

Getting Ready For Your Alpacas

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Black Meadow Suris

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At the beginning of 2005 the owners of Alpaca Vista Suris, located in Washington State, decided to expand their farm to include another location in beautiful Spotsylvania County, Virginia. We purchased a 5-acre horse farm complete with fencing, an 8-stall barn, and plenty of open pasture. After we had worked hard at getting the land in shape (see previous article) we stood back and surveyed our domain with pride and joy thinking that we were ready to receive our curious and frolicsome alpacas. Did I happen to mention that I had not actually ever started a farm before much less an alpaca farm? It seems that there is a lot more involved in “alpacaing”, if that is a word, than the theory, “build it and they will come”. After sage advice and council from the “home office”; they were able to supply a seemingly endless list of items that needed to be in place before the alpacas arrived. I learned a few new skills and due to Yankee ingenuity was able to adapt strange products to alpaca use. I have compiled a checklist of what we used in order to ensure that the alpacas arrived with everything that they needed to be safe, happy and productive.

No Climb Fence – While we thought that we had fencing that was strong and secure, there were additional considerations that needed to be taken into account for alpacas. When we purchased the horse farm it had extensive three board fencing complete with gates. It was well laid out and we were confident that the alpacas could be separated and herded in an easy manner. We did not fear that the alpacas would jump over or charge the fencing. One consideration that we forgot was the fact that the fencing was designed to keep the alpaca in but not to keep predators out. An alpaca's greatest defense in times of threat is its ability to run. We had taken that ability away by placing fencing throughout the pasture. In order to reduce the threat of incoming predators we will place no climb fencing around the perimeter of the property. This will keep the curious dogs and other predators out and well as ensuring that smaller cria will not wander under the fencing by accident.



Capture Poles – We assumed that since alpacas were not aggressive that they would be easy to catch. That is not exactly true. Most alpacas will not willingly allow themselves to be handled so they have to be cornered and then either haltered or held gently but firmly around the neck. The trick is to get them cornered. Alpacas are extremely agile and even at 46 years young I do not want to be chasing alpaca around the field. The solution was to have deployed around the pastures capture poles. The poles are used like an extension of your arms to guide the alpacas into a corner so that they can be handled. We use white 10-foot 1 ½ inch PVC pipes to accomplish this. The

size of the poles may depend on how strong you are and how long you have to use them. We actually have *his* and *hers* poles. The *hers* poles are slightly smaller - 10 foot, 1-inch PVC pipes. We also drove two 8-inch nail spikes into the fence posts (one in each post) near the gates and lay the capture poles across them when they are not in use.

Mineral Supplements – There are as many opinions on what type of mineral supplements to use, as there are opinions about the weather. The average alpaca's diet will consist of both forage (grass and hay) as well as mineral supplements. About 20% (.75 lb per day) of a regular full-grown alpaca's diet will include supplements. These are general numbers so your alpaca may eat more or less depending on weight, age, and environment. The key is to have a fresh, ready and continuous supply of supplements available. Depending on the supplement contents you will want to consider storage as well as ordering amounts to ensure it is the freshest possible. Some farms that we talked to use old nonworking freezers to store the supplements but we plan on using galvanized trashcans. Many supplements come in 40 or 50 pound bags and can take as long as three weeks to be ordered and received. So it is a good policy to get to know who in your area provides alpaca supplements and the time schedule for delivery. In some cases you may be able to order from a local larger farm. We plan to order in smaller quantities and more often to ensure that we will keep a fresh supply on hand.



Winter Hay - The average alpaca's diet will consist of both forage and supplements. An average full-grown alpaca will eat about 80% forage (2.25 to 2.5 lbs per day) as a part of their diet. These are general numbers so your alpaca may eat more or less depending on weight, age, and environment. The key is to have a fresh, ready and continuous supply of forage available. This is pretty easy during the spring, summer and fall since the pastures will provide a ready supply of grass. However, as winter approaches the need turns to having an available source of hay. Some farms keep hay available all year long. In the summer, they don't eat too much, usually just at night when they are too lazy to go out into the pasture to eat or they will eat some hay in the shelter area while they are cushed. The first decision that we encountered was whether we should use small square or roll bales. A 5' X 5' roll weighs about 1,450 pounds and the small square bales weigh around 40 to 60 pounds (depending on the type of hay, the density/size of the bale, and water content). Per pound, rolls are cheaper but they are harder to manage and the potential for more waste due to improper handling and storage is greater. I have even seen compressed bales that have two small square bales compressed into the size of one bale. For a smaller number of alpaca, regular small square bales are probably the way to go. So, with that being said, an alpaca should eat a small square bale every 20 days (2.5 lbs X 20 days = 50 lbs). Once that was determined, we checked other area farms to determine how many days they use hay during the winter. We then calculated the amount of hay to buy for the winter. The best time to buy hay is late August and September. This is when farmers are cutting

hay and prices are the most competitive. Unlike the supplements, it is better to buy the hay for the season and I would not over buy more than 10 %. Although hay can last several years, feeding animals dusty hay can potentially cause health issues.

