

Pasture Considerations

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Probably the most important aspect of good care and management of llamas (llamas and alpacas are referred to as “llamas”...with one “L”) is their pasture, its layout, and maintenance. One of the first planning decisions to make is how many alpacas you expect to have and whether your current farm has enough available pasture to handle them. Most breeders will tell you that you can pasture 5–10 alpacas/acre. Ten are only realistic if you have outstanding pasture with fast growing forage varieties, use rotational grazing, and are able to provide regular irrigation. Rotational grazing requires the use of interior fence lines and multiple gates to allow you to move the herd from one pasture to another so the previous pasture can be allowed to grow without grazing. Five alpacas per acre is more reasonable and that, to some degree, is determined by where you live. In many Canadian areas, the ground stays frozen until at least early April so forage doesn't reach grazing height until usually mid-May or later. By mid-October the days are short and the temperature has dropped so much that forage growth has almost stopped. In other words, plan on feeding hay for six months out of the year.

Proper layout of your available land increases efficiency reduces cost as well as reducing your daily labor input—this is one of many services we can provide. You need to consider that you'll require at least 2 fenced pastures: one for males and one for females, with a means of getting the respective sexes to their pastures. Ideally, you want at least 3 as weanlings should really have their own so they are not competing with adults; 4 allows male and female weanlings to be separated. Of course, the more pastures you have, the more fence expense as well. Portable fencing can be employed to break larger pastures into smaller ones for this or rotational purposes at lower cost than fixed fencing.

The forage varieties you plant are extremely important. The types you select should be determined by your area as well as palatability to llamas. Your local Agricultural Service can tell you what types do best in your area. Get to know your agent well—they are an invaluable source of information. Your agent will probably recommend doing soil testing twice a year to determine what soil amendments your particular pastures will require. Tests are inexpensive and it's wise to test each pasture individually as topography affects soil nutrition. Hilly areas experience rain runoff and thus nutrient leaching while low lying areas receive that runoff which means they require fewer amendments. Nearby alpaca or llama breeders can tell you the forage types their animals prefer. We at Kelowna Alpaca Farm have chosen to plant primarily orchard grass with a small percentage of alfalfa. We have found clover mixes too invasive and will choke out the grasses.

In our area where the soil is very sandy and heavy with clay we need to dramatically improve the organic properties. All “poop” that is collected is designated to an area slated for improvement that year. We spread it thinly, disc it in and then seed with oats, buckwheat, and alfalfa allowing it to grow to about 6–8 inches. Once it reaches the desired height, we then disc it in again, let it “rest” for 2 weeks and then top seed with

orchard grass for it's final seeding. This method has proven to be highly successful for us.

In general, a mix of several grasses and a legume (legumes like clover and alfalfa are higher in protein and “fix” or put nitrogen back into the soil) is usually best. Timothy grasses, orchard grasses, certain fescues, ladino (or white) clover, and alfalfa are the typical choices. Avoid rye grasses in general—they carry endophytes (bacteria) which can cause “staggers” which is a condition that looks like it sounds. It affects the central nervous system temporarily unless the rye is not removed in which case it can become permanent or fatal. There are “endophyte free” varieties but given so many other choices I see no reason to recommend them. Some regions have suitable mixes prebagged; in other areas you may have to mix your own. Keep in mind that types like alfalfa require periodic reseeding while others like clover can be invasive; use small quantities of invasive types relative to slower growing varieties.

If you have existing pastures with the right varieties you're in luck. If not, you may be faced with raking and over seeding or even plowing and replanting if the wrong types are present. If you don't already have tractors, plows, rakes, mowers, etc., there is usually a farmer nearby you can hire to do this work for you—get to know them irrelevant of what they grow or ranch as they are usually another great source of information. You also need to plan on regular maintenance of your pastures as well. In most areas you'll need to fertilize in the spring and fall. Some areas require liming to sweeten the soil if irrigation is used or rainfall is high. Alpacas will not eat pasture when it gets more than 6–8 inches high (they must think something is hiding in it to get them) so unless you are intensively grazing or in a slow growth area, you'll also need to mow on a regular basis.

Finally, you should do a forage analysis of your pastures on a regular basis. We do it at least once per year. Again, consult with your local agricultural agent or nearby college for local testing resources. An analysis will give you information like % protein, fiber TDN (total dietary nutrition) which will affect how you supplement your animals feeding with grain, minerals, and other nutritional supplements. In the Okanagan, for example, there is very little selenium in the soil so there is very little in the forage. Selenium is critical for good health (although like most minerals toxic if over fed) so breeders in this area use a mineral supplement high in selenium.

Analysis of hay should also be done for the same reasons. Some hay dealers will pretest their hay and can readily provide printed results from a reliable laboratory. If not, require a written contract that includes a clause that states you will have the hay tested and that it may be returned if it does not meet pre-agreed upon dietary requirements. Most hay dealers know their hay so if you tell them you need a certain protein level, fiber level, and type (for palatability), they usually can match the right hay to your needs.

A serious note: if possible, invite your local agricultural agent to visit your farm and walk the pastures with you. This is a

free service. Ask them to take note of the weeds and any trees growing in your pasture. They can point out those that are toxic to livestock and make recommendations for their eradication. That beautiful cherry tree in the middle of your pasture is aesthetically pleasing and provides shade for the alpacas (always desirable), but the dried old leaves on the ground may be toxic. Likewise, rhododendron, milkweed, most yews, etc. are deadly. In general, a well fed lama will not browse on toxic plants, trees or shrubs—but cria are always chewing on everything they find. Eradicate such dangers or if a favorite plant, fence it off.

As with all other aspects of alpaca care and management, good planning beforehand will make your life easier, your lamas happier and healthier—and your business more profitable.