

Groom Your Pastures, Not Your 'Pacas

by Caroline Mixon

Do you remember when you first saw an alpaca? Did the thought ever cross your mind, “how do they get them to look that way?” I had a burst of thought that it took a lot of “grooming” with curling irons, hair conditioners, or highlighting gels. I have come to find out that this is the antithesis of what really happens. You do very little to them if you will groom your pastures, not the animals.

When we first moved into the country and onto this property in the early 80's, I did not realize that the decision of what would be lawn and what would be pasture would have such an impact. We cordoned off land for the house and the lawn, fenced in the perimeters, and that was that. So, as the years went by, I used part of the pasture as a compost pit, a grave for old terra cotta pots, and a place to put the stuff that my husband sucked up into the shop vac. I have now found myself cleaning up, inch by inch, this area that is now grazing territory for this great Incan treasure. If I had only known then what I know now, I would not have been such a procrastinator in my clean up duties and just hauled off right then what was waste.

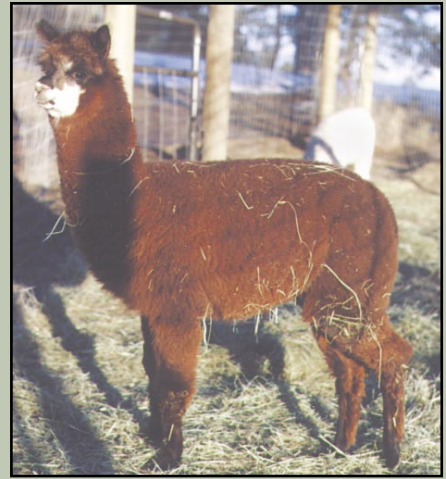
After that detail, I realized that the earth “burps” after a rain. To this day, I make daily rounds looking for artifacts such as glass, pottery, parts of farm equipment, rusted cans and the like. This land once was an old farm home place, long since forgotten. With this past civilization came its buried treasures, thus increasing the vigilance of things unearthed by rain. I have come to realize that the earth reveals all sorts of interesting artifacts – some of which are potentially dangerous – things like pottery, glass,

parts of farm equipment, rusted cans, and pop top rings! One day, I even found a buried golf ball and 30 empty .22 rifle casings, just lying in a pile that had been uncovered by our last rain!

A farmer who lives near us told me of an unfortunate event in which one of her crias came up to the barn with bloody legs. She found barbed wire that had been around a tree, buried, but guess who found it? I thought: what an unfortunate thing. So, I was on the lookout as we cleaned out the perimeter woods. We harvested cherry trees that would make them sick, got rid of other noxious trees that have by-products that lodge in the fiber. The ubiquitous pine tree with its sticky sap makes a worse mess than any velcro tipping on a cria's coat. It seems that their little bodies are magnets for vegetative debris to their tui fleece. Am I coming in clear here? These trees are great for winter shade, but horrid for the fiber.

On another occasion, I was making another check after a downpour and I saw something dark brown, about four inches long, sticking out of the ground at the base of an old tree. I pulled on it and 15 feet later I had the remnant of an old barbed wire fence! I could have croaked. I had done my homework, I had removed all obstacles, I thought. But there it was! So, you never can be too sure about their safety and well being.

Additionally, by picking up wind-blown debris that makes it into your pastures, you then have minor prep to the animal prior to shearing or showing. It surely beats that uncomfortable task of trying to remove or cut out burrs from very tender areas. The learning curve gets more intense as



Please, oh, please take this advice! I need your help. I am not a lint brush! –Thanks, Velcro, the alpaca.

you strive to be a good caretaker of this special creature. If you are mindful of what comes from the seasonal production of the vegetation in your ecosystem, there will be less “fiber picking.” Shearing time will be less time consuming if the vegetation is at a minimum. The fleece judges love a pile of luxury to run their fingers through without bumping into the stubble of forage stems. You know the culprits: cockleburrs, sand spurs, pine needles, twigs, briar strands, beggar lice, and those geodesic-shaped prickly balls of the sweet gum tree.

Once you remove from your pasture what might get caught in the fiber, your grooming concerns now gets down to one major issue. How does one get the little darlings not to use each other's “neck pit” as a trash heap?

So in summary, keeping your pastures well-groomed really has two major benefits: it will pay dividends in not only keeping your alpaca safe, but also in keeping the fleece in tip-top shape. So next time it rains (and after every major rain or wind storm), I encourage you to scour your fields. Your alpacas will thank you for it!

In the past two years, Dr. Del and Caroline Mixon have taken 80 acres in northeast Georgia and made it home to some 40 alpacas. He, the periodontist, still has his day job! This is to support the addiction of Caroline to build a cadre of proven bloodlines. You can reach the Mixons at www.carodelalpacas.com, carodelalpacas@home.com, or (770) 967-4041.