



Alpacas – common questions and answers

Are alpacas related to llamas?

Alpacas are very closely related to llamas. They are both from a group of four species known as South American Camelids. The llama is approximately twice the size of an alpaca with banana shaped ears and is principally used as a pack animal. Alpacas are exclusively bred as fleece animals in Australia.

How many alpacas can I run on my property?

That will depend on what sort of pasture and how much pasture your land is capable of producing. Different climatic regions and different soil types vary widely in their carrying capacity.

A standard unit of carrying capacity is the Dry Sheep Equivalent per hectare (DSE). For example, in areas of good soil and high rainfall your property might sustain 10 DSE/ha, compared with dryland areas that might be 1.5 DSE/ha.

The DSE for your property can be determined by speaking to an agricultural consultant, or perhaps your neighbour if they are experienced farmers.

As a general rule, one alpaca wether is equivalent to one DSE. If you are prepared to supplementary feed with extra hay, you may be able to increase your stocking rate. A pregnant alpaca is approximately 1.5 DSE and a lactating pregnant alpaca is about 2 DSE.

What sort of fencing do alpacas need?

Any fencing that keeps sheep contained is satisfactory, preferably without barbed wire. Alpacas do not tend to jump fences but are quite capable of clearing a standard fence if sufficiently stressed.

Electric fencing is not very common but it may be used. Advice on the correct height settings of the hot wires is best sought from an alpaca breeder who has experience with alpacas and electric fencing.

If you live in an area known to have problem dogs it can be worthwhile to increase the height of perimeter fencing. Dog attacks are not common but when they occur they have disastrous consequences.

Apart from the boundary fences, the most important structure is a small yard or pen to catch the alpacas. Some alpacas will allow themselves to be caught in an open paddock, but even the friendliest ones tend to step just out of reach when you most need to catch them (eg. shearing time).

The yard need not be elaborate, and often the easiest and cheapest one to construct is to place two 3 metre gates at right angles to each other inside the corner of the paddock. If the alpacas get used to being fed in this area it also makes it very easy to catch them.

It is essential that shade trees are available in each paddock.

What do alpacas eat?

Alpacas are principally grazers but sometimes they enjoy casual browsing. They are fastidious food selectors that are highly adapted to eat small amounts of a variety of plants.

Although they can survive very harsh conditions, alpacas do best on good quality pasture and benefit from having access to plant material with long fibres: eg. hay.

There are a number of commercial alpaca mixes available but these are best thought of as supplying vitamins and minerals rather than the bulk feed which is obtained through grazing.

One important rule to remember is to introduce any changes to the diet gradually, over a period of a couple of weeks. This way, the microbes in the gut have time to adjust to any feed changes.

Some gardens contain a number of plants that are toxic to most livestock (oleander, rhododendron, laburnum etc). Care should be taken when fencing off gardens that such plants do not overhang into alpaca areas. Likewise, there is a long history of calamities with other livestock that have inadvertently been fed prunings from such plants. Local nurseries can provide good advice on poisonous plants.

Although some people think alpacas don't drink huge amounts, they do need to have ready access to good quality, fresh drinking water.

How often do you shear alpacas?

Alpacas are shorn once a year, usually in spring. Shearing is the biggest maintenance required and usually takes around five to ten minutes per animal for an experienced alpaca shearer.

If you are purchasing your first alpacas, ask the vendors for the name of a recommended shearer, or ask if you can bring the alpacas back to the property on their shearing day.

Most AAA regions hold regular workshops and demonstrations on shearing alpacas.

A very small percentage of alpacas are shorn standing up, but the preferred method of shearing is to lie the animals on their side and restrain their legs with a tether at each end. This protects both the shearer and the alpaca from being accidentally cut. One side of the animal is shorn and it is then rolled over and shorn on the other side.

Depending on the density of the fleece, alpacas cut anywhere between 1.5 and 4 kg of fleece. Some of the high quality stud males will cut higher weights.

What do you do with the fleece?

Alpaca fibre is highly prized for its very soft feel (handle), its high thermal properties, its durability and its variety of natural colours.

It is processed into high quality fashion garments such as suits, jackets, skirts and coats. Jumpers knitted from alpaca fleece are soft, light and warm. Because of its natural warmth, it is also used as a continental quilt filling. Coarser fibre can be used to make car seat covers.

