

Good
To
Know

Discover ALPACA

Welcome to the wonderful world of alpacas! *by Margaret MacDonald and Wendy Cross*

about alpacas

Beautiful, gentle and intelligent, these New World Camelids produce luxurious, soft fibre that commands relatively high prices. New World Camelids arrived in North America in the 1980s and the first major importation to Canada began in the 1990s.

Alpacas are uniquely positioned as a livestock species to further the goals of the sustainable agriculture movement. Alpacas are easy on the environment as they are a ruminant type animal. Their efficient digestive systems reduce pressure on pastures and the padded feet minimize damage to the land. A hardy constitution minimizes the need for chemical or medical management and communal dung piles facilitate simple manure management.

From a business point of view, alpacas represent multiple market outlets for product which can in turn support other local businesses – feed mill, fibre mill, hay producers, local shops to sell products. Alpaca farmers can sell raw alpaca fleece or get involved in some level of valued added processing (yarn, socks, duvets). Sales of live animals, herdsire



services and boarding (agisting) can also be a part of the business model. There is even a market for the manure.

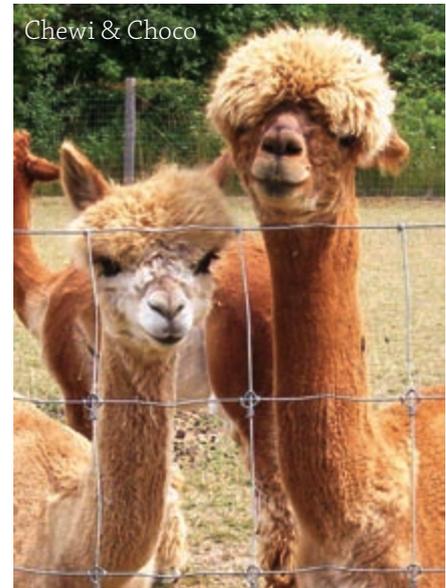
the fibre

According to the Canadian Camelid Fibre Co-op (CCFC), Canadian alpaca producers shear approximately 80 thousand pounds of alpaca fibre annually which is then processed in Canadian custom mills. The fibre is made into yarn, felt, batts and rovings. Many alpaca producers sell alpaca products at the farm gate.

There are two types of alpacas, Suri and Huacaya, with Huacaya making up about 90% of the Canadian herd. The fleece on a Suri hangs parallel to the body in pencil like locks and has high luster, no crimp or crinkle. Huacaya fleece, however, grows perpendicular to the body of the animal and has crimp and/or crinkle. Alpacas are shorn once per year, usually in the spring.

Alpaca fibre has good draping characteristics and is lightweight with high thermal qualities. The absence of grease results in less scouring and high yields. This fibre blends well with any other fibre (wool, silk and bamboo, to name a few) providing the enthusiastic fibre artist a whole new world of options to discover.

Alpaca fleece is considered a luxury fibre because it combines so many positive, commercial attributes into one fibre. There are no negative characteristics to be found in alpaca fleece. It is stronger than sheep's wool and contains no lanolin. It is found naturally in 22 distinct colours, which can also be blended to produce an infinite array of natural colours. The fibre is hollow giving better



insulation and warmth on cold nights and a better cooling on hot days. Those who cannot wear wool can usually comfortably wear alpaca.

Optical Fibre Diameter Analysis (OFDA) is performed by alpaca breeders serious about their breeding programs to assist with the objective of improving the fibre. This analysis provides data about fineness and crimp characteristics from each individual alpaca and can also be used as an effective guide for determining end-product suitability. Genetics, nutrition, health, stress and age can all affect the characteristics of the fibre.

Through intensive, selective breeding of stock and grading of clip, Canadian alpacas will produce fibre that is superior to any Peruvian product with the result of a more consistent quality in North American alpaca fibre and products.

