



Could alpacas be a good fit for your property?

Alpacas, which are closely related to llamas but much smaller, are gaining popularity with youth and rural residents.

If managed well, they can generate significant income with very little natural resource impact.

A little bit of research can help you determine if this tough animal from the high Andes is a good fit for your place.

Prized for fiber

Alpacas were bred specifically for fiber production and not intended to be pack animals as much as llamas. Mature alpacas are usually about 36 inches tall at the withers and weigh 100-175 pounds. Suri and Huacaya are the two most common breeds. Both originated in the high elevations of South America. Suri have silky, graceful fleece that drapes down their bodies, while

Huacaya are more common in United States, with a crimped and fluffy fleece giving the appearance of a teddy bear.

Alpaca fiber is lighter, stronger, warmer, more resilient and gentler on skin than most other species. The fiber blends well with other animal species' fiber and is usually considered hypoallergenic. Alpaca fibers contain no lanolin. This means they do not have to be de-greased like traditional wool before spinning. All of this and the silky feel make alpaca fiber more valuable by about 200 percent compared to fine sheep wool. Alpacas usually live 15-20 years, which can make them a good investment.

Alpacas can cost from \$400-\$100,000 per adult depending on origin, registry, age, and breeding. Managing 20-40 alpacas on 40-80 acres of rough ground can be just as

big an investment and have a similar income potential as a 300-cow ranch.

Tough constitution, gentle demeanor

Alpacas developed at high elevations and cold temperatures. They are well-adapted to cold temperatures but need to be sheared early in the year if living in hot and humid conditions. Shade and shelter allow animals to adjust for hot temperatures.

If handled correctly, alpaca become very attached to their managers and are easy to work with. If encountering strangers or risk, they tend to lay their ears back, tense their jaw, and mew while stomping their front feet. When stressed, their nose and lips also crinkle up. These warning actions may precede them spitting at you. These usually quiet animals can issue a call when distressed. There is an exception: the males often "orgle" with a throat noise to attract females during breeding.

Forage preferences

Alpacas most often consume forbs and low quality grasses. Their ability to travel across rough ground lets them utilize rocky and marginal pastures more effectively than cattle or sheep. They only eat about 1.5 percent of their body weight each day. This means a 150-pound adult will only consume 2.25 pounds of forage each day. In cow terms, each 1,200-pound cow equals the grazing of 16 alpacas.

Grass hay is better for the species than alfalfa. An alpaca has one multi-compartment stomach. By feeding grass hay similar to



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An alpaca, prior to shearing, investigates natural-colored alpaca wool yarn.

their evolutionary forage, the animals stay on a level nutritional plain for fiber continuity and avoid chances of bloat and excess protein intake. In addition, the high levels of phosphorus in alfalfa can bind up calcium in the dietary system, inhibiting young animal growth and weakening bones in older animals.

They have a short tongue, front top incisor teeth for gripping feed, and molars in the back for chewing. They will eat and then rest to chew cud similar to cows. Their short tongue and limited front teeth also limit the amount of damage they can do to a landscape. Alpacas require clean water at all times.

Alpaca offspring, called "cria," are usually born at 15-19 pounds during daylight. They will nurse for about six months until weaned. Alpacas come in 16 colors with different hues and markings.

Predators a challenge

Since alpacas are not native to the region, both the predators and poisonous plants are significant management challenges. Alpacas are very agile, intelligent, and clean. They prefer to live in herds and can be trained for agility courses like sporting dogs. Their cleanliness leads to another trait. They usually deposit their feces in one or more locations in each pasture. This makes it easy to manage, but the smell and the fact these long-necked livestock return to the pile at regular intervals generates a "predator magnet." Alpacas are prey for coyotes, wolves, dogs, bears, and mountain lions.

Some threats by predators are governed by their nature: bears are not a problem during most winter months due to hibernation, but cougars are a threat year-round. Extension has worked with alpaca

producers in the Rocky Mountain Region extensively on predator management and plant poisonings.

Mountain lions will return repeatedly to areas near manure piles, and the alpaca are easy prey as they drift in daily. Hunting, fencing, and closing animals up during risk periods are some of the only effective options.

For more information, contact your local UW Extension office, the Alpaca Breeders of the Rockies (<https://alpacabreeders.org/>), or me. My contact information is below. I had the opportunity to work with alpaca producers for more than a decade.

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