

ALPACAS

Introduction



Alpacas are intelligent, trainable and sometimes amusing.

The alpaca is a domesticated camelid, with an average life expectancy of approximately 25 years. They are livestock, and should be treated as such, not pets.

There are two breeds of alpaca. Huacayas have a fluffy coat more suited to the woollen process. The Suri breed's coat is lustrous and wavy, with longer fibres more suited to the 'worsted process' of finer fabrics. Huacaya fibre is easier to process than Suri fibre, which fetches lower prices generally and is more difficult to sell.

Features of alpacas include:

- smaller in frame and lighter than llamas, weighing 50-90kg;
- mature height 76-96cm at the shoulder;
- distinguishable by their short spear shaped ears;
- reproductively mature by 18-24 months (females);
- gestation period is 343 days (plus or minus two weeks);
- produce 10-12 single crias (baby alpacas) in a lifetime (average 80% fertility rate) – twins rarely survive;
- curious, sociable, intelligent, quirky, trainable and sometimes amusing animals;
- can be trained to accept a halter and be led; and,
- calm animals making them easy for even children to handle.

Guard animals

Many livestock including sheep, goats, and poultry accept an alpaca guard. Alpacas' protection methods range from walking or running at the intruder to chasing, spitting and kicking with their front feet, while making loud pitched noises. A gelded male or adult female are suitable.

They occasionally spit at people, but more usually when a person gets in the crossfire between alpacas trying to establish dominance, or when they are distressed or feel threatened.

Husbandry

Alpacas are herd animals requiring the company of multiple other alpacas. An acre of good land can support about six alpacas, but any land type is suitable. A three-sided field shelter is recommended. Standard sheep fence is adequate, while barbed wire is unsuitable. A supply of fresh, clean water and grass or hay is essential. Supplementation with pelleted vitamin and mineral supplements is advised. Alpacas require annual vaccinations and parasite control (discuss with a vet). Their toenails must be trimmed intermittently and teeth checked annually.

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Agritourism and animal-assisted programmes

There are a variety of options for tourism offerings:

- opportunity to spend time with alpacas and/or walk with them;
- depending on additional facilities and offerings available, they can be an attraction for birthday parties, weddings, and corporate wellness programmes;
- visits to/from nursing/care homes, and interactions with individuals with disabilities, autism or attention deficit disorders have proven beneficial;

- packages can include other activities, food offerings, accommodation, or perhaps experiences such as shearing, wool production, workshops on their husbandry and so on; and,
- corporate wellness programmes, including visits to offices by alpacas have been piloted with success, providing options to pet, cuddle and walk an alpaca, leaving participants happy, relaxed and ready to return to work.



Alpacas are easy to handle.

Fibre

Alpaca fibre is more valuable than cashmere. The Guinness World Records confirmed alpaca fibre as the finest in the world. Alpaca fibre:

- is soft, fine, and strong with strength second only to silk;
- is made of hollow fibres, with insulating qualities significantly warmer than sheep's wool;
- does not pill (when groups of fibres break and get tangled together in small knots);
- is hypoallergenic, suitable for allergy sufferers;
- feels cool in summer and warm in winter;
- can be made into fine and delicate, yet strong and hard-wearing materials;
- is generally between 15 (finer) and 35 (coarser) microns in diameter; and,
- is available in 22 recognised colours.

There is a use for all grades of alpaca fibres including: footwear insoles; clothing (from woollen wear and suits to babywear and lingerie); dolls' hair; yarns for knitting (both hand and industrial); blankets; pillows; mattress toppers; duvets; rugs; and, carpets.



Alpaca fibre is more valuable than cashmere.

Fibre price varies based on micron, length, handle and colour. Lighter coloured alpacas traditionally produce finer fibre fetching higher prices. Larger fleece volumes are mostly exported, while smaller quantities are sold to individual spinners and weavers.

Alpacas are sheared annually in the spring producing 2.5-5kg of fleece per annum. Poor shearing technique can spoil the fleece and reduce yield so unless experienced, do not be tempted to shear your own herd.

Breeding and sale of alpacas

Alpacas are bred primarily for their fibre. There is scope, with careful selective-breeding programmes, to produce quality alpacas for sale, though it is not a get rich quick production. The Alpaca Association of Ireland recommends breeders purchase only registered alpacas, as this proves pedigree and protects investment.

Regulations

Importation of alpacas is controlled by the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine (DAFM) live trade section – T: lo-call 1890-200 509 or 01-607 2000.

Getting started

Do your research and visit as many alpaca farms as possible. Membership of the Alpaca Association of Ireland is advised. This offers access to resources, contacts, and support.

Further information

For further information please see:
www.teagasc.ie/rural-economy/rural-development/options-programme/.

The following resources are also helpful:

- www.alpaca.ie
- www.bas-uk.com
- www.agriculture.gov.ie/animaltransport

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www.teagasc.ie/ruraldev



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