

Alpaca Investment Is Shear Joy

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DELTA (York Co.) — It all began with a desire to raise "something that would prance around in the pastures" of the green hills of Nicky Roth and her husband Chris Neumann's farm in Delta, York County.

Roth, a part-time psychotherapist, and Neumann, a transportation planner for Lancaster County, "wanted to raise something here," she said. The couple own nine alpacas at Alpacas of Willow Spring Farm.

Although sheep was the couple's original thought for filling the farm's 30 acres, when the couple attended the Maryland Sheep and Wool Festival they noticed alpacas and sent for information.

"We read about how they were really an investment," she said. "We have horses, so we know

what it's like, having large animals. We thought that alpacas would be ideal."

Their first animals came from a small, established farm in Virginia "willing to help with questions," said Roth. The couple purchased one herd sire, a gelded "buddy" for the sire, and two females in 1997.

"They're sweet, clean, attractive, and curious. They are just very huggable and they don't bite or spit at people. They have a soft pad on their bottom of their foot, so if they kick — and they don't, really — it doesn't hurt."

The animals have a strong herd instinct and are usually "more interested in other alpacas," however Roth has found them to be fascinated by strollers and children.

Alpacas are easy keepers. The females take one pound of alpaca food a day, and the males receive one-half a pound a day.



Nicky Roth, Delta, describes alpacas as sweet, clean, attractive, and curious. "They are just very huggable."

Alpaca History

Watching the solemn, unruffled, soft-eyed expression of the alpaca, one would never guess that the animal has weathered such a tumultuous history.

Alpacas are indigenous to South America, with concentration of animals in Peru, Bolivia, and Chile. Native people groups consumed their meat, spun their fiber into clothing, and burned their manure as fuel.

The animals' story is full of close calls. In the early 1500s the Spanish Conquistadors arrived, bringing with them European livestock that destroyed pasture lands and brought new diseases to the alpacas, drastically reducing the alpaca population.

Also, as more Conquistadors arrived, they noticed how the native people — especially in the rural areas — were dependent on the animal, so the Spaniards, intent on controlling the people of South America, killed alpacas by the millions, according to information from the Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association (AOBA). Peruvian historians estimate that as many as 90 percent of the entire world's population of alpacas were killed by the Conquistadors. Consequently, this resulted in the death of approximately 80 percent of the human population in rural areas.

Several groups of native South Americans, however, took their animals to a remote, high mountain desert area of the Andes Mountains. Fortunately for the alpaca, in the mid-1800s, an English wool mill owner named Sir Titus Salt acquired a package of raw alpaca fleece. Recognizing its potential, he developed a cloth that became popular with the British royal family and spread into the aristocratic circles of continental Europe. This eventually led to the importation of animals to not only England but also Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Israel, and the United States.

Alpaca fiber is lanolin-free, so it is ready to spin right from the animal and is prized by handspinners. They are sheared once a year, which produces roughly five to ten pounds of fiber per animal.

Also contributing to the wool's popularity is its spectrum of natural colors — 22 distinguishable hues — from white, lawn fawn, and light gray to brown and black.

The fiber is unique in that it is considered "hypoallergenic" since the fiber's scales lie against the shaft of each hair follicle.

There are North American commercial spinning mills available to process alpaca fiber.



"You can have a few alpacas on very little acreage — five to six on one acre," said Roth.

They are also given free choice hay, besides the offerings of the pasture. "You can have a few alpacas on very little acreage — five to six on one acre."

The couple feeds their alpacas a specially-formulated pelleted food, "basically a sweet feed," she said. They make gentle 4-H projects for students around the country.

In addition, their shelter needs are simple, with a small lean-to sufficient for their needs. They also do not challenge fences and can be kept in with minimal fencing.

As a result of their experience with caring for alpacas, the couple works to pass on their knowledge. "We like to educate people about alpacas," said Roth.

Consequently, the couple has conducted seminars twice a year to educate those with interest in investing in these gentle creatures. Basic care, breeding, shearing, and fencing are just a few of the topics that the couple has worked hard to teach themselves and now offer to teach others.

An Investment

"Alpaca prices are high compared to other livestock," she said. With the animals' fiber and breeding and selling opportunity, the couple considers them an investment. The easy-going animals can be cared for in the couple's retirement years while still providing an income with fiber and offspring sales.

More importantly, said Roth, "raising alpacas is a peaceful, enjoyable lifestyle. We just enjoy working with animals — that's a big part of it."

The average male costs between \$5,000-\$20,000. A pregnant female will run \$15,000-\$23,000, and weanlings \$10,000-\$12,000. However, package prices of alpacas from the same farm can be considerably lower.

Females are generally bred at 18 months of age, however males

"vary widely in maturity," she said.

The animals can be shown year-round. Shows are conducted in Ohio and Harrisburg, for example, and the national show is rotated between Seattle and Louisville. Colorado, Washington, Ohio, California, and Oregon have concentrations of alpaca populations.

The animals are divided into two species: the Huacayas and the Suris. Huacayas are much more populous, with more than 28,000 in the country. Suris number approximately 6,000 in the U.S.

Both Suris and Huacayas lack sufficient bone structure to be pack animals. The animals were

primarily used for fiber production in South America.

Suris yield fiber that is "very fine and lustrous and a little more challenging to work with," said Roth. The fiber is "used for evening things — shiny, glittery, and lacy" pieces which "cost a good deal more money" than fiber from Huacayas. Suris are characterized by little pencil locks that look like dreadlocks.

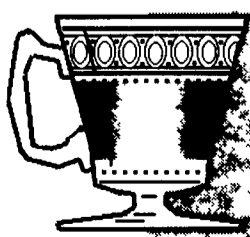
Fiber

Belly and leg hair from alpacas, formerly thrown away, is now used for socks, scarves, and gloves. Baby alpaca fiber, considered hypoallergenic, is used for baby things.

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New addition "AWS's B.J.'s Alexander" tries out his wobbly legs soon after his springtime birth.



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