

Purchasing the Perfect 'Paca

Whether you are already experiencing the joy of alpaca farming, or just contemplating it, here are some opinions that we hope provide you with food for thought when purchasing an alpaca. Our article is not written with any particular expertise, but rather as a result of 12 years of alpaca farming experience.

Prior to purchase it is imperative to establish your goals. Any goals are legitimate, but you must have them, otherwise you will not have a clue if the alpaca is suitable for you or not. Are you looking for pets, guardians or breeders? If you want breeders are you going for quality or quantity? Do you want to breed for a specific color or micron? And so on. Of course there is no such beast as the perfect alpaca, unfortunately! This is why goals are so important. Once they are clarified you can develop a plan that will lead you to those goals and only then will you begin to narrow down the type of alpaca you need to purchase to get you started on that journey.

Now you have some idea of the alpaca you want to purchase. If you have not heard of the 3 f's we would like to introduce you to them. There is a school of thought that says when assessing any fibre producing livestock these 3 f's are key indicators to look at. We agree. They are ridiculous in their simplicity, but it is amazing how often they, or at least one of them, are ignored.

Firstly, an alpaca must have a frame that is correct so it will be able to do the job you ask of it. Whether it is to be a wether as a herd protector, a stud male, a breeding female or even a pet; an alpaca's life can be quite demanding. It may need to roam huge distances to protect his mob of ewes and lambs, cover hundreds of females or be required to produce viable cria as frequently as possible. Some particular things we look for are sound straight legs and a good mouth. The importance of legs is self evident, and the value of a good mouth should not be overlooked. It sounds terribly basic, but we have seen alpaca with such poor mouths that they cannot feed properly and therefore cannot maintain sufficient condition to function, let alone thrive. The worst case scenario is death, the best poor performance. The teeth must be well aligned with the dental pad. There are other physical aspects to look at, such as genetic defects like fused ears, less or more than two toes, a bent tail, etc. If you are not confident in assessing an alpaca yourself it is best to get a vet to provide a certificate of good health (which can include a pregnancy assessment) as a condition of purchase. This may be required for insurance in any event. Usually these certificates will only be provided when purchasing a stud quality alpaca. The Australian Alpaca Association is also a good source of information. In addition to their website various educational aids are available.

Secondly, if the alpaca is to be used for breeding it must have good fertility, and be sold with a fertility guarantee. Many factors can affect fertility. It is heritable, so it is worth checking out the family history on both sides as well of course as the history of the alpaca itself (if it is old enough to have a history). Any reputable breeder will be able to help you ascertain this history. Fertility is also influenced significantly by health and nutrition so the management of the alpaca should be researched, as well as suggested husbandry practices of the region. For example in our area we need to supplement our alpaca with selenium, vitamin B12 and vitamin D. Local veterinarians can assist with advice, as well as the farmers and graziers in the district. Neighbors are a great source of information on livestock, pastures and all sorts of local matters. Any livestock, including alpaca, can only be as productive as you allow them to be with your management and husbandry.

Thirdly, and if the alpaca is used for breeding or fleece production, it must have a fleece that is consistent with your goals. This does not automatically mean the fleece must be above average. A robust fertile breeder with a good frame and a 25 micron fleece is an economically more viable option than a runt who has difficulty breeding with a superfine fleece. Fleece is of course a topic that volumes has been written about, but suffice it to say you need to be provided with recent fleece statistics on any animal you are looking to purchase, except perhaps in the case of a guard alpaca. We would also suggest requesting the statistics of the whole family involved. Mandatory fleece testing is a standard component in the management of any fibre producing industry. These fleece statistics can be confusing to interpret, especially if this is your first foray into the world of fleece. The statistic we take the most notice of is the spin fineness; because it represents what you feel when you touch alpaca and how that alpaca's fleece will process. It is measured in microns, and we explain it as the average micron of the sample adjusted to take account of the standard deviation which measures the consistency of the sample in microns. So for example a very uniform sample may have lower spin fineness than the average micron – it will handle more softly due to its uniformity. Another

important point to note is the bodily condition of the alpaca. By starving a fibre producing animal you can reduce its micron. It is often referred to as starvation fineness, and it does not represent the genetic micron of the alpaca. Again, if you are not confident in assessing these matters enlist help. There are numerous articles in past conference proceedings and other publications that are available through the Australian Alpaca Association.

By now you should get the picture! Obviously alpaca are bred primarily for their fleece, but to ignore the value of a good frame and fertility potentially renders the fleece aspect irrelevant. We can't tell you the number of times we hear a comment along the lines of "my best female is 18 microns but I can't get her to breed" – one thing is clear, she is not that person's best female until she is proven, because at that point she is simply an expensive pet. This is why fertility guarantees are important. As an example we have one 24 micron female who passes all the selection criteria herself and who produces with monotonous regularity stud quality offspring, as measured by any standard. She is truly elite, and that type of alpaca is the ideal we should all be striving for.

Once we are past the 3 f's we move on to assessing the next two factors that are related in some degree. Pedigree and bloodlines. It is important to know and assess the alpaca's pedigree if it is to be used as breeding stock. So how do you objectively assess this? A really good way is to look at show results of that bloodline over time. Isolated show results are meaningless. Who was the judge? What was the competition? Etc. However, consistency over time speaks volumes. If a bloodline has the runs on the board year after year at strong shows with good competition it is a very strong indication of the value of that bloodline. You often hear the comments that show results are subjective and therefore of no use. Again, that is true if you are looking at one off results, but if results over the years are analyzed they become a good source of objective data. Assessing the bloodlines involved is not just about show results. For example, not all breeders may have the opportunity to show their stock. Also look at the objective data the stud can provide on the bloodlines. It is standard management to have data on one's whole herd and any reputable breeder will readily make that information available.

A mate of ours has a good way of going about assessing an alpaca. She gets a piece of butchers paper for any alpaca she is interested in. On it she creates the whole story – pedigree, colours, fleece, performance both in terms of cria production and show results – this way she can assess how it may (or may not!) fit into her breeding program and therefore whether it will move her closer to her goals.

Last, but not least, it is worth asking around and shopping around. Any reputable stud will be more than happy to help you and to provide you with any information you request.

In summary, when assessing an alpaca we think the following is a sound checklist:

- Establish your goals
- Look at the 3 f's –
 - Frame
 - Fertility
 - Fleece
- Know and research the pedigree
- Examine the show record and objective data of the bloodlines involved
- Research the stud you are looking to deal with – they should be happy to provide you with any information requested

A final word. Alpaca ownership can be extremely rewarding. Especially so if you are happy with your alpaca purchase! So don't ignore your personal feelings. There are plenty of alpaca around, so make sure your purchases suit YOU – as someone recently said to us when purchasing a young female "I picked her out because she 'spoke' to me!"

Happy shopping!

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