

ALPACAS 101 November 17th 2007 at Thistledown Alpacas

Please feel free to look at my collection of alpaca-related props during the lecture!

My Bio:

I am a former computer systems analyst. Have owned and run the Mount Airy Alpaca Company for 9 years along with my husband, Tom. I am a hand spinning instructor, skein judge, knitter, web master for myself, other alpaca farms, and also Maryland Sheep & Wool Festival (largest fiber event in the U.S.) My husband, Tom, is an expert alpaca shearer. However, due to Tom's illness, we no longer **breed** or **shear** alpacas. I have served as fleece show superintendent for many alpaca shows. Our alpaca farm has been profiled in many magazines and newspaper articles as well as being featured on the National Geographic Television channel. I am the former president of Alpaca Heritage Events Inc. and spent most of my "free time" in 2005 & 2006 filming, editing and scripting the alpaca care DVD "**Alpaca Care for Beginners, We walk you through it.**", along with my husband and partners from Alpacas of Sunset Fields.

Speaking of the movie, you will all be receiving a **free copy** of the DVD as part of this seminar. **Please be aware that some of the things we show in the DVD are tasks that many alpaca breeders prefer to pay others to do!** We include these tasks, such as shearing, teeth trimming and blood drawing, to give you the option of doing these tasks yourself and also to help you understand **how** they should be done by the person you pay to do them. Please don't think that you HAVE to do these things yourself.

Here are the 5 alpaca business questions that I have most often been asked and I am going to try to answer them as well as I can in this talk.

1. **Do you like it?** I do realize that it's very hard to listen to a big lecture on selenium levels, worming doses, computer stuff etc. and still feel like the business is FUN but it is! We have loved raising and breeding alpacas more than I can really tell you. Please consider this talk to be just an introduction and not a list of things that you have to know **RIGHT THIS SECOND!** So, let me remind you that most of this job has been very happy and stress free. I don't think there is another career like this one!
2. **Did YOU make \$** - Yes! A lot more on this later.
3. **Are they (alpacas) Friendly?** Yes and No and, also, depends. I am not sure why this question comes up so much but the answer is, Yes, they are sweet and docile and they do want comfort and feeding from you but No, they should not follow you like a dog and want to be petted all the time. That's too friendly and that animal is likely to be bratty as an adult. And, it depends a great deal on 3 things:
 - a. Is this animal pregnant? Girls who are sweet as pie will often be super cranky when newly pregnant.

- b. Was this alpaca handled when younger? Adults who are not used to being handled will not be that “friendly.”
- c. Inherited temperament. I think most breeders will agree that there **are** some bloodlines where the alpacas tend to be of similar temperament ie: most are very dominant – these often look great in the show ring! - nervous, calm or sweet. Remember though that a naturally dominant alpaca can easily be made friendly or just as easily be made too aggressive. A meeker alpaca is less likely to turn bratty and aggressive even with the same amount of over-handling.

Alpacas are not dogs and it’s not useful (in my opinion) to compare them to dogs. They do not like to be petted on the head. They should not follow you around. And, please consider that, if an alpaca produces healthy beautiful babies, THAT is their job and you can always keep a gelding if you want a “nice” alpaca.

4. Can you make the fleece sales pay for the farm or do you need to sell animals?

My opinion is No, you cannot pay all your bills from fleece sales, but you can come close AFTER you have recouped your initial investment in animals, barn, etc. Jane and I will both be speaking on this topic tomorrow.

5. What do I need to know to make money raising alpacas? This is the really BIG question and will include a lot of different topics.

A. What is the bare minimum that I need to have or do as far as:

- **Shelter**
 - A run in shed is fine if it is deep enough to provide shade and shelter from driving rain. Be aware of how much space or how many run-ins are needed per number of alpacas ie: how many can fit inside - keeping in mind that more dominant animals may try to hog large areas.
- **Fencing** (you’re trying to keep predators out, not alpacas in!)
 - No-climb is best but many farms use rail fencing and/or wire fences with some wires hot to discourage dogs.
 - Metal field fencing and welded wire are not really recommended, due to the potential for alpaca injury.
 - Electric netting as temporary fencing and for rotational grazing, works with the dams and crias when we are on the premises to supervise them. Maybe not for males
 - Barbed wire – No.
 - Most fences will not avoid crias slipping under 100% of the time.
- **Number and configuration of Pastures and pens**
 - New farms often get by with one large pasture but later on you will want one for breeding males, one for male crias needing to be

weaned, one for female crias needing to be weaned. These last can go in with a group of females that does not include their own dam. So that makes 4 altogether.

- 10 alpacas per acre is too much but 7 is usually OK and it depends on what KIND of animals, ie: pregnant females, older males, geldings etc. Not all have the same protein requirements.