The international market for alpaca product is enormous with demand always exceeding supply.

There are three commercial options for raw alpaca fleece in Australia: The Alpaca Co-operative, the Australian Alpaca Fibre Marketing Organisation (AAFMO), and local spinners.

The Alpaca Co-op is made up of shareholders that are mostly alpaca breeders. The Co-op classes fibre and gives returns to growers as either direct payment or extra shares. It develops and markets finished products for retail sales. The Co-op also holds a 15% interest in Elite Fibre mill in Geelong. This mill was purpose-built to process and value-add Australian grown alpaca fibre.

AAFMO is a privately owned company that collects, classes and sells fibre to local and overseas buyers. Payments are made to growers once the fibre has been sold.

A few alpaca owners prefer to home spin their fibre. Commercial prices depend on quality with a premium paid for finer micron fibre – up to \$45 per kilogram. Sales to home spinners can be considerably higher.

Do they stay the same colour that they are born?

Alpacas do stay the same colour they are born. However, some alpacas that are born black can develop dark brown tips as the fleece grows out. Also animals that are thought to be white at birth might prove to be light fawn later on.

These minor variations probably have more to do with the accuracy of the initial assessment rather than an actual change in colour with age.

What sort of diseases do alpacas get?

Compared with other livestock, alpacas are relatively disease free. Because of their dry fleece and naturally clean breech, fly strike is not an issue with alpacas. They do not require mulesing or crutching.

They are vaccinated twice yearly with the same '5 in 1' vaccine used for sheep and goats to protect against tetanus, pulpy kidney, black leg, black disease and malignant oedema.

Some geographic locations also vaccinate against leptospirosis, so check with other experienced alpaca breeders in your area or with your local agricultural authority on its presence.

Likewise, alpaca owners need to be aware if they are in a 'sporidesmin' area. Sporidesmin is the toxin in a fungus that causes facial excema and can be fatal.

However, it is confined to specific geographic locations and is easily managed by not allowing animals to graze on affected pastures during warm and humid weather.

In the past 10 years, there have been a handful of cases of Johne's Disease (JD). Many breeders are taking part in the National JD M.A.P. (Market Assurance Program) which will provide assurance of their animals' health status.

Restrictions of animal movements may apply, particularly between some states.

When buying alpacas for breeding purposes it is advisable to arrange a veterinary check to ensure you are buying a healthy animal.

Do they make good pets?

Most alpacas make very good pets if they are treated well and the owners are realistic in their expectations.

Like any livestock, the more handling they receive as youngsters, the quieter they are as adults. Given time, most alpacas will eat out of your hand and training them to lead by a halter is a straightforward process.

Although alpacas look cuddly they generally don't like being held, and are particularly sensitive to being touched on the head.

Alpacas are naturally curious and intelligent and if you let them approach you, rather than rush at them and expect an affectionate response, the interactions can be very rewarding.

The best thing to remember is that they are alpacas, and not dogs or cats, and should be allowed to be alpacas.

Alpacas spit don't they?

Spitting is perhaps the least endearing feature of alpacas. It is one of the few defence mechanisms an alpaca has and it is quite an effective deterrent.

The material is basically regurgitated or recently chewed grass and it brushes off when dry. It does have a distinctive and somewhat offensive odour and it is best to avoid being a target.

However, it is quite rare that alpacas spit at people. It is normally used as a pecking order mechanism with other alpacas. If a human hit occurs, it is usually because the person has not read the signs properly when stepping between two squabbling alpacas.

Do alpacas kick and bite?

When interacting with humans, kicking and biting is highly individualistic. Alpacas are usually sensitive around the hind legs and will instinctively kick backwards if they sense a threat from the rear.

Most alpacas do not kick at humans but there are individuals that can be quickly identified as being prone to kicking. This is more evident in a pregnant female that wants to deter the advances of an amorous male.

Fortunately, because the foot is a soft pad, injuries to humans are minimal. Most alpacas respond very well to desensitisation of the hind legs if they receive good handling as youngsters.

Alpacas that bite people are extremely rare and it is not a general problem. If it does occur it tends to be an attention seeking behaviour by spoilt pets rather than an attack.

Can I just have one or do I need to have lots?

It is possible to have a single alpaca, but it is not a pleasant existence for the animal. Alpacas are herd animals and are instinctively gregarious, as are other domestic livestock. They obtain security and contentment from having at least one other alpaca for company.

