ALPACA MANAGEMENT AND GENERAL CARE

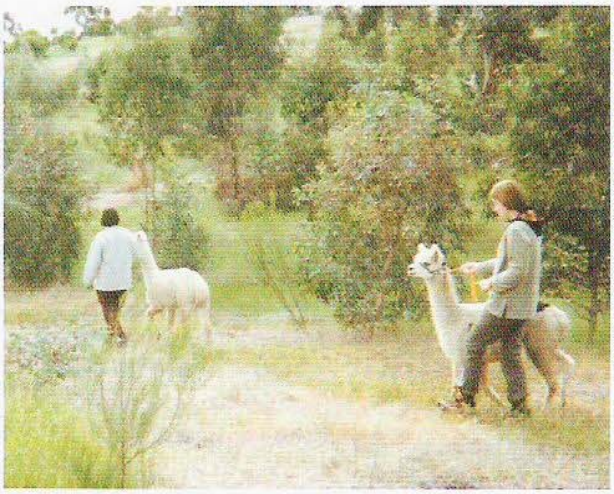
alpacafacts

Management

Alpacas are indeed easy to manage.

By nature alpacas are calm and gentle - handling them is seldom stressful. This ease of management brings with it much satisfaction and pleasure to the owner.

Highly intelligent, alpacas are easy to move from one area to another and through gateways. Under normal circumstances they will approach humans and come when called. They are quick to learn and halter training can be achieved in hours.



Alpacas load and travel easily and cleanly in anything from a float to a small van.

They respect fencing, preferring to remain with the herd rather than explore other territory. Fencing which is suitable for sheep (either ringlock or 5-7 strand wire) is generally adequate, preferably with no barbwire.

Alpacas require no special shedding or shelter - a tree belt for shade and shelter is quite adequate.

Alpacas are low maintenance. They are highly resistant to internal parasites and fly strike is unlikely. They do not require crutching, mulesing or tail docking. With softer pads than hooves, they are less susceptible to foot rot. Protection against clostridial disease with the appropriate use of 5-in-1 vaccinations, is highly recommended.

Alpacas require a diet high in fibre and low in protein. They prefer a variety of grasses and do well on both improved and native pastures. Quality oaten-hay is ideal if supplementary feeding is needed.

Annual shearing is essential. This is a good time to check teeth and toenails, which may require occasional filing or clipping.

Alpacas are hardy animals and by comparison with other livestock species are very easy to manage. The greatest management tool is observation.

Nutrition

Alpacas prefer grasses to other pasture species (like clovers) or to shrubs. Like other ruminants alpacas only have incisor teeth in the lower jaw that bite against an opposing dental pad on the upper jaw. They generally complete their temporary tooth development from 4 to 10 months of age and permanent tooth development by about 4.5 years of age.

Alpacas differ from advanced ruminants in stomach morphology, digestion, diet selectivity and intake. Alpacas have a compartmentalised stomach, which is functionally similar to that of true ruminants, but have 3 compartments rather than 4. Rapid absorption of water and dissolved nutrients combined with an ability to maintain a better nitrogen balance than sheep means that alpacas are more efficient digesters of food than either sheep or cattle. This means that they consume less forage per unit of body weight than other domestic species of the same production status and they can make better use of poorer quality feeds.

Alpacas should have access to a supply of fresh, clean water at all times. An average daily water intake is suggested to be 5 litres for an adult alpaca. This will of course vary depending on environment and management regimes.

Alpacas love water and during summer some like to sit in troughs or dams to cool off.

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Protein requirements for alpacas are relatively low compared to other animals and the following protein levels are provided as a guide.

Maintenance 8%-10% crude protein.

Rapid growth from weaning 16% crude protein.

Pregnancy and lactation 12%-14.5% crude protein.

Energy requirements for alpacas are approximately 30% less than those of sheep. Fibre is also a source of energy for alpacas. The fibre or roughage component of diets should not fall below 25% and ideally should be at least 50% of the intake at all production levels.

Small quantities of minerals, trace elements and vitamins play specific roles in normal body metabolism and some are required in higher quantities during periods of growth, pregnancy and lactation.

Alpacas in southern Australia have been found to be at risk from vitamin D deficiency in the winter and lactation.

Any necessary mineral supplements should be incorporated directly into the diet by way of pelleted feed or grain, as alpacas are apparently unable or unprepared to lick a stock mineral block.

Stocking Rates

As a general guide, alpacas may be grazed at a stocking rate similar to that of sheep.

Feed requirements of grazing livestock are expressed as 'Dry Sheep Equivalents' (DSE). A DSE refers to the average daily energy requirement to maintain a 45 kg merino wether with a fat score of 2.

The following table is a guide to the corresponding alpaca equivalents, ie. one 55 kg macho alpaca = 0.9 DSE.

GROWTH STATUS	ALPACA LIVEWEIGHTS		
	35 kg = DSE	55 kg = DSE	65 kg = DSE
Dry Adult	0.6	0.8	0.9
Hembra	0.9	1.2	1.3
Macho	0.7	0.9	1.1
Growth: 50 gms/day	1.1	1.5	1.7
Growth: 100 gms/day	1.2	1.7	2.0
Growth: 150 gms/day	1.4	2.0	2.2

Shearing

Alpacas are generally shorn annually and at a time when there is least possible contamination of the fleece by vegetable matter.

Shearing is done with electric sheep or goat shearing equipment or (rarely) blade shears. As alpaca fibre is non-greasy, shears must be well oiled to guard against overheating.

Alpacas are usually shorn lying down, gently restrained with feet shackled.

Annual fibre yield is up to 4 kilograms from a male and up to 2.5 kilograms for a female.

The first cria clip commands a premium price because of its extra fineness.

The best fleece comes from the saddle (i.e. back, side, shoulder and rump). Neck fleece can be slightly coarser and is usually shorter. Coarser fibre is usually found on the belly and legs. (Refer to alpacafacts titled Alpaca Fibre and Alpaca Shearing and Clip Preparation.)

Feet and Teeth Trimming

When alpacas are kept on softer ground their toenails require trimming from time to time. Hoof shears used for sheep are quite satisfactory.

When an occasional animal has teeth protruding past the dental pad then the teeth should be filed back. The animal should be held firmly or restrained (shearing time is suitable) and teeth filed back with an appropriate rasp or small grinder.

Males have fighting teeth and the sharp points can be cut off from 3 years of age. If not removed they can inflict severe injury during fights with other males. There are 6 fighting teeth - 4 upper and 2 lower. This is a two-person job with one restraining the animal while the other uses a piece of obstetric wire to remove the points of the teeth. Alternatively, a small engraving tool with the appropriate grinding stone can be used very safely. The fighting teeth do regrow and may require recutting after 3-4 years.