

## ALPACA TIDBITS

Alpacas belong to the Camelid family which includes camels, llamas, vicunas and guanaco.

Alpacas have been domesticated for some 7,000 years now.

There are only 3.5 million Alpacas world wide and 2.7 million still reside in South America.

Large numbers of Alpacas still exist in South America, despite a decline after the conquest of the Incas.

Birth weight is usually around 16 to 21 pounds. Crias (baby alpaca) can most often stand and nurse within 2 hours. Infant mortality is very low.

Alpaca's average lifespan ranges 15-25 years.

Alpaca's average height is 36 inches at their shoulders.

Alpacas weigh on the average: 100-200 pounds (1/2 to 1/3 the size of llamas).

There are two breeds of alpaca: Huacaya, the most common, has a very crimped fleece that gives them a "fluffy" appearance and Suri: more rare, having a very silky hair-like fiber which grows in tight spirals and drapes down into pencil locks.

An Alpaca that turns one year old is called a Tui.

Female Alpacas are pregnant for on average 345 days and only produce one cria at a time.

Twins are very rare. Birthing is relatively easy and trouble free 99% of the time in daylight hours.

Female alpacas (hembra) can be bred back as early as 2 weeks after parturition and can start breeding as early as 14 months of age.

Male alpacas (machos) can begin to breed between 2-3 years of age.

Alpacas are induced ovulators and can be bred throughout the year.

Alpacas prefer outdoors to being cooped up in a barn.

Alpacas do not require special fencing or a lot of acreage (5 to 15 animals/acre).

Other than Shearing and the usual de-worming and vaccinations, Alpacas require little else.

Toenails and teeth may occasionally need trimming.

They produce fibre that is fine as cashmere, soft and silky. Alpaca comes in a range of twenty-two natural colours.

Alpacas are shorn once a year in the spring.

Shearing involves conventional sheep-shearing restrained.

The annual yield per animal is around 5lbs. With top animals reaching 10lbs.

The first fleece or Cria fleece commands a premium because of its extra fineness and crimp.

## ALPACA CANADA

The Canadian alpaca industry remains strong and continues to experience steady growth and change. The alpaca industry has grown substantially since the first major importation of alpacas in 1992.

Many of the founding pioneers of our industry have retired in recent years. They helped to build a strong foundation of knowledge and experience to expand on. The remaining dedicated breeders bring new ideas, goals and dreams for this exciting industry. Currently there are alpacas residing in all ten provinces of Canada as well as the Yukon Territory.

There continues to be significant improvements in our overall national herd quality as a result of increased breeder knowledge. The outstanding quality of our alpacas is backed by the strength and integrity of our internationally recognized registry.

Alpaca Canada, as the National association, is actively involved in the development and promotion of all aspects of the alpaca industry.



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# **FOUR MOST FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE ALPACA BUSINESS**

## **#1 THE INITIAL COSTS OF SETTING UP AN ALPACA BUSINESS**

Setting up an alpaca business will depend on your personal situation (i.e. does your farm have pastureland and outbuildings).

Here are some things to consider:

- Barn/shelter size and numbers depend on herd size; alpacas require shelter to protect them from extreme environmental conditions;
- Fencing - alpacas need fencing to protect them from predators;
- Feed - high quality grass hay (no greater than 12% protein) and mineral supplements, fresh water.
- Insurance - if you wish to purchase livestock insurance, rates will vary based on herd size and value;
- Stock trailer for transporting animals (for small loads, a pick-up truck with canopy or van is suitable);
- Medical - vaccinations once per year and periodic deworming (number depends on herd size and parasites in your area), and pregnancy tests, if desired;
- Shearing (paying a shearer or purchasing and maintaining shears yourself);
- Boarding (termed agisting for alpacas) if you do not have adequate livestock facilities of your own;
- Skirting and sorting either by certified sorters or by custom mills (this skill can be acquired by alpaca owners)



Breeding fees (if you do not own your own stud or wish to diversify the genetics of your herd). Outside breeding fees range considerably based on the quality of the stud.

## **#2 HOW MUCH DOES AN ALPACA COST**

The purchase price of an alpaca depends on a number of factors, including: quality and color of the fleece, conformation, reproductive abilities, age, sex, pedigree, registration status, etc. The cost of an alpaca can even be affected by geographic location, with some areas of Canada showing an increased growth and demand over others. A very general guideline for purchase pricing follows:

- Non-breeding animals (usually gelded males) generally start at a low price that goes up depending on the particular animal;
- Breeding males and females start at a higher asking price that increases depending on their quality. Exceptional animals, particularly stud males, cost much more. Younger animals (<1 to 2 years) tend to be less expensive than adults (all other things being equal) because they aren't yet proven breeders.

## **#3 HOW MUCH FIBRE DOES AN ALPACA PRODUCE EACH YEAR**

The average total fleece weight per animal is roughly 6-10 lbs for an adult shorn once a year (which is the recommended shearing schedule). However, the prime fleece comes from the "blanket" area (across the back, upper sides and rump). The average weight of the blanket is approximately 4 lbs. These weights are based on relatively clean fleeces, with little debris and dust. On some alpacas, the only marketable fleece comes from the "blanket" area, whereas on others, virtually the entire fleece is marketable, based on the fineness of the fleece and the absence of guard hair (coarse, straight fibres). Fleece weight will increase with coarseness and with density, so a fine, dense fleece may weigh the same as a loose, coarser fleece. For this reason, weight is not a good measure to use alone when judging the quality of an alpaca's fleece. It is important to keep breeding standards high to produce fine, dense fleeces for maximum return for the producer. The finer the fleece the higher the value.

## **#4 WHAT IS THE RETURN ON MY INVESTMENT IN ALPACAS**

The return on investment will depend on your expenses, the sex and quality of the offspring, and your marketing efforts. The alpaca breeding market continues to be strong due to the relative rarity of alpacas in Canada and the need to increase the national herd size substantially to supply a market for alpaca fibre. Good quality stock commands relatively high prices; therefore as your herd grows its total value could go up markedly.

Revenue can also be generated from the fleece. The value of an alpaca fleece depends on its quality and weight. This is determined by the fineness or soft feel to the touch (referred to as "handle") crimp and other fleece characteristics. The price also depends on whether it is sold in the artisan or cottage industry market (e.g. hand-spinners, cottage craft operators) versus the commercial market (e.g. fibre processing mills). Higher prices are obtained from the artisan or cottage industry market, however, this market is limited. The price obtained for raw fibre varies with the quality starting around \$5 per pound and upwards. The finest, cleanest fleeces fetch the premium prices. The financial returns increase as processing, or the value-added component, increases, i.e., producing yarn, textiles, finished products. The more work you put into marketing and possibly creating a value-added component, the more financially rewarding the venture will be.

As in any venture, there are no guarantees and market forces will prevail. It is important to learn as much as possible about alpacas and the industry in order to be successful.

