



How to Choose Your First Alpacas

By Deb Hill, Cloud Dancer Alpacas
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Shopping for your first alpacas is like being a kid in a candy store – you want one of everything! How in the world will you decide? Here are some questions to help you select the alpacas that are right for you.

1. **Why do you want alpacas?** This is the crux of the entire selection process. If you are looking for pets or 4-H animals, your concerns might center on personality and alpacas that appeal to you visually, but you may not care if the alpacas can't reproduce. If your goal is fiber production, then the quality of the fleece will be of most importance and slightly crooked legs will not matter. If your goal is to breed alpacas as a business you will want to invest in very good quality, meaning both fiber and conformation will be important to you. Your reasons for buying alpacas are crucial because the different quality levels are not interchangeable – you cannot purchase a pet alpaca and expect it will produce show quality offspring, for example.
2. **Are you educated about alpaca health care, especially for newborns?** If not, start with alpacas that are not expecting babies right away to give yourself time to get used to caring for alpacas before you face the challenge of delivering crias (baby alpacas are called crias). A young alpaca is weaned from its mother around six months of age, and can be moved to a new farm soon after. Female alpacas are typically not bred until they are 18 months of age, and males are not ready to breed until approximately two years of age. You may wish to start with youngsters so that when they are old

enough to begin breeding you will be more experienced at alpaca husbandry and health care.

3. **What is the weather like where you live?** There is some evidence that the two types of alpacas respond to climate differently. Suri alpacas, with their long ‘dreadlock’ style fleeces, are thought to be more sensitive to cold weather whereas huacaya alpacas, with their ‘puffball’ fleeces are said to be more prone to heat problems. You can mitigate these tendencies with proper management (heating and/or cooling in your barn, etc.), but it might make sense to start with the type of alpaca that will do best where you live.
4. **Is winning in the show ring important to you?** If so, you need to be aware that the show ring rewards certain ‘styles’ of alpacas. If you want to do well, use the judging criteria to help you decide what alpacas to purchase. Judges like huacayas with lots of fiber on the legs and head, shorter noses and a compact body type, as well as extremely dense, fine fleeces with long staple length. For suris, the judges like lots of fiber on the legs and head, ringlet style fleeces (known as pencil locks) and a tall “stretchy” body type, along with dense, fine fleeces. Judging criteria changes over time so pay close attention. Attend shows and watch what happens. You can usually purchase alpacas at the shows, before or after they have won their ribbons. Of course, you will pay a lot more for one that is the show champion than for one that did not place or was at the end of the line-up.
5. **Do you need to sell alpacas right away in order to pay off some of your start-up debt?** If you said yes, plan to purchase pregnant alpacas that are due soon. Find packages with a pregnant mother alpaca that sells with a baby at her side. This kind of purchase will allow you to sell the baby at her side once it has been weaned, or sell the mother once she has delivered, along with her new baby. If you purchase young females (under 18 months of age) you will need to wait until they are old enough to breed, wait almost a year before they birth, wait another six months until the crias are old enough to wean, and then wait while you find a buyer. That’s why we say it can be two years or more before you have income from selling alpacas.

6. **What are your breeding goals?** If you are planning to breed and raise alpacas, develop your breeding goals before you look at a single alpaca sales list. Are you breeding for the finest fiber? For a certain color? For very dense, heavy fleeces? Write down your goals and use them as a guide to weed out alpacas that don't have the characters you are interested in. For example, if your goal is to breed exceptionally fine fibered black alpacas with fiber diameter less than 25 microns, you will not spend your time looking at a brown female with a 27 micron fiber even if she is priced very attractively!
7. **Who are you buying from?** Choosing the farm that sells your first alpacas to you is almost as important as choosing the alpacas. The best farms provide advice and guidance to their clients well after the sale is final. You should be comfortable to call or email the sellers with any question that arises. You should also feel that they have your best interests at heart, because if something unexpected and unhappy happens, you may be relying on their goodwill for a resolution. Choose a seller that is experienced, that is respected in the U.S. alpaca industry, that can provide you with references, and that is willing to work with you to address your special needs. Really you are finding a mentor, not just someone that sells alpacas.
8. **What are your financial limits?** We advise clients who want to breed alpacas as a business to purchase the best they can afford. Purchasing fewer animals of higher quality is better than buying a whole herd of low quality animals. With that said, it is important to know your limits and stick to them. Tempting deals will come along, or auction fever may strike, but when all is said and done, you need to be able to pay your monthly bills. Write down the maximum amount that you can afford to spend on your first alpacas and then stick to it. There are alpacas of all qualities available for purchase, and prices vary considerably. Don't pay more than you can afford in order to get what you want.
9. **Have you read the contract?** A good contract is essential to protect your alpaca investment. The best contract should protect both the buyer and the seller equally. If you can't understand what the contract language says, ask. If you don't like what the contract language says, request changes. If the seller can't answer your

questions or won't alter the contract to accommodate a reasonable request, find a different alpaca to purchase.

10. **What's the rush?** There are many alpacas available for sale, and new ones being born every year. If you are doing business with someone that pressures you to purchase quickly, stop. Take all the time you need to get familiar with alpacas and the industry. We recommend that you visit at least three alpaca farms before you buy anything, that you answer the questions on this list, and that you attend some shows or classes for a hands-on education in assessing alpacas. Consider signing up for classes to learn how to judge alpaca conformation and fiber.

If you have taken the time to answer all the above questions, you should now have a good sense how to pick alpacas that are right for you. If you are still unsure, feel free to contact us with your specific concerns or questions.

Wishing you all the best in your alpaca endeavors:

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