

# *It Takes A Village To Raise An Alpaca*

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*Black Meadow Suris*

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When we first started to think about raising alpacas, I thought that we were going to live a lonely and solitary life. I somehow got the picture of wandering the wind sweep fields, day in and day out, herding alpacas. Once a year I would venture into town to buy the necessary grain to sustain the alpacas for another year. Other than that, and an occasional browse through the internet, who else out there did I have to interact with? I didn't really appreciate that raising alpacas is a little more complex than raising cats and dogs. (Not that I know that much about raising cats or dogs but at least they have been around awhile.) In the first place, we are all still learning about how to care for alpacas. The body of information is constantly changing and updating. Also, what is true in one part of the country may not work as well in another. What works well on a big farm may not work on a small farm. There are so many variables involved on each individual farm that one has to be aware of them all (or as many as they can) in order to make informed decisions. Therefore, if I really wanted to be a part of the growing alpaca industry and be successful on our farm; I needed to become more involved with the people that were helping to shape the industry. As I started to reach out and identify who these people might be, I didn't realize all the people that are necessary to make a farm successful. And it is not just from the aspect of providing specialized care and assistance but also information helpful in making the farm run better.

One of the benefits of talking to a lot of different people is that you can get diverse perspectives on the same subject and can make up your own mind on what will work best on your farm. Many times it comes down to just plain common sense, past experience, trial and error, and/or trusting in the advice that you get. There isn't anyone that I have found that has all of the answers to all of the issues that are out there. One example of this is introducing fiber nutrients into the alpaca diet. It will produce more fiber, with more luster are the manufacturers claims. We paid a little over two dollars a pounds for a bag. Why? We wanted to see for ourselves if it worked. Alpacas owners are divided on the issue. Vets are divided on the issue. For this next year we are going to play with it. We have the fiber from the alpacas that were shorn last year (without the fiber nutrients). The same alpacas will have been on the nutrients for about a year when they will be shorn again. If it works, great, if it doesn't; chalk one up for good marketing. If it was a more serious decision I don't think that we would take such a casual view on the matter. At that point it gets down to who we believe has the best information and can respond the quickest.

As you can see, people matter; especially for a new alpaca owner who may not have the experience to fall back on when a decision needs to be made. So who are all those important people out there that can make a difference between success and failure to an alpaca farm owner? In this last year I started to really understand who my network of

experts out there may be. What made it a little more complex was that there are so many different areas that I needed advice or at least another opinion. From medical, to legal, tax, farm management, marketing, etc. It started to sound like I was running a business!

## **The Business Part**

Many of the people that I needed to get to know were pretty easy. Like any business, you need sound and experienced advice on the mechanics of running a business.

**The Tax Guy/Gal** – Before we started the business we identified a tax advisor that was familiar with farms and how they need to be treated from a tax perspective. What could or could not be expensed, deducted and why. What records needed to be kept and how.

**The Legal Guy/Gal** – One of the reasons for starting an alpaca business is to make money. In order to do that one has to buy and sell alpacas. These typically involve contracts. Either yours or someone else's. Therefore, we found it was a good idea, at least initially, to understand the contract and how to create one of our own. What were our rights and obligations when buying and selling alpacas? In addition, since this is a business, should we have a formal company or a family farm. Another important question to ask is "Can alpacas be raised on my property?" Sometimes the answers surprise even us. Again, we looked for people that were familiar with the farm industry and alpacas in particular.

**The Insurance Guy/Gal** – But I have homeowners insurance, right? While that may be true, one should talk to their homeowner insurance provider about the implications of starting an alpaca farm on the premises. The same rules may not apply and a "farm and ranch policy" may be in your future. Issues like property damage if the alpacas get out or farm visitors getting injured on your property may come into play. Also, alpacas may need insurance too! Alpacas are vastly different then picking a puppy up from the pound. An investment in an alpaca can run from \$25,000 and up. While many owners are comfortable with their alpacas on their own property, there are many cases where alpacas have to be transported to other locations for breeding or shows. There are a number of companies that can insure your alpacas while on your farm and away on visits. We insured our alpacas from the day that they arrived on the farm. The reason that we did so was that we had paid a lot of money for the alpacas and we were just starting out. The loss of even one alpaca at that time would have been devastating to our business. We simply could not afford to leave them uninsured. As we have increased the size of our herd, it has moved from being critical to important. As we continue to grow we may not insure all of our alpacas on our own property but will continue to insure them on the road. In our case, it was a matter of our comfort level.

