

Soft, Strong, Warm, Fleece



Alpacas bring value and charm to NC farms

Text and photos by Karen Olson House

After a couple of calls from Teresa, they slowly approach. When they reach her, these two-toed creatures are bunched fuzzily together, weaving slightly, softly humming and staring inquisitively at a visitor. Their bemusing ability to seem, simultaneously, both elegant and geeky only adds to their charm.

Enticingly, each is also very much his or her own. Here at Caraway Alpacas near Asheboro, Ann Poole and Teresa and Mike Johnson acknowledge their charges' individuality with wide smiles. "They are as different as people in looks and temperament," says Ann. "Lars wants you to stay in the pasture with him. Bodie loves glasses and shiny earrings. Rudy will pick with him. And they're all curious about Jonas [a Chihuahua on the farm]."

Kin to camels and llamas, these exotic South American expatriates were first imported to the U.S. in 1984. Their gentle, intelligent nature makes them good farm pets, but they are chiefly raised because of their luxurious fleece. Owners sell it profitably as raw fiber, washed and carded

fiber, and yarns. A smaller number also make and sell finished handmade products.

Alpaca fiber is silky soft, stronger, lighter and warmer than wool. It comes in 22 natural shades and is naturally hypoallergenic. People sensitive to wool can wear alpaca apparel comfortably.

The vast majority of alpacas in the U.S. are registered with Alpaca Registry, Inc., a database containing genealogy, blood typing and ownership records. Importation in the U.S. ceased in 1998 to protect the national herd's quality and value. Since then, the limited supply has fueled ownership interest. Carolina Alpaca Breeders and Owners lists 55 North Carolina member farms, but the actual farm owner count in the state is believed to be at least 70.

There are two breed-types of alpacas: the more common Huacaya (pronounced "wah-KI-ya") and the Suri ("surrey"). Huacayas sport wavy or crimped fleece. Suris' fleece clings in hanging pencil locks.

The cost to buy an alpaca varies widely depending on fleecing, conformation, bloodlines, breeding history, age and gender, as well as the economy. Commonly, prices range from \$500 up to \$25,000. Owners raise their alpacas themselves or place them with established breeders.

A farm alternative

Empty-nesters, families with kids and working professionals are all attracted to ownership. Unlike some beasts of burden, these earth-friendly herd animals have padded feet. They require little acreage, eat grasses and relatively little supplemental hay and confine their droppings to a few places. In addition to income potential and tax advantages, owners often cite enhanced lifestyle as reason for raising these peaceful, amusing creatures.

Ann says after she and her husband Bobby retired, they, along with their daughter Teresa and son-in-law Mike, wanted to do something with family land "that would involve animals but not slaughter." They started with six alpacas in 1997 on two acres cleared by family and friends.



Ann Poole is nuzzled by a Suri male alpaca named Bodie, along with Peanut (right), a Huacaya male, at Caraway Alpacas near Asheboro.

Ann, Teresa and Mike shortened their steep learning curve through veterinarian community college classes and seminars by the Southeastern Alpaca Association and Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association. Ann recalls even their vet, now considered an alpaca specialist, grew with them in understanding alpaca birthing and eating habits.

Today, their 17-acre farm boasts more than 30 alpacas, counting five they are boarding. When they sell an alpaca, they hand the owner “the bible” (a copy of “Alpaca Field Manual” by C. Norman Evans). Teresa also travels to help owners with shots, birthing and grooming. She and Ann, who are Randolph EMC members, mentor high school students in fiber arts and farm maintenance, and lead their alpacas into schools, nursing homes and even libraries for show and tell.

They treat incoming alpacas and house female alpacas and their crias (babies) at their Resource Learning Center, which also displays fiber and finished goods. Bobby Poole is the farm’s weaver and spinner, and his talent shines in the intricate capelets and shawls he creates in the center’s studio. He learned to knit after a hernia operation. “I made a sweater in three days. They threatened to put me in the maternity ward,” he says, chuckling. Those interested in purchasing goods can call for an appointment, or visit the farm’s Open Barn Day, set for Saturday, November 20, 1–3 p.m.

Like the owners at Caraway, Amanda Fitzgerald says she and husband, Brian, wanted to do something fulfilling as a family, something “not hard on the land.” In early 2003, the Surry-Yadkin EMC members launched their Lewisville operation, Credence Farm Alpacas, with three alpacas and no experience.

Today, they raise and sell a range of Suri alpacas, from top Peruvian, Accoyo and Bolivian bloodlines to fiber/pet quality animals, and hang at least 15 award ribbons in their hand-hewn log barn. The couple, who have four young sons and outside work, enjoy their business, but don’t have time to show their animals as they used to. They recently decided to downsize their 22-and-counting alpaca herd.

Amanda, a North Carolina native and former Los Angeles litigator, draws on her law skills in writing sales, breeding and boarding contracts and her computer savvy in researching bloodlines. But as far as raising alpacas day to day, she espouses hands-on learning. For example, at first Amanda and Brian strapped their alpacas in restraints for tricky chores like toenail trimming. Although the straps were comfortably padded, there was struggling on both ends. So they jettisoned the straps and just held their animals, which worked much better. “You can read all the books you want,” says Amanda. “I watched videos. But you just have to do it.”

Served by Randolph EMC:

Caraway Alpacas, Inc
Asheboro, NC 27205
(336) 629-6767
www.carawayalpaca.com

Served by Surry-Yadkin EMC:

Credence Farm Alpacas, LLC
Lewisville, NC 27023
(336) 945-4237
www.credencefarmalpacas.com

Open Farm Days Sept. 25–26

Many North Carolina alpaca farms will be holding Open Farm Days Sept. 25 and/or Sept. 26, including tours, spinning and felting, children’s events and handcrafted items for sale. Credence Farm Alpacas will hold its day Sunday, September 26, 1–3 pm. For other participating farms, visit www.nationalalpacafarmdays.com.



To learn more

Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association (AOBA)
(800) 213-9522
www.AlpacaInfo.com

Alpaca Registry, Inc. (ARI)
(402) 437-8484
www.alpacaregistry.net

Carolina Alpaca Breeders and Owners (CABO)
(803) 548-2757
www.carolinaalpaca.com



Top photo: Gloria (front left) and Blossom (far right) are Huacaya females.

Bottom photo: Most handmade products for sale at Caraway come from the fiber of the farm’s own alpacas.