



# Are Alpacas in **YOUR** Future?

by Cindy Lavan

If you would have asked me ten years ago what I thought I would be doing for a living at the turn of the century, full-time alpaca farming would have probably been on the bottom of the list, if even on the list at all. However, through circumstances within and beyond my control, I now live on a 150-acre farm in Maine with my husband, our 4-year-old son, and a multitude of farm essentials such as sheep, chickens, dogs, cats, and the ever-ubiquitous donkey.

## **But where did the 90+ alpacas come from? Good question.**

Husbands do have good ideas every now and then, and back in the summer of '93, Tim stumbled upon an investment article relative to alpacas. He gathered information and made a presentation to me over dinner. I was hooked. I had some livestock experience volunteering in zoos and aquariums while growing up in Baltimore, and my uncle owned a llama farm in Colorado where we would visit in the summers. I knew llamas had a cousin named alpaca, but that was about it. Seven years later, we have entered the year 2000 with over 90 alpacas on our farm and a few moms still due before the end of the year.

We have been raising and breeding alpacas successfully enough to turn our farm into our full-time business. Tim worked off the farm for the first five years, while I managed the animals on a daily basis. As the herd grew, so did the business and instead of hiring outside help, I hired Tim. He already knew how to shovel manure and work the tractor.

Like any business, what you put in, you get out, but with livestock, you add a few more variables. For instance: what are the qualities I should look for when considering purchasing breeding stock?

There are many variables that will help you find the alpaca that is just right for you. Firstly, where do you want your alpaca business to be and where do you want it to go? Fiber only, or breeding? If you are interested in developing a fiber-only business, then finding the best quality, non-breeding fiber animals is the way to proceed. Having a variety of color will help, as well as diversify your product. Do you want to prepare, spin, and knit or weave yourself, or do you want to sub-contract those processes out? When sub-contracting out, you will have to work those costs into the final cost of the product. Most craftspeople do not truly get adequately compensated for their efforts, but the love of working with the fiber and the end-product from your own animals is extremely rewarding in itself.

If you are interested in developing a breeding business, know what your goals are. Where do you want to see your business in five years? Ten years? What do you want to build your herd toward? Excellence in fiber? Excellence in conformation? Particular colors? Have a game plan from which to begin. Know that plans change as events change and allow for that flexibility in your business plan. Everything looks good in black and white, but know that when dealing with any business, shades of gray can appear.

Stay focused on your goal when beginning. Visit as many farms as you can, looking for a farm(s) you feel comfortable in dealing with. Ask about their opinions and values. You are investing a lot of money and you want to be comfortable in dealing with a farm that, if a situation were to arise down the road, you would feel comfortable in working with them toward a resolution.

Additionally, focus on finding the best alpaca for the money you want to spend. In looking at breeding

stock, you are looking at two sides of an alpaca. First, the conformation and overall body of the alpaca and secondly, the fleece. We have been breeding for seven years. We continue to breed to improve our stock generation after generation. We look closely at the female and mate her with a male who will add to her overall physical attributes. *There is no such thing as the perfect alpaca.* Each has something that can be improved upon whether it be in their fiber or conformation. When looking for breeding stock, *look for an alpaca(s) where the positives outweigh the negatives.*

**What are good conformational components? Let's start from the top and work our way down.**

### Ears

Ideal ears are curved in and pointed at the top.

### Head

Personal preference plays a part. Some folks like a short snout, some a longer one. Top knot or fiber coverage on the head can correlate to a denser fleece on the body. A darker color on the palate and gums may indicate darker alleles and the chances that the alpaca will throw color in its breeding future. Bite: how the teeth align with the dental pad, but also how the jaws line up as well. Alpacas lose their baby teeth at roughly 2-3 years of age. The adult teeth come in from behind. We have seen bites where jaw alignment is fine with the baby teeth off palate slightly and when adult teeth erupt and mature, match evenly with the palate. We have also seen that if trimmed at 8-10 months of age, the adult teeth align better and no more trimming was needed.

### Body Proportions

We like to see alpacas that are well proportioned. That is, their neck length is equally proportioned to their body length. Some alpacas have shorter necks, some longer, but ideally, the 'typey' alpaca looks like a well-proportioned animal.

### Front Legs

Front legs should ideally be straight down from the shoulder. Some alpacas' front legs come closer in and make a V-shape. This would not be as ideal. During importation, alpacas were allowed a degree of variation in the front leg angulation, but nothing too great. From the side, the front legs should be straight down from the shoulder. A large percentage of alpacas have good front leg conformation.

### Back Legs

When the alpaca is standing on level ground, there should be a natural bend in the back leg (the hock) when looking from the side. When the bend in the hock is too great, it brings the animal's foot too far forward, which is undesirable. From the back, watch the animal walk or run forward. You can see how the legs move. Do they rub together, or do they toe out? Is this going to cause them any damage in their future? Probably not, but know your alpaca(s)' conformation so we can start building better alpacas today.