Feeding Buckets or Trays – Two different considerations need to be taken into account feeding alpacas. In the area of supplement feeding, alpacas have taken this to a sport level and can be very competitive among themselves. Alpacas, like other animals, have a pecking order. The more “alpha” alpacas exhibit aggression and try to control access to the feed supplements. So the trick is to distribute the feed in such a way that everyone has a chance to consume the appropriate amounts. This can be accomplished by separating the feeding areas. I have seen separate feed buckets as well as partitioned trays. Our farm in Washington State uses a 10-foot house rain gutter with spacers every 12 inches. Other suggestions include cutting a wide diameter PVC pipe down the middle and tying rope knots every foot or so to separate feed areas. The separated areas will also prevent the alpacas by gobbling all the supplements at once and potentially choking.



Winter forage hay should be ample and provided in such a way that the alpaca do not waste it by dragging onto the ground thus making it unpalatable. There are a number of commercially available feeders that can control hay access thereby making feeding more effective and efficient.

Pooper Scooper – Who would have thought that we would have to clean up after the alpacas. However, removing the feces from the pasture is the best way to reduce bacteria and other unwanted pests that thrive in dung piles. There are different schools of thought when it comes to cleaning the dung pile. We have adopted the mindset that since we feed every day, we clean the poop every day. The cleaning process only takes a couple of minutes and is much better then letting it accumulate for days. A small garden rake and scooper along with a cart will solve this problem. It is important to note that the pooper-scooper cart and equipment should only be used for this purpose and not for hauling hay or for other uses that it would contaminate.



Livestock Scale – A good alpaca scale is worth its weight in gold. It is difficult to see many alpaca illnesses since fiber covers most of their body and alpacas tend to be stoic animals. However, changes in weight can be an early indicator that there is



something going on with the alpaca that needs attention. By weighing the alpacas periodically one can better understand the health of their alpaca. The scale that we will use will also include a shoot and side rails so that we can secure the alpaca in place and can look at the alpaca without having to physically hold them. At that same time, we can also conduct a “body scoring” (check end to end as part of a quick health inspection). The scale will also be essential for monitoring young cria development.



Monitoring – In many cases, alpaca owners use some type of security to watch over their herd. Some use guard dogs, others llamas, and still others electric fences. Alpacas, by their very nature, are very watchful of their environment and have their own language and social order. Alpaca owners come to understand and recognize the sounds that an alpaca will make if they are mad, scared, or content. While all security methods give alpaca owners their own level of comfort, we felt that with the proper fencing that we could rely on the alpacas themselves to alert us if anything out of the ordinary occurred. Our farm in Washington State uses a baby monitor to alert them if anything unusual is occurring in the pasture. The transmitting unit is placed in a protected area next to the pastures and the receiving unit is in their house. If we notice any persistent danger then we will increase our monitoring measures but for now, it seems to work quite well.

Heat Relief – Summers in Virginia can get quite hot and humid. Alpacas can become heat distressed if the sum of ambient temperature and humidity exceeds 150°. One alpaca owner has commented, “Stand outside in a fur coat for a couple of hours in 100 degree heat and then you will know how an alpaca feels.” While alpacas have their own methods of self-regulating their body temperatures it is wise to find ways to reduce the body temperatures and reduce the stress that they feel caused by extreme heat. Heat relief methods that we have heard include:

- Watering down a concrete area;
- A kiddie pool;
- Sand box with a soaker hose about 2 inches below the sand;
- Barn fans;
- Sprinklers; and even
- Air conditioning.

For now, we will stick with barn fans since they are easier to deploy and use as well as easier on the fiber.

Gate Locks – The first time that we see our alpacas trotting down the driveway will be one time too many. Alpacas are curious animals and will certainly take the opportunity to see if the pasture is greener on the other side. Gate locks are an important safety precaution not only for your investment but also for your alpacas. The ones that came with our gates did not seem to be easy to manipulate and use. If that is the case, then it is always a temptation to just



throw the chain over the gate to hold the gate in place rather than locking the gate each time you enter and exit a pasture. There are easy to use gates locks sold separately at farm and hardware stores that should be purchased and used. It will be more expensive than using the chain and clip that routinely come with gates but it is cheaper than chasing an alpaca down the road or discovering a rogue alpaca in a pasture that it shouldn't be in.

Alpaca Tracking Software – One important farm management and sales activity is tracking the health, habits, and events that happen on the farm and with your alpacas. The more organized the record keeping, the easier it is to document the life of your alpacas. This becomes critical not only in being able to better manage your farm but when selling your alpacas. Buyers will want to know as complete a history as possible on the alpaca in question so that they can be comfortable that they are getting a quality animal that has been well cared for. There are many different types of tracking software on the market and some are specifically designed to track alpaca farm activities. Many of the products will offer a free trial period or a demonstration disk. As a beginner, we will be purchasing software specifically designed for alpacas. This will, we hope, guide us better in what activities to document as well as what information we should be collecting over time for marketing, sales, and health and management issues.

