

What is an alpaca?

Alpacas are members of the Camelid family and are found indigenously in South America. Alpaca husbandry is centuries old in Bolivia, Chile and Peru, but new to the United States since 1984 when they were first imported to North America.

Alpacas are partial ruminants. They have three stomach compartments, chew cud and efficiently convert grass and hay into energy. They live 15 to 25 years, are approximately three feet tall at the withers and on average weigh about 150 pounds.

There are two breeds of alpacas which are differentiated by their fleece. Huacayas have fluffy, crimped fiber. Suris have straight fiber that hangs down in long locks.

How much does an alpaca cost?

It depends. Gelded pet quality alpaca males can sell for as low as \$500. Young females and males can range from \$10,000 to \$15,000. Breeding females and herdsires can range from \$20,000 on up. Pricing depends on multiple variables, including lineage, age, conformation, fleece quality, and breeding/birthing experience. Top quality animals have been auctioned for over \$500,000.

What makes raising alpacas so appealing?

Alpacas are intelligent, gentle, curious creatures. They are relatively self-sufficient and hardy. Income can be earned on alpacas without killing them. They produce an "annual crop" of fleece (an average of eight pounds per animal) which is sold by the ounce. Alpaca fleece is considered a specialty fiber in the fashion world. It is more luxurious than cashmere, extremely light and warm due to its thermal nature, very resilient and incredibly fine to touch. Alpacas provide attractive investment potential and financial tax advantages.

And last but not least, they poop in the same place! The herd uses select spots as waste areas and will literally lineup to utilize the designated site. Alpacas digest their food efficiently and produce pellet-size manure. Alpaca poop can be immediately utilized as garden, lawn and field fertilizer without the benefit of composting.

Do alpacas spit and what kind of noise do they make?

Alpacas will spit at each other over issues of food, dominance, protecting their cria and to reject the approach of a breeding male when the female is already pregnant. They are also known to spit at humans during those rare occasions of extreme stress, such as the Spring shearing. Alpacas make a delightful humming sound and will make a shrill bugle sound to warn the herd of danger. Breeding males make an "orgling" sound when mating.

How do you breed and birth alpacas?

Females are generally bred at 18 to 24 months of age. Herdsires are usually put into service at two to three years, both depending upon sexual maturity and fertility. Females are pregnant for eleven and half months, and because the uterus quickly recuperates are literally ready to breed again within weeks of giving birth. Females do not enter a heat cycle, but are induced ovulators - with the act of mating causing ovulation. Female alpacas usually give birth during daylight hours and infrequently require human assistance. Crias average about 16 pounds at birth and are up on their feet and nursing within a few hours. Crias are generally weaned by six months of age.

What does it take to raise alpacas?

Five to ten alpacas can be raised on an acre of land. They need access to pasture grass, hay and fresh water. Alpacas can easily survive the elements with a three-sided shed or lean-to, though many breeders provide additional shelter options for birthing females and newborn crias. Alpacas are not aggressive and will not challenge a fence; however, secure fencing is essential to ensure that alpacas are protected from predators. Alpacas require minimum care -- veterinarian administered annual vaccines and breeder administered deworming, nail trimming and annual shearing in the spring.

If I live in the city, can I still own alpacas?

Many breeders offer agistment (boarding) for alpacas owned by those who don't have a farm setting. Breeders provide daily care for your animals at an average cost of \$3.00 per day. Owners may visit their alpacas on the farm, get involved in their care and training as much or as little as they like, and make decisions related to breeding, show competition and sales. Once a female is bred and delivers her cria, the owner has already increased his initial investment in alpaca "stock".