- **Pasture/Hay Grain / Supplements**

- Plant Orchard Grass but don't freak out if there is some other stuff in there like regular grass, clover or even some poison ivy.
- Make sure there is nothing poisonous or harmful in your pasture but don't pull up everything. Dandelions may be good, some raspberries or blackberries are good, clover makes them foam at the mouth but is otherwise harmless.
- Talk to your Agricultural Extension Agent (for Your County) about specifics. Find out the level of such things as Selenium in your soil. Find out what weeds you need to worry about.

- **Veterinary Care**

- Find a veterinarian as soon as possible. Don't wait until you actually need a veterinarian to look for one.
- Try to find one with alpaca experience but DON'T count on this person to know more than you about every aspect of alpaca care. You need to educate yourself as well.
- Your relationship with the farm you bought from is important in this equation. Think about how much experience that farm has and how much time they are willing to offer you to guide you through your initial 2 years or so. They should not give VETERINARY advice but can point you in the right direction as to things that they have seen in their alpacas and what those things turned out to be due to and how they were fixed.

- **Herd Health Day**

- You will have to commit to doing a monthly herd health day including regular worming, toenail trimming, examinations of your alpacas close up and weighing or Body Scoring if you have no scale. Luckily for us, we can practice Body Scoring at Jane's later.
- A note on HANDLING! If you do not have experience handling livestock, please try to remember that this is a skill like any other and I cannot over-emphasize the importance of YOUR mental state while doing this. These are living things and they will pick up on

your mood and act accordingly. Don't be angry or fearful. We show several different ways of worming in our DVD.

- Worming information such as doses, time frame and efficacy of certain drugs is always evolving. Do some of your own research and then get input from other sources. Ultimately, this decision will be yours because you will hear everything from, Never worm a pregnant female to worm every 30 days no matter what. Decide based on research not hearsay and consider your OWN climate when making worming decisions.

○ **Shearing Plan**

- Know as soon as you buy whether or not your alpacas will be delivered shorn and make a plan right away for who will shear for you and when.
- As a farm that used to do a lot of outside shearing jobs here are a couple of things to consider:
 - Do you realize that you cannot start trying to find a shearer in May or June? Most of our customers arranged their shearing for the coming year WHILE WE WERE SHEARING FOR THEM! If you are nearby, you may be able to get in on **Jane's excellent shearing schedule!**
 - Do you know what you expect of this person?
 - Just "getting it off."
 - Placing blanket and 2nds in separate bags
 - Any cleaning prior to shearing?
 - Guidance about how to separate the fleece?
 - Any Bio-security measures to ensure that your alpaca is not infected by their equipment, shoes ect. With a parasite or virus from another farm?
 - Any extras, ie: toes, teeth, shots – not all do this.
 - Do you know what this person expects of you?
 - Get every alpaca haltered to the shearing table, pen or on the floor without their help?
 - Keep every alpaca dry prior to shearing?
 - Don't discount the idea of doing your own shearing. It is not as hard as you think and saves lots of money plus it guarantees that you will get the kind of fleeces that YOU want. And, it's a great source of extra farm income.

- B. What is the bare minimum I need to **MAKE MONEY** selling alpacas? You cannot answer the question about how much money another person will make but you can lay out some of the variables. Unfortunately, luck is one of the variables. One year we had 5 pregnant females on our farm and all 5 of those girls had female cria, all healthy and cute. That's not going to happen EVERY year! Another variable is how much difference having some serious tax write-offs will change **your** financial picture and that should be discussed with a livestock accountant **like the one here today**.

But there **are also** things you can do to *decrease* your expenditures. There **are** tasks that you could do, or pay someone else to do, and those costs will be one of the variables in our equation about making money in the alpaca business. For example:

o **Do you own web site and/or advertising?**

I know that not every person wants to be a computer person but have you thought about what you can reasonably pay for as opposed to what you could easily do yourself? Figure out whether one person on your farm would be able to do some of the graphic design, web site work, advertising flyers or even just take digital photos of your animals and e-mail them to potential customers. Too many smaller farms don't think this through. If you have no paid staff and a small budget for advertising – Don't Panic! Computers are our friends and this type of work is easy and fun. (Really!) But you will need:

- A graphics program such as Paintshop Pro, Adobe Elements etc. This is so that you can crop, re-touch and "optimize" photos and graphics for flyers, e-mail attachments, Optimize just means make the photo size smaller so that it can be sent as an attachment or placed on a web site without being far too huge of a file size to be usable.
Even if you decide to pay for this, at least know WHAT you are trying to pay for. As a webmaster for many alpaca-related websites, and also having created several alpaca show catalogs, I have often seen paid "professionals" send web or print ads that were unusable because they did not meet the specifications.
- A plan for a web site. It is not that hard to do your own web site – really! And it's getting easier and cheaper every day! If you decide to do your own, you may need some kind of HTML editor such as DreamWeaver or GoLive. However, many hosting companies now allow you to edit a website using THEIR super-easy interfaces. I have had buyers with no website design experience who were able to set up their own websites using this method with only a little coaching from me.

