

Recommended Alpaca Breeders Best Practices

Alpacas are native to South America and were imported to the United States beginning in the early 1980's through 1998. Raising alpacas in the United States requires an understanding of what makes this livestock unique, and a willingness to learn how to properly care for alpacas and create an environment for their safety and survival.

1. **Alpacas are herd animals.** Any alpaca, whether it is a fiber pet or breeding stock, should not be sold by itself unless the purchaser already has alpacas. A solo animal will likely become depressed, refuse to eat, "wither away" and die. Alpacas do best when sold in groups of two or three. As a new breeder, you will soon discover the more alpacas you have, the more the dynamics of the herd come into play. Alpaca herds are best managed in small groups of the same sex and close in age and size.
2. **Responsible Breeders educate their client.** For new people starting in the alpaca industry it is important to purchase alpacas from Breeders that are willing to educate you about the alpaca industry. A good Breeder will guide their new customer through the initial steps of buying, raising, and caring for their alpacas, setting up their farm, and starting their business, because their customer's success in this industry reinforces their own success. Breeders should provide written contracts for sales and breeding transactions. First time buyers should seek an established Breeder who plans to stay in the business and be around to offer support after the sale.
3. **Breeders must provide their alpacas with proper nutrition.** This includes hay that is mostly orchard grass, plus grain and minerals formulated specifically for alpacas. Mineral supplements are critical to alpacas as the soil in Michigan and much of the U.S. doesn't contain the proper balance of selenium and other elements needed.
4. **Breeders must provide proper vaccinations and parasite control for their alpacas.** Breeders must work with their veterinarian to establish a program that works for their farm and their location. There are books and DVDs devoted to the care and management of alpacas to assist in establishing an effective program for your farm.
5. **Breeders should keep accurate and up-to-date health records.** These records assist you and your vet when an issue comes up – knowing the alpaca's history can help with diagnosis. There are forms and computer programs available on the internet to assist in organizing herd health records. Breeders and their vets rely on records to manage the herd, keep animal health care costs lower, and provide accurate history of an animal when sold. Alpacas can be insured for mortality and these records are essential when filing a claim.
6. **Breeders need to manage their alpacas' environment.** Breeders need to be knowledgeable in which species of grass to grow and poisonous plants to avoid. Make sure weed control and fertilizers are safe for this breed of livestock as some chemicals safe for other livestock are fatal to alpacas. Your local extension office can assist with pasture management. Alpacas should not share pastures with other livestock, mainly for parasite control and the safety of the alpacas. Pastures should be cleared of burdock and other weeds that stick to fine fiber.
7. **Breeders should maintain clean facilities through manure management.** This practice includes manure removal from pastures, barns and paddocks, composting techniques, and following state and federal guidelines on runoff. Alpaca manure is a by-product that makes excellent natural fertilizer or can be used for bio-fuel. Their pellet-like droppings are PH balanced offering a natural, slow release, low odor fertilizer.
8. **Breeders must provide adequate shelter for weather conditions.** For winter weather, proper shelter from wind and snow is required. In summer the combination of humidity and heat can stress and overheat an alpaca resulting in death. Adequate water and shade are required. Fans are also recommended inside barns to improve airflow and cooling. Alpacas also like to be sprayed with water to cool off in hot weather. Owners should only spray the belly, chest and legs – spraying the back without soaking to the skin can cause overheating as fiber that is wet on the surface only traps air and will cause the body to overheat.
9. **Breeders are responsible for annual shearing of their alpacas.** Alpacas are fiber producing animals and need to be shorn typically around mid-spring to early summer in Michigan. Lack of shearing can cause heat stress, sterility in males, and result in death. Fiber is a source of income for the breeder – shearing should be viewed as annual harvesting and the care and nutrition of the alpacas designed to maximize healthy fiber production.
10. **Breeders need a basic understanding of genetics.** Breeders need to be educated on the genetics of breeding for different colors to avoid producing negative recessive traits. Beyond breeding for color, genetics play an important role in optimum fiber production, alongside providing proper nutrition, health care and a relatively stress-free environment for the alpacas.