

‘Just made for people’

VALUED FOR THEIR FIBER, ALPACAS ARE ENDEARING, TOO

By Faith Gillman
Staff writer

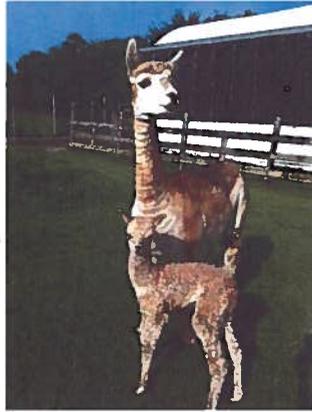
Alpacas are gentle, intelligent and social creatures. Though dwarfed by their family cousins, the llama and the camel, alpacas offer a lot in a small package. Just ask Pamela Drew of Pamelamas in Arundel and Doris and Walter Van Buskirk of Lightfoot Farms in Kennebunk.

Drew became interested in alpacas in the mid-1990s via her introduction to llamas. While she appreciated the llama's usefulness in carrying supplies for hikers, she was more intrigued with the animal's fiber.

"I'm a knitter from way back," Drew said. "My interest has always been about the fiber. But llamas were too big for me and their fiber is much coarser [than alpacas]. Alpacas are a good size and bred for their fiber. I took time, did some research and learned more about them."

Although she had no prior experience with livestock, Drew decided to try her hand at raising alpacas. She sold her home in favor of a property with plenty of land. She started with three alpacas in 2001; she now has 21.

For the Van Buskirks, raising alpacas was more about making a life change. The couple had successful businesses through the years but came to a point where, with children grown and gone, they were "looking to do something



A dam and cria at Lightfoot Farms.
Photo courtesy of Lightfoot Farms

Pamela Drew, right, with the fiber products she sells.

Staff photo by Faith Gillman

for us – something fun that we wanted to do," Doris Van Buskirk said.

They read an article about alpacas and decided to look into them. They came to the conclusion that raising them would be something they would enjoy doing together.

"They are lovely animals," Van Buskirk said. "We were city people. It was a big leap for us, but alpacas are friendly, non-aggressive and just made for people."

Drew and the Van Buskirks are among a growing number of people in Maine who raise alpacas. According to the Maine Alpaca Association website, some 40 farms, from Kittery to Harrington, are home to alpacas.





A female alpaca keeps watch from the barn at Pamelamas.

Staff photo by Faith Gillman

The Van Buskirks have been raising alpacas for 17 years. They started with a few females that were boarded at a nearby farm. A few years later, they purchased land in Kennebunk and moved their growing herd there. They now have 60 alpacas.

Found primarily in the Andean Mountain range in South American, alpacas are adaptable animals that have been domesticated for more than 5,000 years. The climate in Maine, which is not too dissimilar from that of alpacas' native area, makes it a good place to raise

them.

"We have extremes of heat and cold here but they are manageable extremes," Drew said. "If you have shelter for them they will do well. It's good to keep them out of the wind and wet and feed them up well in the winter. You can put coats on them when it's cold. I have fans in the barns in the summer and make sure they always have an ample supply of water."

Alpacas range from 100 to 200 pounds and have an average life span of 20 years. Their

gestation period is 11.5 months. Babies, called crias, are normally born without assistance. Alpacas eat hay, graze on grass and browse on bushes. Their diet is supplemented with feed – grain that includes needed vitamins and loose minerals. Attention to diet is essential, especially when breeding.

"We grain our animals two times a day all year with good feed. It's needed if you want to produce good quality crias," Van Buskirk said. "We round out with pasture, and hay in the winter months."

Good grazing land is important, as well. One acre will support five to six alpacas, depending on its quality.

"You have to take care of your pasture," Drew said. "The quality can be impacted by the weather. Sometimes we have to give more hay to make up."

Alpacas are easy on the land. They have two toes, not hooves. Their toenails, as well as their teeth, need occasional trimming. The underside of their feet is like a dog's paw, soft pads that tread lightly on the ground. When

grazing, they trim the grass, rather than pull it up. Their manure is compostable.

"I can't think of a nicer animal to have on a farm," Van Buskirk said, "They are environmentally friendly, smart and come right up to you. Even their manure is good for the garden - they are the best of everything."

One of the most important aspects of raising alpacas is for the fiber generated. An adult can produce 5 to 10 pounds of various grades of fiber. The shearing process takes place once a year, generally in the spring.

