

Life with Alpacas

Taking A Road Less Traveled

Almost nine years ago, when my initial enchantment with alpacas began, I embarked on an energetic process of researching “the alpaca lifestyle.” I read a wide variety of marketing and educational materials and then began a mission of visiting numerous alpaca farms, in order to learn about these animals firsthand and ask an abundance of questions. Throughout this process, it became clear to me that the traditional and recommended “starter package” for new alpaca farmers consisted of purchasing at least two adult females, preferably pregnant, with soon-to-be born crias who would hopefully be the female version of the 50/50, girl/boy pattern predicted for alpaca births. While no one ever tried to unduly influence my decision to own alpacas, my observations and the answers to my many questions all pointed me in the one direction of: “buy females, if you want to do this well.” and I always want to do things in my life very well. I wanted to be a success. I wanted to do it right. I always do. So, I followed in the footsteps of those who had been successful before me.

Yet, the actual experience of doing so often left me with uneasy sense that I had entered a movie theatre, where I had taken my place in one long line, leading to a single ticket counter, for the purchase of admission to only one particular movie. Even though I felt certain that there must be other film choices in the theatre, and even though I heard the faint melody of a sound track from a different movie down the hall, I eventually moved forward in line with everyone else and bought my first ticket to “A Life with Alpacas.” I purchased two lovely females, one a maiden and one a mommy-to-be with a due date just a few months down the road. All the while, somewhere in my head, I could hear an insistent whisper reminding me: “What about those boys?”

So, that is the story of my beginning. What is my story now? As a psychologist, I am often interested in asking my clients: “If you had it to do all over again, would you do it the same way?” Six years, seventeen alpacas, and two guard llamas later, I am asking myself that exact question. And I believe that my most honest answer is: “Probably not!” Now, that doesn’t mean that I would change my mind about owning an alpaca herd. Absolutely not — I love these animals! However, if I knew then what I know now, I believe that I would begin my life with alpacas by purchasing two very fine, herdsire -quality MALES. Yes, males! Not gelded pets, but potential quality herdsires. Here is why. Over the years, I have had 13 crias born to my herd and approximately 85 percent (not 50 percent) have been boys! This means that I have repeatedly had the conflicting realities of “I’m disappointed because everybody wants a girl” and the actual, day-to-day experience of delight in having a relationship with each and every marvelous alpaca boy.

Long before I ever thought of writing this article, I said to friends and family, over and over again: “As much as I love my alpaca girls, I would be really happy just raising boys.” Because male alpacas are just FUN! In many ways, they are like timeless crias — always delighting in

running like the wind, play- frilly wrestling with their brothers, and stretching out for a leisurely nap under a warm afternoon sun. They are not particularly moody, because they have no pregnancy hormones racing through their system for the majority of their lives. They are affectionate and generally easy to handle for every occasion, ranging from shots to show performance. Also, the fiber of male alpacas often times remains fabulous year after year; thus making them the perfect solution to taking on sheep's wool and synthetic materials for first place in the textile and garment industries. Research shows repeatedly that the USA has far too few fiber alpacas to command control in the fabric world, and lots of boy alpacas would go a long way toward improving this situation.

All right. Remember that insistent voice from the movie theatre line that asked: "What about those boys?" If I had it to do all over again, I would move to a different line and purchase a ticket to a different film, the one entitled: "Congratulations! It's a Boy!"

And, let's be clear. There are a number of very practical financial and business reasons to support this "other way" as well. Most obviously, good quality male alpacas tend to sell for much more modest prices than do females of the same quality. So, there is the opportunity to sample the alpaca experience and lifestyle with much less initial financial investment than is possible with the traditional "Female Starter Package." Furthermore, this is an endeavor (as most new experiences are) with a learning curve. While every glowing marketing description for raising alpacas is essentially true, it is also true that there are many challenges in this business. There are many new skills and much new knowledge to be mastered. There are pitfalls to be avoided. There are monetary, tax, and sales considerations. And there are the occasional heart-aches which accompany the usual celebrations of breedings and births.

This means that, for some of us, there is a distinct advantage in starting out more slowly — in order to get our feet wet, learn the ropes, and gain a sense of the playing field before we enter the game. With the purchase of at least two fine-quality males, it is possible for us (on a manageable scale) to gain skill and confidence in handling these gentle, yet skittish, animals through all of the routines for worming, shots, toe-nail trimmings, shearing, and behavioral performance.

At this level of involvement, there is plenty of time and opportunity for us to determine the most protective and practical sources of feed, hay, shelter, fencing, and veterinary care. We can attend local and regional alpaca shows in order to get a feel for how our boy alpacas fare in this competitive environment, before we make decisions about investing in an expansion of our herd. We can also assess our comfort with this very social, yet competitive, marketing arm of the industry; while meeting and having a sense of belonging among many other alpaca breeders.

As we build confidence in ourselves and our abilities, and as we gain a stronger foothold as members of the alpaca community, we will naturally solidify our true alpaca-lifestyle identity. We will soon understand whether we will be content to live happily-ever-after with a herd of boys,

focusing on the pleasure of their company and the beauty and value of their fleece, yarn, and fiber products; or whether we have a desire to expand into an enterprise which includes the eventual purchasing and breeding of girl alpacas for the prospect of raising and selling their irresistible babies. If the ultimate choice is the latter scenario, the additional benefit is that you will NOT have to seek out males from other farms for breeding to your beautiful new females, because you will already have at least two great herdsire males of your own waiting EAGERLY (and I promise you, it will be EAGERLY) to help make a growing herd of new baby alpacas — just for you!

In the end, if you know that you want to be a part of the alpaca lifestyle, there is good news for you. And then, there is more good news! If you know that you are ready and able to step into alpaca ranching in the traditional way, good for you! There are many fabulous female alpacas awaiting you and many terrific breeders to launch you on your way. But if you need and want another way to enter this exciting and ever-so-rewarding world of alpacas, there is a path open to you as well. In a challenging economy, you do not have to fore go your dream of owning these amazing animals, because you do not have to spend a small fortune to do so. You can allow yourself time to learn and decide what is best for you and your family. You can start out small and grow as rapidly as you please. Or you can keep the simplicity of your original endeavor. You can, as Frank Sinatra reminded is, do it YOUR WAY~ And this means that an “All-Boys Starter Package” may be just the ticket for you.

So, best of luck to you — and to all of us who love the incredible alpaca. May we all find welcome, purpose, and prosperity along one of the several exciting roads that lie ahead.

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