Photos courtesy of Margaret MacDonald.



a personal account

I saw my first alpaca at the Royal Winter Fair in Toronto, about 10 years ago and thought that they were the sweetest animals I had ever seen. Their huge dark eyes, incredibly soft fleece and gentle nature won me over. Little did I know that I would end up raising my own alpacas years later. I cautiously started off with just two pregnant females, just to test the water, so to speak. I purchased Thea and Cherish from Margie MacDonald at Blood Moon Alpacas. I was especially hooked when Thea's cria, Thistle, was born and stole my heart.

Initially I wasn't interested in doing anything with my raw fibre other than selling it but that all changed when I helped out with shearing. Just straight off the alpaca, the fibre felt like butter! I was intrigued by the differences in the fleece of each animal. Some were denser, softer, longer, had more crimp and of course, in the case of the cria especially, were finer. The cria fleece, being the softest and finest, is also a dirt magnet and the most difficult to get clean. To my delight, I thoroughly enjoyed the whole skirting and sorting process.

I further researched what could be done with this luxurious fibre and consulted with Margie MacDonald. After touring several fibre mills my head was spinning with possibilities. The fibre could be made



into batting, various weights and colours of felt, and spun in a multitude of yarn weights, dyed any colour of the rainbow, blended with silk, wool, mohair or bamboo, brushed or bouclé'd!

I started with making felt out of the fibre. Instead of the usual thicker insole felt, I got a lighter weight that I could use to handcraft clutches, bags, cell-phone and eyeglass cases. Alpaca is a smooth fibre, so it needs the addition of wool, which is barbed to help it bind together as it is pressed in layers by the felting machine.

While waiting for my fibre to felt, I used recycled blue jeans to make small wallets, clutches and purses, which were hand decorated with needle punched alpaca fibre, beads, buttons, trims, lace...you name it. With some yarn purchased from the mill, I dusted off my crochet hooks and went to town. My neighbour, June McGarigle, is a self proclaimed knitaholic; not only did she fall in love with my alpacas she also fell in love with their fibre. Needless to say she had a ball with the alpaca yarn (excuse the pun).

Alpacas are addictive...you cannot just have a few, so I purchased some more along with some raw fibre to boot! I got my husband to build me my own skirting table, which I would set up down by the barn. With the help of my barn cats "Arial" and "Zara", who delighted in walking around the edge of the table or playing in the discarded pieces on the ground, I would pull apart, shake, pick out any vegetation and sort the fibre in to what we call firsts and seconds, while sipping on a cup of coffee. It doesn't get any better than this!

I had so much fun with this fibre I had it made in to roving bumps...some with silk added and some with merino wool added. As far as yarn goes, I tried pretty much a bit of everything. When I received my parcel from the mill, I was so excited! It was like getting a Christmas present. Once again, my neighbour (who has since become a good friend) and I went to town crocheting and knitting!

I'm having a blast! I took it one step further and took a wet felting and dyeing course and a weaving course at the local mill. Next year I plan to learn spinning.

I've been lucky to sell my loot at local craft shows, Margie's open houses and to an "alpaca" store. Friends and family members have been recipients of these treasures too. 🌀

For more information about alpacas in Canada: www.alpacacanada.com

For more information about fibre testing: www.oldscollege.ca/schools/ocsi/NFC

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alpaca facts

- they are small enough to handle easily and cause no danger
- they are curious but rather shy
- they are healthy, clean and don't need huge quantities of food
- they have a designated pecking order
- alpacas generally weigh 110 to 200 pounds and are about 3 feet high at the shoulder
- they have a life span of about 20 years.
- alpacas have a strong herding instinct and feel vulnerable and become stressed if kept alone.
- a male alpaca is a *macho*, a female alpaca is called a *hembra*, and a baby alpaca is called a *cria*.
- female alpacas usually have one cria after an 11½ month gestation.
- alpacas usually give birth only in daylight hours.
- females need the support structure of other females, for companionship, to be around at birthing and helping to protect cria.



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