



## Guidelines for choosing your first alpacas

### 1. Decide on your objectives

It is important to research alpacas before you decide what to buy. Your objectives will determine the type, sex and possibly the colour of alpacas to choose.

Join British Alpaca Society (BAS) and there will be information, and advice available.

People often buy alpacas as pets, as guards for sheep or as producers of fleece for home use in spinning. In these cases the best choice would be geldings (castrated males). They will happily settle in groups of two or three and provide fleece each year as well as being the source of much enjoyment for all the family without a huge investment.

If you want to establish a breeding herd and have the added interest of caring for the young alpacas (called crias) then you should buy a minimum of two pregnant females with say, two geldings for company.

Alpacas are herd animals and must never be kept on their own. Females need the company of other females and should never be kept singly.

You may wish to buy breeding males (studs) but this is not necessary to start with as you can use the services of visiting males or take your females to other herds for mating.

### 2. Your land and facilities.

Before buying alpacas you need to be sure you have the right facilities for keeping them.

Alpacas can be stocked at 5 - 6 per acre of pasture but there should if possible be a minimum of two separate paddocks so that the herd can be rotated and the land can be rested at regular intervals. Paddocks should be well - fenced up to a height of four feet with either close rails or pig/sheep netting. No barbed wire should be used.

If you intend breeding then you will need a paddock completely separate from the rest of the land where your crias can be weaned out of sight and smell from their mothers. Entire males should also be kept separate from females from about the age of nine months.

You will need shelter from bad weather and for poorly or premature alpacas and somewhere to store hay and feed that is dry. You need easy access to fresh drinking water.

Alpacas can be kept with other animals and are often very happy with sheep or donkeys and with horses or cattle provided both species have time to get used to each other and are seen to live together without any aggression.

### 3. Where to buy your alpacas

The BAS website shows a list of reputable breeders and you should visit a cross section before deciding where to source your first alpacas. You will find there are different approaches to breeding and different services and advice available.

You will also find herds advertising on the internet and in livestock, country or small-holding magazines.

Make sure the breeder is a member of BAS. BAS has a Code of Conduct for the Sale of Camelids which protects the alpacas and the buyers.

Ask what experience the breeder has and what training and support he can offer pre-purchase and after you have bought your alpacas. Zarza offers a comprehensive Training Scheme.

There are often alpaca auctions advertised that are open to the public. Never buy an alpaca from auction until you are confident you know what to look for and until you have met the breeder and gained a full history of the alpaca. If in doubt ask for advice from a reputable breeder. At Zarza Hilary Shenton selects alpacas or many breeders.

#### 4. Choosing your alpacas

There are two types of alpaca; the huacaya and the suri.

Choose alpacas that look good to the eye. They should have straight legs when viewed from the front and behind and have a balanced body shape. The fleece should be evenly textured over the whole of the blanket area with good coverage on the legs. The fleeces on suris and huacayas are completely different and the breeder will explain the features of each.

They should look bright and alert.

Breeding males should have even-sized testicles. Breeding females should be checked for normal appearance of the perineum as hermaphrodites are known to occur in alpacas.

Ask the breeder to show you the relevant registration certificates and a medical and breeding history. Ask him to discuss the positive points of each alpaca as well as any known faults in conformation, fleece or temperament.

If pregnant the breeders should be able to produce a service/mating certificate and details of the sire. Ask to see offspring of the pregnant female or breeding male so you will know the likely quality of future crias.

Ask if the alpaca is halter or lead trained as they will then be easier to handle.

Look at the colours available and decide upon your preference. Generally speaking there is no premium value on any particular colour. Some breeders try to build their herds of specific colours. Multi-coloured (pinto) alpacas are loved by hand spinners as they can blend their own shades. It is all down to personal preference and, as with humans, can be quite difficult to predict in future generations.

Some new owners prefer to have geldings to start with so they can learn how to handle and look after them and then move on to breeding alpacas later.

There are many ways to get started in alpacas and much advice available. Whichever you choose you will have many years ahead of you to enjoy these intelligent, sensitive yet productive animals.