### Back/Spinal Area

Don't forget the back. I like to see a flat back line with a nice curve to the tail. Llamas tend to have longer, straighter backs and straighter conformation than alpacas, which is why they are far better suited to carry weights on their backs than are alpacas.

### Fiber

Traditionally speaking, white and fawn colored alpacas tend to have finer fleeces. This is because in Peru, the goal was to breed for as much fiber off an animal to sell to the European market and white was the color of choice so their customers could then dye it any color they wished.

Micron count and its associated numbers are just ONE of the factors I use in evaluating a fleece. Micron itself means the average diameter of the sample of fibers sent in for evaluation. You take a 2" x 2" sample of fleece from the center, mid-section



*Top: good cria fleece coverage, good ears and small snout.*

*Middle: Heavy leg bone, good fleece coverage, bow in legs from knees down is within acceptable limits.*

*Bottom: A sample of good crimp and lock on huacaya fleece.*

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of the fleece and submit it to a testing laboratory. Humidity can interfere with results, so we sample dry fleeces only. The lower the micron count, the better. Hence, numbers around 17-25 microns are good. We will not use a male for breeding if his micron is over 30 microns, no matter how wonderful he is in all other aspects. SD stands for standard deviation of the micron. Looking for a number again, lower is better, but no higher than say 5-6 in a stud male. CV is co-efficient of variation. The lower the CV, the better, because it shows uniformity through out the sample, and chances are it will correlate with a more uniform fleece. The final entry on a sample report is "Percent over 30 microns." Once again, lower numbers are desirable and this is something we look at closely for breeding males.

Sometimes color of fleece will affect numbers. Remember I said usually white or light-colored fleeces have lower microns and if you have an animal in other colors that also has a low micron count, you are doing good. Example: for white, the good range is 19-22 microns, while for black, the good range is 22-25 microns. They do not use micron numbers in Peru. They have women who sort the fiber by handle or feel and judge it accordingly as baby, fine, superfine, or coarse. Americans have to take it one step further, of course!

Just as important as micron and its associated numbers are the fleece's "handle" ( how it feels to the touch), color, luster (or sheen), strength (overall health of the fiber), crimp (waviness - applies only to huacaya fleeces, as suri fleece has little or no



*Well proportioned features and conformation. Note the dense fleece by the "cracking" of the fiber on the neck. The hock, or bend, in the rear legs is also good.*

crimp), lock cleanliness, and "presentation of fleece." In fact, these factors from a hand-spinning point of view are more important to me. My fiber customers and end-product customers want to know how a fiber feels, not its micron.

Density of a fleece and coverage of fiber on an alpaca is also a point to look at. Traditionally speaking, the denser the alpaca, the more coverage it may have. Well, that 's not always the case. I have had nationally award-winning fleeces that have come off of well covered and not-so well covered alpacas. "Unless you are using the fiber between their toes, what good is the coverage anyway?" I have been asked. Good point. However, if you are utilizing the leg wool, which we do for co-operative projects, this enables us to get every bit of fiber off the alpaca and turn it into something to sell.

Off- and on-the-farm fiber sales totaled approximately \$10,000 for us in 1999. This amount easily paid for all feed costs associated with the fiber-bearing animals on our farm. We did

incur costs to make product, but profit was higher than our expense.

Well-conformed, well-fibered, well-priced alpacas... know that your alpaca business, whether fiber-based or breeding-based, will grow naturally as your herd grows. Find the best stock for the price you want to spend, allocating a reserve for insurance to protect your investment. Also, don't forget to set aside a contingency fund for veterinary and stud fees, plus also business development and start-up expenses. Folks starting today have a wide realm of resources on which to draw that we didn't have seven years ago. Learn from our growing pains to build a healthier and happier herd for the future. Many farms, established and new, will work with you to find alpacas that will help you reach your goals. Alpacas are not right for everyone. We want you to enjoy your alpaca journey, beginning to end. We invite you to an alpaca farm for a hands-on experience. Seeing is not only believing, but it is learning as well. And who knows? Maybe alpacas will be in YOUR future!

### **About the Author**

*Cindy Lavan, along with husband Tim and son Charlie, has been raising alpacas on their farm in rural Maine since 1993. The Lavans are active in every aspect of the alpaca industry, and Cindy is a former AOBA board member. They actively educate the public about alpacas, and are also involved with a special program that brings inner-city kids to their farm - which is the first exposure most have had to a rural environment. You can reach Cindy at [cindyl@ctalpacas.com](mailto:cindyl@ctalpacas.com) or (877) 283-7222.*