

What Are Alpacas?

Alpacas are livestock that are raised primarily for their soft, luxurious fleece. Members of the camelid family, the alpaca comes in two breed-types: huacaya (pronounced wah-KI-ah) and suri (SOO-ree).

Huacayas, the more common type, have fluffy, crimped fleece that gives the animals a teddy bear-like appearance. Suris grow silky, lustrous fleece that drapes gracefully in beautiful pencil-locks.

The alpaca industry continues to expand throughout the United States, and since the most important end-product of alpacas is their fleece (sometimes called fiber), like sheep, they are classified as livestock by both the United States and Canadian federal governments. Each shearing produces roughly five to ten pounds of fleece per animal, per year. This fleece, often compared to cashmere, can be turned into a wide array of products from yarn and apparel to tapestries and blankets. The fleece itself is recognized globally for its fineness, softness, light-weight, durability, excellent thermal qualities, and luster.

When compared to wool from most breeds of sheep, alpaca fleece is stronger, lighter, warmer, and more resilient. Finer grades of alpaca fleece (known commercially as "Baby Alpaca") are believed to be hypo-allergenic, meaning it does not irritate your skin as sheep's wool sometimes does. Unlike sheep's wool, alpaca fleece contains no lanolin and is therefore ready to spin after only nominal cleaning. Prized for its unique silky feel and superb "handle," alpaca fleece is highly sought-after by both cottage-industry artists (hand spinners, knitters, weavers, etc.) and the commercial fashion industry.

Alpaca fleece has a great variety of natural colors, with 16 official colors (white; beige; black and shades of fawn, brown, and grey) with many subtle shades and hues. It can be readily dyed and it can also be combined with other fine fibers such as merino wool, cashmere, mohair, silk, and angora to attain incredibly interesting blends.

Alpacas are relatively easy livestock to maintain. They stand about 36" high at the withers (where the neck and back come together); weigh between 100 to 200 pounds; and establish easy-to-manage, communal dung piles. Alpacas need basic shelter and protection from heat and foul weather, just like

other types of livestock, and if predators are present in the area, then a minimum of five-foot high non-climb fencing is strongly recommended. They also require certain vaccinations and anti-parasitic medicines. Their fleece is sheared once a year for processing, and is usually done in the spring to help keep them cool in the summer. Alpacas do not have hooves — instead, they have two toes, with hard toenails on top and a soft pad on the bottom of their feet, which minimizes their effect on pastures and makes them an "environmentally friendly" animal. Their toenails need to be trimmed on an as-needed basis to ensure proper foot alignment and comfort.

Alpacas mainly eat pasture grass or hay, although they are also browsers and will eat shrubs or leaves from trees if given the opportunity. They are modified-ruminants, with a single stomach divided into three compartments. They produce rumen and chew cud, thus they are able to process modest amounts of food very efficiently. Many alpacas (especially pregnant and lactating females) will benefit from nutritional and mineral supplements, depending on local conditions. Alpacas also require access to plenty of fresh water to drink.

Alpaca Owners Association, Inc. (AOA) is the world's largest alpaca association with more than 5,000 members and over 260,000 alpacas in its registry database. AOA's primary purpose is to promote awareness of alpacas and alpaca products while maintaining an official DNA validated genealogical registry system, administering an alpaca show system, providing education to members and the public about the operation of sustainable alpaca businesses, marketing alpacas and the use of alpaca products, and promoting scientific research to benefit the alpaca industry. For 30 years AOA has provided support to the North American alpaca industry through programs that assist members in growing their alpaca, alpaca fiber and alpaca product businesses. For more information about alpacas please visit www.alpacainfo.com.