

ALPACAS

Introduction

Alpacas are of the camelid family and originate primarily from Peru but are also found in Chile and Bolivia. These valuable animals that are called “the finest livestock investment in the world” have been spreading across the globe from the late 80’s; the first animals arrived in Ireland in 1999. Numbers are growing in US, Australia, UK and Europe but are low globally at 5m compared to 1bn sheep, thus it will be a growth industry for many years yet. The Chinese have stated their intention to grow their numbers to 6m. All these point to solid industry similar to but better than Cashmere. Alpacas have a lower environmental impact and lower carbon footprint than any other livestock animal.

Establishment Costs and Profit Margins

Breeding Alpacas is not a get rich quick scheme. Investment in alpacas requires patience. Alpacas are herd animals and will not thrive on their own 2 or ideally 3 alpacas is the minimum investment required. Initial profits will come from breeding and selling the offspring and from fibre sales. Alpacas breed slowly, in 2014 China announced its intent to build a national herd of 6m animals thus increasing demand globally. This demand for alpacas is likely to last for many years to come. Alpacas sell for €500 for gelded males, €2000 for breeding females and €5000 for stud males. These are average prices with pedigree animals commanding much higher prices. The best way to start is with 3x quality pregnant breeding females. It’s makes better financial sense to wait 2 or 3 years before buying a stud male and jointly buying with one or more other breeders.

Alpaca give c. 5kg of fibre annual and sells for up to £12/kg v €1/kg for sheeps wool, even the lower quality fibre from the legs and neck sells for £1/kg.

What are Alpacas

Alpacas weigh in at between 55 and 90kg and stand 76-96cm at the shoulder. Other south American camelids include the Llama, Vicuna and Guanaco, these last two are the wild versions of Alpaca and Llama respectively. Llamas are the largest of the four South American Camelids and can weigh 110-250kg and stand 102-110cm at the shoulder. Alpacas are bred for their superior fibre and Llamas are bred as pack animals.

Alpacas have a gestation period of 11.5 months and they produce one offspring per year (cria), twins are rare. They generally live 20 to 25 years. Alpacas are kept mostly for their fine fleece, however, because of their affectionate nature; many people also buy them as pets. They originate from a harsh climate ranging from -20c at night to



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27c daytime and thus are hardy animals suitable to Irish weather.

The Alpaca industry is still in its infancy in Ireland and they provide a viable and alternative animal stock which is particularly suited to smallholdings.

Alpacas are shorn annually and produce about 5 kilos of fleece. Alpacas produce a luxurious fibre, which exceeds all other domesticated fibre producing animals. All the fibre can be used. The leg and neck fibre is used in duvets, pillows and mattress toppers. The main blanket is used to make yarn. It's loved by spinners and weavers and is used in manufacturing high-end suits and garments. Alpaca when blended with other fibres adds lustre and softness. The fibre is lighter than sheep's wool but three times warmer. It's one of the strongest natural fibres second only to silk. It has a hollow, tube-like structure that gives it its thermal properties which feels cool in summer and warm in winter. It can be worn close to the skin and is suitable for allergy sufferers.

The price for the fibre varies based on micron, length handle and colour. The sheared fibre from one alpaca is usually enough to make four to six sweaters. Alpacas come in 22 natural colours with the lighter coloured animals traditionally producing finer fibre and fetching higher prices.

Currently the fleece is exported to mills in the UK. Some is sold to local 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 are also used as guardians for sheep and poultry, alpacas hate foxes and foxes hate them. When run with sheep they help increase birth rates and reduce lamb losses. When guarding poultry such as hens, ducks or turkeys they eliminate fox problems.

The Market

Alpacas are regarded as exotic animals in Ireland There are an estimated 1500 alpacas in Ireland at present.

Alpacas can provide an income through breeding, live sales fibre processing and agri tourism.. Alpacas are friendly, intelligent and inquisitive animals and are particularly suited to Alpaca trekking, Pet Farms and for use in Care Homes. Alpacas are not sold or used for meat in Ireland.

Before starting an alpaca enterprise, it is advisable to do your research and visit as many alpaca farms as possible. Membership of the Alpaca Association of Ireland is advised and will give you access to resources, contacts, support and discounted supplies.

Support

The Alpaca Association of Ireland supports the continuous improvement in breeding of high quality Alpacas and offers on-going support and advice to all alpaca owners. The Association can be contacted through their

In Ireland Alpacas are not required to be registered as livestock. As a result there are few regulations that cover the keeping and movement of these animals. The association maintains a registry of animals. The registration is important as it proves the pedigree of the animal your buying and protects your investment.

For this reason prospective buyers are strongly recommended to only purchase registered animals from members of the Alpaca Association of Ireland.



Production Land

Alpacas can be stocked at 6 per acre. Any land type is suitable, marginal pastureland is suitable for raising Alpacas with some supplemental feeding. Alpacas are generally easy to care for, they have padded feet and tend not to churn up the land like other grazers. They use a communal dung pile and cleaning up is relatively easy. They prefer grazing in open paddocks. Standard sheep fencing is adequate as they do not challenge fences. Open shelter is all that is required. Alpacas are not bothered by the cold.

Behaviour

Female alpacas are first bred from 14 – 18 months. Alpacas are induced ovulators, they can be bred anytime. It is usual though, to time the breeding's so the cria are born during the warmer summer months. They are capable of producing one offspring (cria) a year for up to 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 (yearly), trimming of teeth (yearly for some) and toenails (2-3 times a year), vaccination (yearly) and regular worming (depending on worm burden). Alpacas are easy to handle.



Breeding

Links

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Web: www.alpaca.ie

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