Watering Stations – Clean water is essential to alpaca health. It is curious that we have seen a number of alpaca owners try to use the same watering methods used by our horse friends. Alpacas will drink about 1 to 1.5 quarts daily therefore, it is probably a little over kill to use a horse trough for alpacas. Just from a practical perspective, it is hard to manage that much water. We installed watering stations that have a float that automatically refills the container when the water goes below a certain level. The watering stations are available in each pasture and provide the alpaca with a ready supply of fresh, clean water.



Winter Watering Station – Having available water when the temperature drops below freezing can be a challenge. The simplest method would be to transport warm water out to the pastures a couple of times a day. Our previous owners used a heated horse trough for their horses and they indicated that they noticed a severe spike in their electrical bills during the months that they had to heat all that water. For a solution to this dilemma we turned to our aquatic friends and visited the local pet store. We found a submersible aquarium heater, which used only 25 watts of electricity, and will heat about 5 gallons of water. Perfect for alpacas. If there isn't power available in the fields then solar power may be an option to power the heater.



Veterinarian – The time to start looking for a Vet is long before the alpacas arrive because when you need a vet, You Need A Vet! The best place that we found to find out about local vets was asking other area alpaca owners. After you start to know other farms in the area try to schedule a visit when their vet is going to be there. That way you can meet the vet, see them in operation and understand how they may work with you on your farm. However, be considerate of the vet and owner. Vets charge by the hour and asking too many questions may distract the vet and be expensive for the farmer owner. Make an appointment with the vet to visit your farm before the alpacas arrive. This is the perfect time to interview the vet. Don't be shy in asking the rates, their availability, expertise, and specialties. Treat the vet like you would if you were picking out a doctor for your children. It is also a good idea to have a number of vets that you can work with since some have better rates, others have better expertise in certain areas that you may require and not all vets will be available when you need them.

Animal Hospital – If there is a tragic event on the farm, the life that you save may be your alpacas if you can get them help quickly. Like finding a vet, knowing where the closest animal hospital that is familiar with camelids may become important if needed. Setting up an appointment and visiting the hospital will accomplish two objectives. First, you will know how to get there if you ever need to and second, you can meet the staff that may be called upon to work with you in a crisis. Getting to know who they are, how to get a in touch with them, and how to get there quickly may save your alpaca's life.

Medical Kit –At first, we let the vet handle everything. As time went on and we grew more confident in our ability to care for the alpacas we consulted our vet to determine what care we could safely provide to the alpacas. We discovered that there were many medical activities that we could do ourselves with their advice and guidance. I believe that this will evolve over time, as we get more experienced with our alpacas. As we are able to provide more medical care, our medical kit will expand.



First Aid Kit – There are many lists of what should be included in a first aid kit available on the Internet. The key is to have them available when they may be needed. We consulted our vet, and other local farms to determine what they carried in their kits. We went to the hardware store and purchased a toolbox. We then went to various drug, grocery, and hardware stores to stock up on everything on the list. Pre packaged first aid kits are also available but they typically are not as cost effective or have the range of supplies that you will need on an ongoing basis.

Transportation – Once the alpacas are on the farm you may never envision them leaving. However, emergency trips to the animal hospital, alpaca shows, and breeding may all require moving the alpacas to other locations. The good news is that alpacas travel well. So if you are moving one or two alpacas, then a minivan may suffice. Moving more than one will probably require access or an investment in a trailer. Double axel trailers should be used whenever possible since one blown tire on a single axel trailer

might cause it to tip over. Make sure that you equip the trailer with a temperature/humidity thermometer. During warm weather it is easy to exceed the sum of 150 for temperature plus humidity, and stress the alpacas. With the amount of investment that has been placed in the alpacas, it is wiser to error on the side of caution.

We are sure that we will learn of more items that we should have considered but didn't. We are hoping that we considered the major ones and the rest would certainly become apparent to us as time goes by.

So with all of these items in place, we stood back and surveyed our domain with pride and joy thinking that we were ready to receive our curious and frolicsome alpacas. Did I happen to mention that I had not actually ever started a farm before much less an alpaca farm?

About the Authors:

Renee and Barry Prokop have created and developed Black Meadow Suris to provide a diverse collection of suri alpacas. We have a passion for quality customer service and friendliness. Come experience the power that a small dedicated farm can bring to your breeding program! Services that we provide include long and short term agisting, breeding services, and alpaca sales. We also are opening two stores; one online and the other at the farm. Renee and Barry operate Black Meadow Suris just outside of Fredericksburg, Virginia. Fredericksburg is located in the rolling hills just below the falls of the Rappahannock River and halfway between the two Civil War capitals , Washington, D.C. and Richmond, VA.

Renee, who is no stranger to the farm, will manage the day-to-day operations of Black Meadow Suris. Both Barry and Renee will continue to explore, learn, and communicate better ways that they have found to manage their growing farm.

Both farms enjoy and welcome questions and visits. To find out more about Black Meadow Suris, call us at 703-764-9077; email us at renee@prokops.com or visit us on the web at www.blackmeadowsuris.com