



Alpacas *Are they for* *you?*

You may have seen alpacas at a local fair, or maybe you've seen those advertisements on television late at night, but what are these creatures really all about, and are they the right livestock choice for you?

HISTORY

Alpacas were domesticated over 6,000 years ago by the native people of the Andes Mountains in western South America. They were treasured by the Incas for their soft and elegant fiber, but reviled by the Spanish conquistadors who preferred their native merino sheep and worked to exterminate the alpaca. However, in the mid-1800s, alpaca fiber was rediscovered by the British textile industry and found to be warmer and stronger than wool, with a fineness to match the merino. Alpaca fiber soon began making its mark across Europe, and the species began to thrive again in South America.

Alpacas were first imported to the United States in 1984 with the last importation done in 1998. Today, alpacas are considered the fastest-growing livestock species in the U. S. with over 3,000 farms actively raising these animals.

ABOUT THE ALPACA

There are two breeds of alpaca: the huacaya, considered the more common breed with fewer than 5,000,000 in the world today and 103,000 registered in the U.S., and the suri, a rare breed of alpaca representing less than 6% of the world population and 18% of the U.S. population. Huacayas are known for their soft, crimped fiber, similar to a sheep fleece, while suris are distinguished by their long, lustrous and slick locks that lie parallel to the body, similar to an angora goat. Both breeds produce over 22 different colors of fleece, making them one of the most versatile fiber species in the world.





Alpacas generally weigh 150 to 200 pounds and stand about 36" tall at the withers. They are shorn once a year in the spring and are easy to care for, with minimal worming, foot care and clean up. They are grass eaters and can be pastured at 5 to 10 alpacas per acre. They prefer to be together, so it is recommended that anyone starting out in this business purchase at least two alpacas.

WHAT TO DO WITH ALPACAS IN THE U.S.

When alpacas initially came to the U.S., they were primarily used as breeding stock to build the population for fiber production and improve the fiber quality of the national herd. Today, there are several options for people just getting started. There is still a national campaign to build the herd and promote high-quality breeding stock. So, if breeding is your area of interest, there is plenty of opportunity to make your mark. While the alpaca population is growing quickly, it still represents only an estimated 2% of all fiber producing animals in the U.S.

If fiber is your hobby, you're in luck! There are now many fiber animals available to fit a spinner's budget. These are animals that will not be used for breeding, but will provide years of wonderful fiber. Alpacas typically live to 20 years of age and produce 7 to 10 pounds of fiber every year. There are now approximately 50 mini-mills in North America, and new ones are popping up all the time. There has been a

huge resurgence of interest in artisan yarns and other end products over the last 10 years, and alpaca is a perfect fit in this niche market.

If you're just looking for some farm pets to keep you company, alpacas are friendly creatures that many find mesmerizing to watch. They are low maintenance and will bring years of joy to your farm and family.

ONE FARM'S STORY

Located in Paris, Missouri, Salt River Alpacas is a small, family run farm specializing in fine suri alpacas. Liz and Chris Vahlkamp purchased the farm in October 2000 as a weekend getaway, but quickly fell in love with the area, and began searching for a way to make the farm a viable, working operation once again. After a great deal of searching, the owners came across an ad for alpacas and quickly became intrigued.

The animals require limited acreage, the birthing process is generally easy (only 5% of births require any type of assistance), medical costs are low and there is a large, worldwide demand for alpaca fleece. Liz and Chris also determined that even without the prices that the breeding stock commands today, a viable business could be developed through the sale of end products such as yarn and apparel. After a great deal of reading, visiting farms and generally following the alpaca market, they took the big plunge and purchased three bred females from

three separate farms across the U.S.

Today, Liz and Chris have a herd of 22 suris with a thriving breeding business and a newly developed fiber business—Salt River Mills—which designs, markets and sells fine needlepoint yarns to retail stores across the U.S. Liz and Chris chose to focus on suri alpacas because of their rarity and their unique fleece characteristics. Worldwide, suri is most often used in a woven form and blended with other fibers to add luster and drape to the fabric. However, as an individual fiber, very little is known about its processing characteristics, and while that can present challenges at times, Liz and Chris have thoroughly enjoyed being on the “ground floor” and watching this fiber come into its own. In fact, Liz has enjoyed the fiber aspect so much that she is now the Chairperson of the Suri Network Product Development Committee, which is actively working to promote suri fiber through education, product development and general public awareness. ❖

If you have an interest in gathering more information, feel free to contact Liz or Chris at saltriveralpacas@yahoo.com or visit their website at www.alpaca-nation.com/saltriveralpacas.asp. They'll be happy to help you as you learn more about these wonderful creatures. Or contact the Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association (www.alpaca-info.com) or the Suri Network (www.surinet.org) to find a farm in your area.