For this reason, it is usually recommended that two alpacas are the desirable minimum. Sometimes if a single pregnant female is bought for breeding, a wether can go with her for company.

How do you transport alpacas?

Alpacas travel very well in a van, covered trailer or horse float. Most alpacas will sit during the journey and travel best in the company of another alpaca. On long trips over two or three hours it is advisable to plan for a stop so the alpacas can have a toilet break.

Clean hay on the floor of the vehicle helps to absorb jarring on rough roads and also provides feed for the journey.

Can I run alpacas with other livestock?

Alpacas can bond well with other types of animals. Naturally, alpacas and large aggressive dogs are not a good combination, but there are many cases of quiet dogs mixing well with alpacas.

Individual alpacas have been very successfully run with sheep and goats to act as fox guards. The alpacas tend to bond with the foster herd and they are naturally aggressive towards foxes.

If running with different livestock, alpacas will pick up the internal parasites associated with the other animals and should be put on the same drenching regime.

Because of the risk of the alpacas being kicked, caution should be used if running them with cattle or horses.

At what age do alpacas start breeding?

Females become sexually mature at around 12 to 18 months of age and once they reach 45 to 50kg in weight. Males can display sexual interest from a few weeks of age but are not sexually active or fertile until 18 months to 3 years of age. (There will be individuals that fall outside this age range.) Libido in males is not a criteria of stud quality in alpacas.

Alpacas do not have a breeding season and, providing they are receptive, females can be mated at any time of the year. Like rabbits and cats, female alpacas are 'induced ovulators' which means it is the act of mating that causes them to ovulate. It is preferable, though not essential, to avoid mid-late summer matings. Given the 11 to 12 month gestation, this reduces the incidence of heavily pregnant females and new cria (alpaca babies) in very hot weather.

Alpacas mate in the 'cush' (prone) position and if a female is not receptive (e.g. already pregnant) she will refuse to sit down and probably spit at the male. This rejection response, known as a 'spit-off', is used in the management of the female to regularly monitor the progress of her pregnancy.

How long is the gestation?

The average gestation period is 11.5 months, but pregnancies that go for over a year are not uncommon.

Births are generally trouble-free and most occur before the middle of the day.

Cria should be 6 to 8kg at birth and most will be on their feet and drinking within 2 to 3 hours. The mothers are often very protective and the cria will stay with its mum until weaning at 5 to 6 months of age.

Females are usually re-mated 2 to 6 weeks after giving birth.

Do alpacas ever have twins?

Twinning in alpacas is extremely rare (approximately 0.0001% of births) and should not form any part of a breeding plan.

They're really expensive aren't they?

At this stage of the industry's development, price is directly related to the individual breeding potential, and the potential quality of the offspring.

For example, a wether (castrated male) has no breeding potential and is therefore the cheapest alpaca to buy (around \$250 to \$500). On the other hand, a high quality male with many good progeny on the ground has a very high breeding potential and can be worth many thousands of dollars. He can also command a high income from the stud services he provides.

Female prices are a reflection of quality, age, breeding history and to which stud male she is mated. Females can be worth anything from a few thousand dollars to a few tens of thousands of dollars.

Income from females is derived from selling the offspring. However, breeding plans should be made so that long term depreciation of the older breeders and increases in quality of offspring are taken into account.

Although the average gestation is eleven and a half months, a projection of three offspring in four years per mature female is more realistic than expectations of one offspring every year.

How do I get started if I want to breed alpacas?

There are a number of things to consider before launching into the breeding industry.

Firstly, it is best to talk to as many experienced breeders as possible. You will gain lots of useful information from people who have already done the leg work.

If you are serious it is advisable to develop a business plan and if you don't already have one, find an accountant who is used to dealing with primary industry clients.

To be able to register your offspring you will need to become a member of the Australian Alpaca Association and apply for Herd Registration (Herd Prefix and Herd Code). The National Office can send you the appropriate forms.

Also ask which region you will belong to and attend any workshops or seminars that are being held. The more you can educate yourself about all aspects of breeding, the more informed your choices will be.

Some people have bought a couple of wethers to begin with, and once they feel confident that alpacas really are extremely easy to manage, they then take the next step to start a breeding herd.

For most breeders, they simply want to get going as soon as possible and enjoy the experience as they learn along the way.

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