- I think it's OK to use Alpacanation (www.alpacanation.com) or something similar but better if you have your own because you are not advertising other people's alpacas, you have your own Domain Name, and also because I have seen many errors on their pages. However, you DO absolutely have to know 2 things to have your own and they are:
 - Who owns the domain name? (Hint, it better be you!)
 - Is your web site optimized for good search engine placement and does it load on most platforms or is it just cute with cursor trails and no actual text. We don't have time to discuss the particulars of this but keep it in mind and, check your ranking on Google, Yahoo and MSN to get a clue about this.
- Some e-mail program
- Some way to create handouts, flyers etc. and this could be as simple as Word or Word Perfect but something like Microsoft Publisher would work better because it doesn't ruin the quality of your photos and it is designed to place objects and text exactly where you want them. Word Processors are not designed to do either of those 2 things.
- **Don't break the bank to show your alpacas!**
 - Many smaller farms make the mistake of trying to emulate the larger farms in their marketing plans. You can meet just as many potential buyers at smaller shows, county fairs, farm tours at your place or farmer's markets, and you won't pay a fortune to be there, nor will you have so much competition from other farms that you are practically un-noticeable.
 - Find out if your county or state has any agriculture events that they pay to advertise and would let you take part in.
 - Show fleeces as well as live animals. This helps you "be out there" and it's cheaper and less work than showing live animals.
 - Be creative! Any parade, town event, car show, strawberry festival or whatever can be a good opportunity if there are large crowds of people there.
 - Always take photos of yourself doing these things and send them to local newspapers.

- **Have an outlet for fleece sales and sales of alpaca products** – do you have a plan for selling your fleeces and/or alpaca yarn and clothing? This can be used to offset your expenses. **Jane and I will be explaining how to sell your alpaca fleeces and products in a lecture tomorrow!**
- **Think of skills you can trade to offset marketing costs.** Whatever you are good at is probably something you can trade off for things you need for your business. If you are a shearer, veterinary technician, hand spinner, knitter, videographer, lecturer, caterer, alpaca judge, etc. etc. you can often trade these skills for free advertising, free show entries, free links to your web site, free vendor spaces at shows etc.
- **Be smart when purchasing.** A female or male who has produced one or more healthy cria will not look as cute as that young show winner but it's worth a lot to know that your female produces strong cria and has plenty of milk or your male can impregnate and has never produced a birth defect. Cheap, bad-quality alpacas are not a bargain but high price is not a guarantee of quality either. Be a knowledgeable buyer.
- **Have a plan for what niche you will occupy in the minds of buyers.**

This is super-important and many farms never think about it until they are already in business! Too many farms use tag lines like, “breeding for fine fleece.” We all want fine fleece. Think about what sets you apart and use that to your advantage. If you are a huge farm, you have a good selection of alpacas from which to choose. If you are a small farm, you can offer alpacas that are very easy to handle.

If you have no small children and like to travel, you could show your alpacas often and rack up the ribbons and set yourself apart that way. Write off that trailer with the sleeping quarters!

If you have small children and don't want to show as much, you might be able to do a charming Blog on your website featuring adorable photos of your children playing with your alpacas. I can tell you from experience, THIS WORKS! And don't forget that costume class entry for that cute kid and alpaca.

If you bought very desirable bloodlines that are scarce in your area, **advertise that angle.** Don't buy “Son of _____” and then try to get breedings for him when you live 10 minutes away from his famous daddy.

2 More important parts of the plan:

○ **Proper Alpaca Management Will Save You Money in the Long Run**

The main way to do this is to take good care of your alpacas. Sounds simple and it is. Make sure you put your hands on your alpacas often and know what body conditions (fat, skinny or normal) they are in. If they don't like to be handled, work with them patiently until they are not so afraid.

Spend time with your alpacas and know what their normal behavior looks like. If you have an alpaca that is normally timid but it suddenly doesn't get up when you walk over to it, you might have something to worry about. Same thing goes for excessive humming, cud chewing, or even a funny expression on the face. If you KNOW your alpacas, you'll know when something is not right.

Have a look at the poop piles while you are shoveling them. Same goes for the back end of your alpacas. Any sign of runny poop is something to worry about. Do your worming on time and in the proper dose and check your pasture for things that should not be there. This includes other animals as well as plants. Make sure that weaker alpacas are able to get their share of food and stronger ones aren't getting way too much food. Same goes for shelter.