## **The Farm Part**

While I am thankful for the business experts that I consult, I truly enjoy the farm experts that we interact. They are a wealth of information and stories that continue to delight and inform us.

**Alpaca Owners** – One of the first sparks that ignited our interest in alpacas came from talking to other alpaca owners. They seemed so passionate about their alpacas that we naturally wanted to be a part of it all. We were lucky in that my father had started an alpaca farm called *Alpaca Vista Suris* back in 1998 in Washington State. So I had a built in source of knowledge and information. This really jump started our new farm (located in Virginia) because we were able to take much of the information that they had had to learn the hard way and directly apply it to our new farm. Through them we also got introduced to other farms that were more than willing to assist us to better understand our alpacas and how to care for them. We soon learned that there wasn't a standard rule book that could be followed and some habits that worked well on the west coast didn't seem to apply on the east coast. Sometimes, the best advice could come from the farm next door. Building this network of trusted alpaca owners is important because it allows you to ask what you don't know and benefit from the experiences of others.

**Local Extension Service** – When we first moved onto our farm we were in discovery mode. What kind of soil do I have? How should I treat it? What plants should I watch out for? How and when should I plant grass? All of the good questions that an experienced farmer may know. The challenge was that I had just moved from a three level townhouse in the middle of the city and while I was willing to learn, I didn't have any of the answers. The local extension service, to me, is that experienced land manager to look to for those answers. They have the local experience to provide knowledge transfer about all of the conditions that you need to know about; from the amount of selenium typically found in the soil to the average white tail deer populations.

**Associations** – Alpacas associations are a wealth of information. However, the amount of information that they provide is directly proportional to the amount of effort that you give to the association. Paying the association fee in and of itself will not provide you with a lot of value. The value is in attending the meetings and events, networking with the members, and giving back some of the information that you have received or learned. By volunteering your time and expertise it allows others to share theirs with you as well. The trick is to join ones that you believe are meaningful and can assist you. Joining one may not give you a well rounded view of the industry and joining 20 may fragment your time so much that you can not get any value from any of them. The good news is that there are associations out there for everyone. National associations like the Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association (AOBA) or regional ones like the Alpaca Association of Western Washington (AAWW) or the Mid-Atlantic Alpaca Association (MAPACA).

**Your Veterinarian** - We have gotten to know a number of vets because you never know when your primary vets will not be available. Renee does all of our alpaca care and nurturing and she understands that the value of a local vet is not just in giving shots. It is about the wide range of health advice that they can provide because they live it, day in and day out. They travel the local farms and hear the latest issues and problems that other alpaca farmers are having. They come to understand what has worked and what has not. As a result they are able to take the best practices from the

farms that they visit and pass them on to other farm owners. Here comes the hard part, you have to consider your vet not just as a vet but as a consultant. Ask them. It is that simple. In many cases they will either have the answer or be able to put you in touch with another farm or expert that may. I am astounded by the amount of information that Renee gets each time she talks to our vet.

**Alpaca Thought Leaders** – As soon as people say, “alpaca thought leaders”, about five or six names come to mind. Why are these people thought leaders? What do they know that I don’t know? More, importantly, what do they know that I need to know? In looking into some of these people’s past, I have come to understand that these people have been around from the beginning. They have watched the alpaca industry grow from its infancy to where it is today. Many watched and tracked the Lama industry and see many parallels in its development to the development of the alpaca industry. So while that are not the last word on every topic, they are certainly worth reading, listening to and getting to know. These thought leaders also tend to take a more practical view of the industry. We caught up with Dr. Karen Baum, one day down on her farm in Huddleston, Virginia and asked her, “What is the one thing that all new alpaca owners should have?” Her reply was a chute because it safely contains the alpaca and allows one person to be able to attend to the alpaca’s needs without harming the alpaca or the handler. I then asked her “What is the one thing that all experienced alpaca owners should have?” Her reply was a chute. So I went out and got a chute. Now everything that used to take two people to do like trimming toenails, giving shots, doing body checks takes one person half the time. Sometimes it is the little things that count.