There are a number of methods used in handling the raw fiber. Drew has the back, or blanket, of her alpacas sheared first, which gets laid out flat on a special piece of cardboard. The blanket is generally the softest and highest quality fiber.

"Some prefer to roll the blanket and put it in a plastic bag," Drew said. "We put the neck fiber into a bag - all bags are labeled with the animal's name. In another bag go the belly, leg and chest fiber, which is lower quality, shorter and coarser."

The fiber from Drew's animals is sorted as it is sheared. She uses the services of a certified sorter who grades the fiber on a scale of 1 to 6 with 1 being the finest quality. The fiber is also separated by color, grade and length. Drew belongs to several coops that process fiber, some of which require the certified sorter. Other coops sort in house.

"We grade and bag it and then decide where it will go," Drew said.

Alpaca fiber blends well with wool. Although it does not have much elasticity, it is very warm, which makes it excellent for use in outdoor wear. Alpaca fiber enhances the warmth of wool and wool has the elasticity to help hold shape. There are many ways the fiber can be utilized, depending on the grade and length.

Drew sells yarn spun from her animal's fiber, along with hats, purses, socks and other finished products, made by herself and others, from a small shop in her home.

"Something can be done with every grade of fiber. Rugs can be made with the coarser, shorter fiber and it's great for shoe inserts," she said.

The Van Buskirks are not crafters, although they did operate a spinning mill on their farm for a number of years. For the past 10 years, all their raw fiber has been purchased by a company from outside of Maine for approximately \$15 per pound.

A CLOSER LOOK

For more information on alpacas, contact Pamelamas at www.pamelamas.com or call 985-7215; Lightfoot Farms, www.lightfootfarms.com or call 985-7629; or see www.mainealpacaassociation.com.

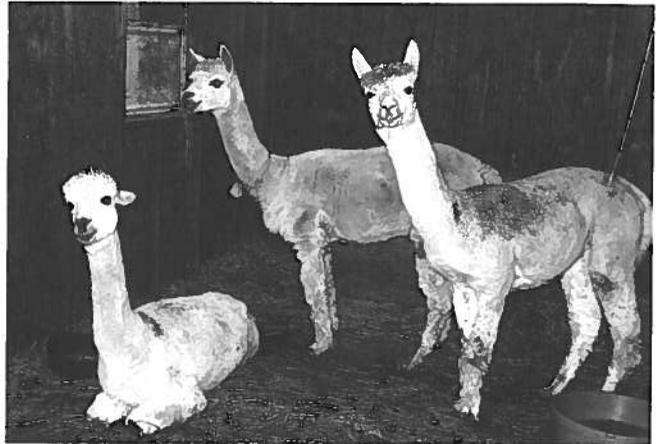


Purses, yarn and other products made from alpaca fiber.

Staff photos Faith Gillman

Any processing of the fiber, from cleaning to spinning to knitting, makes it more valuable. Drew bags cleaned, sorted fiber ready for spinning that, depending on grade, can go for \$5 or more an ounce. Fiber can sell for as much as \$10 an ounce when used for finished goods.

Alpacas are also raised to breed. In the mid-1990s, the animals were often seen as an investment. It was a breeder's market, with



The elder statesman of Pam Drew's alpaca herd, Charlie, center, in the orange ribbon, with his buddies.



The "girls" in the barn at Pamelamas.

good-quality females going for \$30,000 or more. Top-of-the-line males could command \$250,000. Times have changed. The economic downturn impacted everyone, including the alpaca market.

"At one time, we did not sell any crias for under \$25,000 - we have top-of-the-line animals. Now they would go for \$2,500," Van Buskirk, who is not breeding now, said. "You can buy a good female now for about \$1,000."

But for Drew and the Van Buskirks, the main reason to raise alpacas is for love of the animals.

"[Alpacas] help you slow down, take time to observe nature and animal behavior. But it is

a herd of animals and takes work, especially if you have a job on top," said Drew, who works full time at Kennebunk Savings Bank. "But it is rewarding. They are all individuals, all have their own quirks and yes, they all have names. I love getting up in the morning and going out, smelling the hay, taking care of them."

Doris Van Buskirk loves talking alpaca. She and her husband have run seminars, led tours, and provided education on the care of the animals and their fiber.

"Alpacas are a wonderful animal to be around, to show, to raise. They are gentle, pretty and all in all remarkable creatures," she said, "It's a labor of love." ■