

Alpacas

Introduction

Alpacas are a gentle and intelligent breed of South American camel. Alpacas have a gestation period of 11.5 months and produce just one offspring per year (cria). They generally live 15 to 20 years. Alpacas are kept mostly for their fleece, however, because of their affectionate nature, many people also buy them as pets. They are specially suited to harsh climates and therefore they are generally healthy, easy to care for and disease free.

Alpacas produce a luxurious fibre, which is used for manufacturing high-priced garments. The fibre has three times the strength of sheep's wool and makes a very fine fabric. It has a hollow, tube-like structure that makes it very soft. Alpacas are usually shorn annually and produce about 2 to 4 kilos of fleece a year. The price for the fibre varies according to condition and quality. The sheared fibre from one alpaca is usually enough to make four to six sweaters.

Alpacas come in a variety of colours with the lighter coloured animals fetching higher prices. Most of the Alpacas in the world are located in South America. Australia and the United States have begun to breed significant numbers of alpacas commercially. The Alpaca industry is still in its infancy in Ireland but could provide a viable and alternative animal stock.

Currently the fleece can be exported and sold via the British Alpaca Fiber Co-op. Some is sold to cottage industries and individual spinners and weavers. It can be sold at the farm gate or by mail order to individuals. It can also be spun into yarn which can then be used or sold. Alpacas can also be used as guardians of sheep, particularly during the lambing season.

The Market

Alpacas are very rare in Ireland and have to be imported from Chile or Peru via careful breeding programs. There are currently a few hundred alpacas in Ireland. Alpaca farming is likely to be focused on breeding for many years to come. Alpacas provide an income through live sales. Developing markets for alpaca operations can take a long time and requires good people skills and a business plan.

Before starting an alpaca enterprise, it is advisable to do careful research and visit as many existing alpaca operations as possible. Each potential producer must source a market, otherwise financial failure is inevitable.



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This is one of a series of fact sheets on potential income generating activities.

All fact sheets are available in the Advisory Section of the Teagasc Website
www.teagasc.ie

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Teagasc Fact Sheets present a brief overview of a topic. Further detailed advice should always be sought from relevant sources.

Support

The Alpaca Association of Ireland (www.alpacasofireland.com) supplies high quality Alpacas and offer ongoing support and advice to alpaca farmers. Contact them at Killinagh Lodge, Carbury, Co Kildare, Ireland.

Email: xkw@bigfoot.com

Telephone 046-973-1191

Also, inclusion in the BAS (www.bas-uk.com) pedigree registry depends on each imported animal passing stringent screening requirements as to the physical standards of the animal and the quality of the fibre. Alpacas are not sold or used for meat. In Ireland they are not registered as livestock. As a result there are very few regulations of the type that cover the keeping and movement of other farm animals. It is envisaged that in time there will either be a registry set up in Ireland or Alpaca farmers will become part of a (proposed) European registration body.

Production

Land

Marginal pastureland such as boggy land is suitable for raising Alpacas with some supplemental feeding. Alpacas are generally easy to care for and have many habits similar to those of cattle and sheep. They prefer grazing in open paddocks and can be stocked at similar rates to sheep. Standard sheep fencing is quite adequate. Shelter from very hot, windy or rainy conditions is recommended. Alpacas are less bothered by the cold.

Diet

Alpacas graze on grass, weeds, leaves and shrubs. In periods of feed shortages such as winter and late summer they need a hay supplement. Alpacas are known to have a high need for trace elements, vitamins and minerals which can be administered easily by specially formulated pellets.

Breeding

Female alpacas are first bred from 14 – 18 months. As they do not have a heat cycle, they can be bred anytime. They are capable of producing one offspring (cria) a year for as many as 20 years. The new alpaca mothers are often rebred 2-3 weeks after giving birth. Male alpacas reach breeding age at about 3 years. Usually husbandry includes shearing, trimming of teeth and toenails, vaccination and regular worming. Alpacas are regarded as easy to handle.

Establishment Costs and Profit Margins

Breeding Alpacas is a serious farming venture and not a get quick rich scheme. There is no ready market. Importing a single alpaca from South America can cost several thousand euros. Initial profits will come from breeding and selling the offspring. This situation is likely to last for many years as it has in other markets such as the U.S. and Australia. Alpacas breed slowly, with a maximum of one off-spring a year. Fibre is currently bringing in around €30 to €75 per Kg depending on the colour, quality and amount sold. There is no fibre market as of yet in Ireland and the UK fibre industry is in its infancy. It is estimated that 100,000 animals are needed to produce the economies of scale required for large-scale successful commercial processing.

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