**The Hay Guy** – When I talk about alpacas, I am always asked what they eat. I indicate that they get some pellet with grain and mineral supplements but the majority of their diet consists of grasses and hay. That is really easy to say until you start to go out and buy some. Do you want Timothy or Orchard? How much alfalfa with that? First cut or second? Do you want square or round bails? I don’t know! The amount of information that I can tell you about hay could fill a thimble. But Claude Chapman does. He is my hay guy! Claude can wax poetic about the virtues of second cut orchard over first. Claude can sniff a bale of hay and tell you when it was cut. Claude can tell me that because it is going to be a hard Winter that I should “get an extra round cause the alpacas will eat just about that much more before Spring”.

**Alpaca Transporter** – This last year we went out and bought a pony trailer. We can fit two or three alpacas in it for local shows. However, when it comes to long distance hauling, I go to the experts. We sometimes have alpacas shipped out to our east coast farm from our west coast farm. We also ship some of our females back to our west coast farm to be bred. Not an operation that I would undertake under any conditions. However, there is a breed of people that do so. They are our alpaca transporters. One that we have used and love is Mike Cates of Rocking Box Alpacas. Mike fearlessly treads the west to east and back again route most months. Mike gets to know what is happening with the movement of alpacas and this last trip he indicated that he had just delivered a bunch of alpacas to a new farm close to us. It would have taken us a lot

longer to connect with them without Mike. Getting to know the transporters is also important if you have to move your alpacas around for breeding or to get to and from shows. It is painless and easy to arrange. Mike shows up at our doorstep and picks up or drops off the alpacas and is off to his next destination (unless we can entice him to stop over for a quick meal and desert).

**Feed Store** – Crumbles, Chews, High Fiber, Growth & Repro; these are all words that will become second nature to you at some point. Also, as the alpaca industry grows there are more and more manufacturers that are producing alpaca food. So what works, what doesn't, what is available and how long does it take to get it? Florence, our contact at our store knows this and more. She knows the other alpaca owners and what seems to work for them. She has become pretty adapt at comparing the feed breakdowns to let us know what is new on the market and products that may be more cost effective.

**Alpaca Supply Store** – When I first stepped foot into my favorite store, Tractor Supply, I didn't want to leave. Mike, the manager, can tell by the time of the year that I come in the store what I need. While they are not alpaca experts, they have it all. And what they do not have, they can order. It may seem a little strange to be striking up a relationship with your local supply store but based on our experience they seem to have run into every type of challenge that we can throw at them. I can't tell you the amount of money that we spent in starting up the farm. Understanding all of the farm related supplies and equipment has made our lives a little easier. We initially tried to use the local hardware store but soon found out that a store catering to the farming community was a better fit.

**Farm Visitors** – At the end of the day, it is all about the customer. That is why farm visits are so important to us. Talking to customers and understanding their needs is a real treat. It provides a way for us to keep a pulse on the market and appreciate the information that we have gathered over the year. Even those that do not buy from us are hopefully able to learn something from their visit. There are as many reasons for getting into the alpaca business as there are people in it. By understanding customers concerns and motivations for owning alpacas, we can better identify what information is important to them.

It is interesting how little the general population knows about alpacas. We were at a party over the holidays and Renee indicated that we had an alpaca farm. One gentleman had a puzzled look on this face and after a period of silence asked, "Well, do they bark much?" Renee, without missing a beat replied, "Hardly at all." But it is at parties, alpaca shows, community events and even in the supermarket that people ask us about alpacas and then want to stop by and learn more.

All in all - a diverse group of people. But all of these people are important to us in running our farm. Without them all, we would be missing important information or assistance that helps us provide care and assistance to our alpacas. Also, the longer we stay on the farm, the more people we realize it takes to make a successful farm. As time goes on, I am sure that additional people will become as important to us and will need to be added to our list. And they will be welcome. The more we learn, the more we want to share.

**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.*

*To find out more about Black Meadow Suris, call us at 703-764-9077; email us at [Renee@prokops.com](mailto:Renee@prokops.com) or visit us on the web at [www.blackmeadowsuris.com](http://www.blackmeadowsuris.com)*

