

INTRODUCTION

There are a range of alternative livestock enterprises that use the resources present on a holding such as fences and buildings. Products from alternative livestock can include milk, meat, eggs and fibre. This leaflet examines fibre production from alpacas.



Fig 1: A Huacaya Alpaca

There are two types of Alpaca being bred for fibre, the Suri and the Huacaya. The Suri has fibre that grows quite long and forms silky pencil like locks. The Huacaya has a shorter dense, crimped fibre giving it a very woolly appearance. At the moment the UK herd is small with about 15,000 animals, the vast majority of which are Huacaya Alpacas. The future of the Alpaca industry lies in the development of the fibre, and it is this that drives the breeding program in the UK. Its aims are to increase Alpaca numbers and more importantly increase the fineness and density of the fleece by the use of carefully selected breeding stock. Alpaca fibre is silky and soft to the touch whilst its cellular structure makes it light, warm and non-irritating. Expected financial returns should be calculated on the basis that the markets for breeding stock have been saturated and fibre production is the main source of income.

MARKET

The market for fibre in the UK is relatively undeveloped, as Alpaca numbers are not great enough to support commercial processing. Fibres can be sold directly to home spinners or weavers, and to private companies such as UK Alpaca or The Alpaca Wool Company Ltd for the production of high quality yarn. Mini-mills will also process fleece into yarn for owners so that they can produce products from their own fleeces for sale to the public. Alpacas will produce between 2.5 and 5kg of fibre at each shearing. The fibre from young cria (offspring) attracts a premium and there are 22 natural colours. Current prices for Alpaca fibres sold to a company for the production of yarn are - baby £7.50/kg, fine £4.50/kg and coarse £0.75/kg.



Fig 2: Alpaca fibre

REQUIREMENTS

Because of their size and low maintenance requirement Alpacas are ideal for smaller farms and smallholdings. Normal stock fencing 4ft high is adequate around the paddocks but must not include barbed wire. Ideally more than one paddock is required, so that stock can be rotated and grass rested. The pasture must be free from plants that are poisonous to Alpacas such as Ragwort, Laurel, Laburnum and Yew. Shelter should also be provided in the form of a shed or lean-to, to protect the Alpacas from severe weather conditions.

ROUTINE HUSBANDRY & HEALTH

- Alpacas should be vaccinated against clostridial diseases and wormed every six months
- Foot trimming should be carried out when necessary; usually two to three times a year.
- Teeth need to be trimmed annually: this is usually carried out when the animal is caught for shearing.
- Regular catching and body scoring of alpacas is essential. It is difficult to make a visual assessment of the animals' condition when they are fully fleeced. Thin Alpacas may be an indicator of malnutrition or disease. Body scoring is done on a scale of one to five: one being emaciated, and five being obese. Areas to assess for levels of muscle and fat cover are the spine, ribs, upper rear legs, the chest and front legs. This also gives the owner a good chance to check for any signs of injury, brambles or burrs stuck in the fleece, and fly strike.

- Shearing is carried out annually in the early summer months and can be done using normal sheep shearing equipment. Shearing will cost between £10 & £16 per animal, plus travelling expenses. Alternatively, owners can learn to shear their own stock.
- Beware of signs of ill health, which include spending more time sitting or lying down and a reluctance to stand. Unhealthy alpacas will look hunched up and depressed and will be left by the rest of the herd.

COSTS

Initial start-up costs will depend on the intended objective and the quality of animal. If the objective is just to produce fibre, then geldings (castrated males) can be used as they will live in groups and provide a fleece each year. If the objective is to establish a breeding herd then a minimum of two pregnant females and a gelding are required to start with (the gelding is kept as a companion). Alpacas are herd animals and should never be kept on their own; females must have the company of other females.

Table 1: Typical Alpaca prices

| Alpacas | £ / head |
|------------------------------------|----------------|
| Breeding stock – Females | 2,000 – 5,000 |
| Breeding stock – Entire males | 5,000 – 30,000 |
| Fibre Production – Castrated males | 500 - 700 |

When buying an Alpaca ensure that it is sound in conformation and registered with the British Alpaca Society. The British Camelid Association also produces a list of reputable breeders.

FEEDING

Alpacas are efficient converters of fodder and can be stocked at up to 14 per hectare. Adequate grazing must be available and stocking rates adjusted if the grass is low or during winter months. Hay and a constant supply of fresh clean water must also be provided all year round. Specially formulated Camelid feeds are available from feed manufacturers, and can be fed as a supplement to heavily pregnant or lactating females, youngstock or during the winter. Vitamin and mineral supplementation will depend on the naturally available concentrations in the grazed grass and hay provided. A mineral deficiency may affect the quality of the fleece and the fertility of the herd but can be improved by correct feeding.



Fig 3: A Suri Alpaca

BREEDING

Female Alpacas can be ready for mating at 14 to 18 months of age. They are induced breeders and can be mated all year round. Ovulation occurs up to 26 hours after mating, the male will then repeatedly cover the female until she refuses him. Gestation lasts eleven months, producing one cria per year. The female Alpaca can spend the majority of her life pregnant and will average 15 productive years. Births should be timed to coincide with the warmer weather in the late spring / early summer, when grass is growing and the cria is less likely to suffer from hypothermia. The re-mating of females costs between £350 and £850 per service.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information contact The British Alpaca Society on 0845 331 2468, www.bas-uk.com. The society has regional groups covering Wales and the rest of the UK that meet to talk about alpacas, organise events, workshops, and will provide a good starting point for prospective owners. Or contact the British Camelid Association, www.llama.co.uk.