, once the cria is at least 60 pounds and 4-5 months old, we start closing the gate to the creep feeder for several hours a day to get the cria used to being away from mom. Make sure the cria has companion animals in the creep pen!! The length of time apart is gradually lengthened for several weeks until the separation is permanent.

Breeding

Female alpacas are ready to breed when they reach 75% of their adult weight which usually occurs between 12 and 24 months. Sexually mature females are induced ovulators and do not exhibit estrus cycles typical of most domesticated animals. If not pregnant, a mature female is almost constantly "open" or receptive to breeding. Males mature more slowly typically becoming ready to breed between 2 and 3 years of age. Since a few females have become pregnant as early as 6 months and some males may be precocious as youngsters, it is important to separate open females and intact males soon after weaning at 5 to 8 months of age.

Progesterone levels are at their lowest in a female between 14 and 21 days after a cria is born. This is an ideal time to re-breed her. If she had a normal parturition, has no infection, vaginal bleeding or tears, introduce her to a male at 14 days postpartum. Leave with male for one week or rebreed every three days. Behavior test the female at 21 and 35 days postpartum. If she was not receptive (did not push), the next step to verify pregnancy with either an ultrasound or progesterone test. Repeat pregnancy verification at 60 days. If at anytime pregnancy is not indicated, return her to the male to be rebred and start the process again. Some females may need antibiotic uterine flush or hormone injections to become pregnant in certain situations such as infection or being open for an extended period of time.

Breeding is done in the prone position and takes at least 15 minutes since the male dribbles, rather than ejaculates, semen into the female uterus. While breeding, the male makes a continuous "orgling" noise and occasionally moves his front legs along the sides of the female. The mating process induces the female to ovulate so she can become pregnant.

The gestation period is approximately eleven months and almost always results in the birth of a single, healthy baby called a "cria". A cria usually weighs between 10 and 18 pounds and stands and begins to nurse within minutes or a few hours of birth.