

Shelters

By Boyd & Kelly Cumming

The environment your alpacas live in is critical to their health and well being. Their needs in terms of shelter and pasture space are based upon the maximum anticipated herd size and your pocketbook. You can certainly start small in terms of shelter and pasture, but like with any construction, it's less expensive to build more up front than to add on or build more later. Take some time to seriously consider your long term goals if your property does not have existing facilities and you intend to build. If planning to house only a couple of pets for your family pleasure, a simple 3 sided shelter is probably the most economical but if at all possible, try to incorporate a power and water source.

In mild weather areas, three sided shelters may be all that you need — the open side should always point away from the prevailing weather. For those in more severe winter weather areas, barns are necessary. If you have an existing barn that was used for livestock, it probably will require some retrofitting. Horse stalls can make good breeding pens but their sidewall height prevents the alpacas from seeing each other which is critical for the sense of company that they need to be happy. Dairy barns usually have cement floors (good for toenails but cold and hard on legs), urine sluices and pipelines all of which are unsuitable for alpacas. The ideal barn is one that is entirely open allowing the use of lightweight, portable and inexpensive corral panels that allow you to quickly change the size and configuration of individual stall areas (for males, weanlings, females etc.). Separate rooms for feed and grain and veterinary work (which can double as office/birth watch space) are nice additions.

If you are faced with building a new barn, the cost can vary dramatically depending upon the type of barn you desire. Traditional Style or Midwest Style post and beam barns are beautiful and expensive. Modern pole barns are open and expansive and far less expensive. Unfortunately, they don't have the aesthetic appeal of the traditional designs. There are several companies, however, who offer traditional barn designs in "kit" form which literally are intended to be assembled by you and a few friends or a contractor at significantly lower cost. You will still probably need contractors to lay foundation, install plumbing and electrical. It is well worth the time to take a look at barns built by other breeders and find out from them what they would have done differently if they were to start again. One thing to keep in mind is the added value to your property that a well built shelter can offer to prospective buyers in the future as opposed to a bare bones and slapped together shelter.

Finally, a new approach is being offered by several companies using "greenhouse" style barns. They use a metal tubular frame and heavy opaque or semi-opaque plastic coverings and cost about 1/3 that of traditional barns. The manufacturers correctly point out that this style increases natural light inside

reducing electrical bills and improving animal health. Sunlight is the primary source of Vitamin D for all animals and its presence reduces the growth of undesirable bacteria. Greenhouse barns also improve natural airflow (also reducing bacterial growth) which means they are cooler in summer and warmer in winter (due to the solar heating effect) than conventional barns. Dairy farmers report significantly increased milk production in these barns. Greenhouse barns are anything but traditional in appearance — some like them, some don't.

If you need help retrofitting an existing barn, we can be of help. No matter who designs or retrofits your barn, overbuild in terms of electrical, plumbing, and lighting. You never know where power or water may be needed. If you've never lugged 5 gallon pails of water or pulled hundreds of feet of hose to fill troughs you won't appreciate the joys of things like automatic waterers. Also consider running telephone lines and even coaxial cable for use with closed circuit TV cameras.

Over the years it often seemed like we spent more time in the barn than the house. If we had it to do over again, we would include an enclosed, heated office with telephone and a computer networked back to the main one in the house to make life a lot easier. Closed circuit TV cameras (which are not expensive anymore) can be digitally "upconverted" and sent to all of the TV's in your house (if the house is wired for cable distribution) and viewed on an unused channel. This is another level of security and particularly nice when on birth watch with an expectant female. Remember, unlike other animals their gestation period is variable which means a birth watch can run 2 weeks before the expected due date to well over a month late. Running to the barn all the time gets very old.