Breed carefully. Wrap the tails, make sure that the female is reasonably clean under the tail before breeding. Don't let the male go in and out multiple times. Make sure things are "hooked up" properly if the male is inexperienced. Take simple bio-security precautions when showing your alpacas at a show, sending boys or girls out to breed, taking in girls or boys to breed or board, or mixing any tools or boots from one type of livestock barn to another (ie: horse barn to alpaca barn.)

Be careful in offering any other person veterinary advice or treatment but don't rule out learning to do your own blood draws, teeth trimming and other minor veterinary tasks.

○ **Share Resources with other alpaca farms!**

Plan to get most of your handholding and favors from the farm(s) you bought from. One of the main mistakes that we see many new owners make is buying their animals from a farm in the next state over or even across the country and then thinking that the alpaca farm down the street from them will be on board to help them with their problems. It's not a matter of being friendly or not friendly!

Any time you call an alpaca breeder that does not know you and ask them for help, it puts them in an awkward position morally, legally and just plain time-wise. For example, if you bought a girl from breeder X. and I can see that she's sick and underweight and I tell you that, I may look like the bad guy to you for being the one to give you news you don't want to hear. And, your seller isn't going to appreciate my telling you anything negative about the alpaca they sold you.

If I do give you advice and it doesn't work out, you may end up blaming me. If I'm dumb enough to offer you veterinary-type of advice and I'm not a veterinarian, you could even sue me. No one wants to be in this kind of situation.

We all hear new alpaca owners complain angrily "This or that alpaca farm won't help anyone who didn't buy from them!" Folks, if I sold you an alpaca, I know the history and health of the animal you are asking about and I can offer you accurate advice. I do have a responsibility to help you. In addition to that, I don't have to worry about a third party blaming me for turning their customer against them.

I know that this advice makes a lot of people angry. I am not suggesting that alpaca breeders act mean to one another and never help one another. But I am saying that you should look at it from the point of view of the person that you are trying to put in the middle of your business deal. You are asking them to stick their neck way out for you and they may end up regretting it.

Talk to the farm you buy from about what the boundaries of your relationship will be, and get a feel for what kind of mentoring you can expect from them. Ask them if there are any "extras" included in your deal with them. Can they help to arrange the shearing of your alpacas, for example? Will they invite you over to herd health day to show you how they do routine herd health tasks? Don't make price or selection the only criteria for your purchase of alpacas and then be upset that you have no one to call when you need help.

By all means, try to meet other alpaca breeders in your area and volunteer at events and shows so you can "pay your dues" so to speak. Join organizations and go to educational seminars. These new friends, along with the farm you bought from, can be an invaluable resource as far as sharing information, putting on events together and even putting together package deals for customers from alpacas in your small farm network.

Why did I put ALL of this under the question #5 about making money? Because how well you use the resources you have, how well you choose the people you buy from and the alpacas you buy, how well you care for your animals, how much of the work you are willing to do yourself, how well you work with others and how well you learn to do new and challenging things will all factor into the equation about how much money you make.

However, I am not a person who believes that money is the main measure of success. I will say that we made good money in our alpaca breeding business but the experiences we had were the true pay off and I could not put any price on those. Alpacas made our lives much richer, more thrilling, and happier. Raising alpacas provided a unique childhood for my 2 children and a very happy chapter in my husband's and my life. I hope all of you can have this wonderful experience.

So, now, let's all go and have lunch and then participate in the Hands on Alpaca Handling and Evaluation session at Thistledown Alpacas!

Resources to go to for information:

#1. Your veterinarian

#2. The person you bought from if they are knowledgeable and willing to help you.

Dr. Eric Hoffman – The Alpaca Book

Ingrid Wood – “A Breeders’ Guide to Genetics – Relax it’s not Rocket Science”

The Alpaca Research Foundation - www.alpacaresearchfoundation.org

C. Norm Evans, DVM – “Llama & Alpaca Veterinary Field Manual” (But remember! Dosage recommendations change over time and new drugs come along all of the time.)

Attend seminars on birthing, genetics and veterinary topics. I can personally recommend both Dr. Toni Cotton & Dr. David Anderson.

Fleece – Enter as many fleece shows as you can and watch the judging at fleece shows. Ask questions and read your comment tags.

Attend the Maryland Sheep & Wool Festival just once to see what a huge fleece sale looks like and just how many alpaca fleece buyers there really are. Their web site:

www.sheepandwool.org

Please try to stay away from hype-y alpaca articles, web sites and videos when you are a beginner! One magazine that I like is, “*International Camelid Quarterly*.”

My website offers information about showing, shearing, spinning, fleece preparation and links to more educational information -

<http://www.mountairyalpacas.com/>

Computer Information – Searching online will often provide you with lots of free information on any computer topic, but I especially recommend:

<http://reviews.cnet.com/> for product reviews, *and*

<http://www.w3.org/> for all web site and domain related information