



alpacas



A male Huacaya alpaca.

what are they?

Alpacas, along with camels and llamas, are members of the Camelid family and are the domesticated descendants of the vincuñya of the Andes. Alpacas have evolved to live in alpine areas at high altitude so are extremely hardy. They are grazing animals and naturally live in family groups of one male and around 10 females. Domesticated in Peru by 6,000 years ago, they were highly prized for their fine fleece, as well as providing meat, hide and fuel. Increasing numbers are kept in North America, Australia and the UK. Alpaca farmers often make as much of their income from alpacas as visitor attractions and therapy animals as from their fleece.

what are the benefits?

Alpacas produce a silky, lustrous fibre, softer and warmer than sheep's wool. It doesn't itch and is ideal for people who are allergic to sheep's wool. Their efficient metabolism means they need less land than sheep, and the way they graze and the softness of their feet may be less damaging to the pasture. An alpaca can live around 20 years, producing fleece every year. You can also use their dung for compost, or even fuel; they (very usefully) always poo in the same place in the field making a nice easy pile to collect.

It can be difficult to make a profit from selling even the valuable alpaca fibre, but as well as the popular alpaca treks, they're used for educational visits to schools and community groups, and therapeutic visits to hospices and nursing homes. An income can also be made from selling stock. Many people fall in love with alpacas - their nature makes them easy to train and a delight to handle. They also make good guard animals, protecting sheep and poultry from foxes and dogs.

what can I do?

Getting started: many alpaca farms welcome visitors and are happy to share knowledge. Visit keepers and chat about what's involved. If you're considering breeding alpacas, or producing fibre, get advice from an experienced person to ensure you obtain good quality stock. Find local groups and breeders through the British alpaca society. Alpacas are social animals so you need to keep at least two. Males will live together in single-sex herds and, if you're not intending to breed, wethers (castrated males) are can be the most affordable option. If breeding alpacas you need more than one male. You'll want to separate your male from females to control breeding, and your breeding male will need a companion.

Grazing and shelter: on good grass you can keep 5 alpacas per acre. Alpacas are hardy; their fleece protects them from freezing nights in the Andes. Their fleece isn't water-repellent like a sheep's but is so dense that rain doesn't penetrate, so they can easily live out all year, but should be provided with an open-fronted field shelter which they can use at will. Alpacas can jump but rarely try to escape and do not challenge fences; Stock fencing of 4 feet high is sufficient.

Feeding: alpacas need grass and good hay or haylage, and require little supplemental feeding. Pregnant females or youngsters may require some additional concentrated feeds. Compound feeds, specifically formulated for alpacas can be purchased, or they can be given sugar-beet, alfalfa or small amounts of grains. Grass nuts are often given as a treat and are useful to train alpacas to come running at the sight of a feed bucket. They need daily vitamin and mineral supplements specifically formulated for them. In the UK they also need vitamin D supplements, either orally or by injection, every 6-10 weeks depending on the method. Like all livestock, they always need access to clean drinking water.



Alpaca yarn from individual alpacas.

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Keeping alpacas with other animals: alpacas mix well with other livestock, but allow them the company of their own kind. If they're kept with sheep or cows, monitor the parasite burden of the pasture (see below). Alpacas can be infected with the same intestinal parasites. Alpacas may even be more susceptible as they're less prevalent in the Andes, so alpacas haven't evolved resistance.

Fibre production: alpaca fleece produces a very soft, silky fibre which is valued for its lustre or sheen. Suri Alpaca fibre, in particular, has a deep lustre and handles like silk. Many keepers, if not processing the fibre themselves, sell the fleeces to hand spinners. Others send them to small mills that process individual fleeces allowing you to sell yarn from a specific alpaca in your herd.

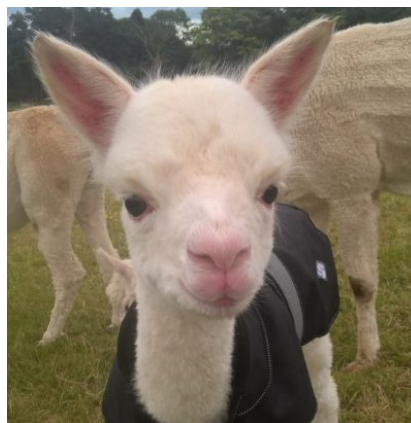
Alpaca fleeces are evaluated on 5 aspects: fineness, density, crimp style, uniformity and lustre. Breeding pairs are often chosen by matching an alpaca weak in one aspect with one strong in the same. It's good to learn this if breeding alpacas for fibre. The finest fleece is produced by the youngest alpacas and the quality decreases with age. Alpacas are sheared annually between late May and late July - usually done with the alpaca lying on its side, with two people - a handler and a shearer - and takes a few minutes.

Health: alpacas tend to suffer from fewer problems than sheep, but check your animals every day and become familiar with their normal behaviour. As with all livestock, have a good vet who can be contacted in an emergency.

Alpacas suffer from many of the same parasites as sheep and cows. Good pasture management can help prevent this becoming a problem. Research pasture rotation systems, where areas of grazing are rested for periods of time. The alpacas will have left all their poo in one big pile, so you should also remove this from the pasture.

Don't treat your animals for worms more often than necessary, as it can lead to resistance to the medications. Conduct regular faecal egg counts to monitor the parasite levels in your herd and only treat when necessary. You can now easily buy kits to do this yourself, or you can send faecal samples to a lab who will do it for you.

Trim toenails every 10-12 weeks if always on pasture, less often if they regularly walk on rough surfaces. Check for lice regularly. Annually, they should be vaccinated for clostridial diseases and have their teeth checked.



A 2-day old baby alpaca, or 'cria'.

Meat production: many breeders are against keeping alpacas for meat. Abattoirs may not be used to them and may not take them, especially in small numbers. If you raise alpacas for meat for your household, you can dispatch them if done humanely. A shotgun or single shot humane killer are most common. See the Humane Slaughter Association for more info. You'll need training and the right firearms license. To sell meat you'll need to send your alpacas to a slaughterhouse. You can do the butchery yourself or pay extra for the abattoir to do it. If you do it, you'll need to follow hygiene regulations and have your premises inspected by Environmental Health regularly. Contact the Food Standards Agency for more info.

Paperwork and regulations: register the land with the relevant agency, which depends on where you live. You don't need a herd no. and there are no regulations covering identifying, tagging or recording movements on and off your holding. This is likely to change, so do check. See DEFRA's guidelines for more information.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/alpacas for more info, courses, links & books, including:
- Harry Fields, *Alpaca Keeping*
- Gina Bromage, *Llamas & Alpacas: a guide to management*
- K D Galbraith, *the Alpaca Breeding Book*
- bas-uk.com – British Alpaca Society
- <http://joyofhandspinning.com/alpaca> – info on preparing alpaca fleece for spinning
- hayne-alpacas.co.uk/alpacas.php – lots of basic info on getting started with alpacas

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