

Tips For Maximizing Your Alpaca Fiber Harvest

By Dianna Jodran

For some alpaca ranchers, fiber is the primary product. For others, breeding and selling alpacas is the primary product and fiber is secondary. Either way, all alpaca ranchers will reap a harvest of raw alpaca fiber every year. That raw fiber has the potential to add to the bottom-line of your alpaca business operation. This article discusses ways you can maximize the potential income from your fiber harvest...from breeding decisions to preparing for processing.

What are your fiber production goals?

The first step in maximizing your alpaca fiber harvest is to know what outcomes you want. The quality of the fiber your alpacas produce is the direct result of your buying and/or breeding decisions. Do you have specific goals for your fiber production? Are you breeding for fineness, density, staple length, uniformity, consistency in color, etc? Do you know and understand the value gained from some of the tools available to you as a fiber producer? Do you understand how to use the information in a histogram to make breeding decisions that will improve the quality of the fiber individual alpacas produce? Do you research the progeny of the herdsires you select to see how their "stats" hold-up over time? Do you do the same for your production dams? Do you look to these "stats" or show results, or both, to determine your breeding decisions?

What are your pre-shearing practices?

Do you keep your pastures clean and free of debris and stickers year round? Do you use feeders that minimize the amount of loose hay that creates the "birds nest" affect at the crook of the neck area? Do you provide good nutrition leading to healthy fiber? Do you strive to keep the stress levels to a minimum so you don't experience "tender" fleece? Do you do all you can to ensure your alpacas are sheared when their fleece is dry? If you answered yes to these questions, you have created a good pre-shearing environment for maximum results.

Who does your shearing?

Another critical step in successfully shearing for maximum value, is selecting a knowledgeable and efficient shearer. You want to make sure your shearer understands fiber characteristics well enough to know when the traditional "blanket" area can be expanded, or needs to be reduced, based on the quality of the fiber. Shearers can also identify the fiber for purposes of separation and bagging as it comes off the alpaca. The shearer should strive to keep second cuts (short pieces of fleece caused by going over the same spot twice with the second cut being shorter) to a minimum. These second cuts (nubs) can be seen on the cut side of the fleece and need to be removed before processing.

How do you prepare for shearing day?

Effectively preparing (organizing) for shearing day cannot be over-stated nor over-rated. The larger your herd, the more critical the preparation. If you have ever experienced a disorganized shearing, you know the importance of

pre-planning. Fortunately, preparing for shearing day can be done months or days before the event. Following are some things to think about in preparation for shearing day. It is not all-inclusive and can be modified to meet your individual needs.

Schedule your shearing date well in advance. Exceptional shearers are booked months in advance. In fact, in some cases, the shearers write their own schedules and let their regular customers know when they will be available.

Arrange for help on shearing days. Many ranches work together and exchange "labor" by assisting each other on shearing days. The number of helpers you need depends on how large your herd is, how many days you will be shearing, and if you plan on doing regular herd maintenance (vaccines, toe nails, tooth trimming, etc) at the same time.

Prepare your fiber collection bags before shearing day. Purchase clear plastic trash/garbage bags, create labels for the bags to record alpaca's name and date of shear, and attach the labels to the bags. You will need a minimum of two bags for each alpaca. One for the blanket and one for the neck and britch area.

Schedule a time to prepare your fleece for processing. Experience has shown if you don't schedule it, preparing your fleece for processing will be put it off or it will not be done at all. If you can get enough help, you can actually arrange for the fiber to go directly from the alpaca to the skirting table. This gets it all done at one time and you don't have to think about it anymore until next year.

Preparing your fleece for processing

Whether you are preparing your fiber to send to a mini-mill or one of the fiber cooperatives or pools, there are certain steps you can take to help ensure you receive maximum return on your raw fiber. Whether you do it yourself, or expect the processor to do it for you (which will add to the expense of processing), your fiber needs to be skirted, cleaned, sorted, and graded.

Skirting is the process of removing undesirable fiber from the edges of the blanket. Generally, this fiber is easy to spot when the blanket is placed cut side down and spread flat on the skirting table. It is noticeably different in quality and characteristics from the blanket. This fiber is usually described as being too hairy and is thicker, straighter, and coarser than the other fiber. To remove the fiber, grasp the fiber you wish to remove between your thumb and index finger and pull. You will need to apply pressure with your other hand against the blanket to keep from pulling the usable fiber from the blanket.

It is during the skirting process that any "second cuts" are removed. The second cuts are easily seen when the blanket is flipped and the cut side is exposed. Looking across the blanket, the second cuts will look like little nubs of fiber.

Hint: to ensure removal of all of the second cuts, take an index

card or other stiff piece of paper and run it across the cut side of the blanket. The second cuts will come to the surface and stick to the paper.

Beware of the "Terrible Toos" identified by former AFCNA Board Member Starr Cash who has graciously given her permission for this collection to be used by anyone promoting effective fiber preparation. The "Terrible Toos" are the most common reasons certain fiber is labeled as having no commercial value (NCV). NCV fiber is just what it says, of no value to the processor meaning no value to you as the producer. Most of the "Terrible Toos" can be eliminated during the skirting process.

The "Terrible Toos" include fiber that is:

- too short—less than 1.5"
- too long—more than 7.5"
- too tender—take a few strands and holding on to the ends, quickly try to pull it apart by snapping (if the fiber breaks, it is too tender)
- too stained—mostly a problem with whites
- too full of vegetable matter (VM) or other contamination (feels "crunchy" when you grab a handful of fiber and squeeze)
- too matted
- too molded—usually happens when fleece is wet or damp when bagged
- too buggy—infested with moths or other insects
- too hairy—topknots, tails, and lower leg hair, excess guard hair

Why is it so important to take care of the "Terrible Toos" before sending your fiber for processing? Well if you don't, the processor will have to because any of those things included in the list can play havoc with the processing equipment. There are a few other things to consider too. Generally, freight charges are determined by weight and there is no sense paying for something that is going to be discarded. Depending on the processor, you may be charged by incoming weight instead of outgoing so again, why pay for something that will be discarded. Another important consideration for the future is that in handling and examining the fiber as it comes off your alpacas you will gain a greater understanding of the actual quality of the fiber being produced by your individual alpacas and your herd as a whole.

The alpaca industry is beginning to experience a shift in focus from strictly breeding and selling to explore new ways, and expand existing ways, to grow the fiber industry. Current economic conditions have shown to be an incentive for many breeders to take a closer look at the fiber end of the business.

Our alpacas will continue producing an annual harvest of incomparable fiber. It is up to each of us to promote "the fiber of the Gods" by getting it into the hands of the consumer. That is the only way we can build the future fiber industry.