

Joining the Network of Small Breeders

By Ingrid Wood (Stormwind Alpacas, NJ)

Do you plan on becoming an alpaca owner and breeder but are uncertain where and how to begin? The following information may be helpful.

When my husband and I decided in 1995 to own and breed alpacas, we made a deliberate decision to visit and eventually purchase our foundation as well as future stock from small farms (the term small applies to the number of animals, not to acreage). My husband attributed our “shopping program” to my European upbringing. There is unquestionably a lot of truth to that. Raised in Germany’s beautiful Mosel Valley as well as a tiny village in the Sauerland Mountains, I became accustomed to the cozy atmosphere and personal service found in small specialty stores.

Relatives who bred livestock at their small farms raised sheep, chickens, and dairy cows. The animal “factories” of a later age were an unknown concept during those times. My uncle walked his cows through village streets to outlying pastures each morning and returned them to their barn adjoining the farm house in the evening. People lived in great intimacy with their animals. The looks, sounds, smells, and habits of all the four-legged creatures on a farm were as familiar to farmers as those of their children. Since rural areas often did not have veterinary services and few conventional medications were available, animals as well as their caretakers were treated, many times quite successfully, with herbal remedies. These small farms were “organic” long before certified organically grown meat, grains, fruit, and vegetables became desirable agricultural commodities. Half a century later, I view the farms of my childhood as role models for modern livestock farms. I am not alone. The public is increasingly concerned that rearing practices at mega farms negatively impact environment as well as quality of life for the animals.

Buying from and networking with other small farmers has been a comfortable “fit” for us.

Interestingly, the vast majority of alpaca farms fit the profile of the old-fashioned family farm (my definition of a family farm is one that operates without or only occasional outside help). Many are tiny, with perhaps only five to ten alpacas. Unfortunately, past and current policies formulated by the AOBA (Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association) board of directors ensure that this fact remains a well-kept secret to prospective customers. AOBA members must pay for an expensive ad/listing in the annual AOBA *Farm and Ranch Guide* to be listed on the organization’s “member” web page. In contrast, membership dues are the same for all size farms.

Luckily, small alpaca farmers, like small but resourceful farmers in other livestock industries, have turned a handicap into a great business opportunity. Marketing co-ops such as SAFA (Small Alpaca Farms of America) and Alpaca Heritage Events are thriving and provide a wonderful support system to their members.

Support begins before a sale. Your first step should be a visit to small farms where breeders can give you an honest, realistic picture of the work involved in being an alpaca farmer in the true sense of the word. This may include juggling farm work with an outside job, the norm rather than the exception for many family farm owners. These experiences cannot be adequately duplicated during presentations by breeders who employ farm managers and other staff to attend to chores. It makes little sense to visit farms with an outside workforce when you and your immediate family members intend to take care of all aspects of raising alpacas yourselves. Infrastructure and care protocols can vary considerably depending on number of animals and other variables. Gather information from those size farms that can serve as viable models for your own.

Dedicated, ethical breeders will want to visit your property to help you design an alpaca friendly facility. Some will want to conduct an inspection prior to signing contracts. Please don't resent this as an intrusive imposition. Such visits protect both seller and buyer and help ensure your future success. If the seller's location is far from yours, he may ask a fellow breeder to make the visit. Alpaca farming involves a steep learning curve for most fledgling breeders. Be appreciative of all advice freely offered.

Support and guidance should continue after the sale. Small breeders are uniquely positioned to extend such mentoring. Since most alpaca females only produce a single cria (baby) per year, a small breeder will acquire few customers each year. His/her attention can be intensely focused on the "newbies" among his/her customers. Assistance with shearing, trimming male "fighting teeth", handling, training, and cria care is often part of a small breeder's routine support service.

Visitors to our farm almost always remark on how "tame" our alpacas are. That's no accident. None of our animals are left out in the "back forty". With a small herd, I also have time to gently and patiently accustom each cria to being handled. That includes the babies of our boarders! There are many things a small breeder can do to make handling and training easier for future owners. As first time owners, you will appreciate this effort. Please don't judge the behavior of an alpaca by your observations at a show or an auction. (As a new breeder, you are well advised not to purchase at auctions, but that's material for another article.)

Eventually, you will be in a position to sell animals yourself. Although some advertisements give the impression that alpacas virtually sell themselves, that is not true. Breeders must have carefully planned marketing strategies in place to enjoy steady sales. This is where networking with other small breeders will benefit you the most. Small breeders rarely have animals in every gender/color/ price range available for sale. Therefore, your chances of getting referrals are fairly high, especially if it becomes known that you reciprocate. *Smart small breeders don't see other breeders as competition but rather as valuable marketing partners.*

Often, a group of small breeders will sponsor a joint sale at one location and share marketing expenses. By purchasing your alpacas from a sponsoring co-op member, you may ensure an invitation to sell at future venues. (This will vary from group to group, so

ask questions.) Some co-ops share traveling and other show expenses, encourage special arrangements for stud service, and help members sell their fiber. Breeding stock, especially males, is often very reasonably priced at small farms.

What happens if a breeding animal you purchased at a small farm turns out to be reproductively unsound? What if you don't like the limited choice of replacements? At Stormwind Alpacas, we will simply return your money. That's better than a replacement guarantee. We are by no means the only small farm to offer such a policy.

Biosecurity and parasite management are issues on farms of all sizes. Proper management practices are crucial to minimize and prevent problems. Equally important are low stocking rates per acre and a low turnover of stock. Small farms often qualify on both counts. Educate yourself thoroughly on these important matters.

Please don't confuse high prices, high farm profiles, and high advertising budgets with quality. Be assured that quality, healthy animals can be found in all price ranges and on all size farms. Last but not least: If you plan on becoming the proprietor of a small alpaca farm, put your money where your mouth is! Why would you expect future customers to do business with *your* small farm if you will not give a fellow small breeder the opportunity to sell to *you*?

For questions about Stormwind Alpacas and our support system/marketing program please contact Ingrid and Dave Wood at 609-261-0696 or email us at alpacas@uscom.com Our website is www.StormwindAlpacas.com

We enjoy and welcome visitors to our small family farm and pay *individual attention* to each one.

Feel free to call and schedule an appointment.