



Advice on Buying and Keeping Alpacas in Italy for the Newcomer

Caring for your Alpaca Herd

If you intend to keep alpacas for pleasure or as a business, then it is very important to learn how to farm your animals properly. It does not matter if you own a large farm or a small field, the importance of setting up the right environment for your animals from the start cannot be overstated.

Your land

In Italy the provision of good grazing can be challenging. In the summer many fields become parched and so you must provide adequate hay instead. Buy the best quality meadow hay you can afford. If you are able to buy a grass and alfalfa mix then this is ideal.

You can keep up to eight alpacas on one hectare of land (10000 sqm). Alpacas are natural herd animals, so never ever keep one on its own.

If possible divide your land into four smaller areas. For example:

Area One could be a large area used by a large group of alpacas.

Area Two could be a similar size and rested.

Area Three could be a smaller area for visiting males.

Area Four could be a small area near to the shelter for expectant and new mothers and crias.

Fencing

Alpacas must be protected from predators such as foxes, wolves and stray dogs. Ensure your fencing is strong and reaches from the ground up to 1.5m high, or to 2m if there is a road on one side. Do not use barbed wire or electric fencing.

Ensure you can lock your gates if you are away from home.

Shelter

Alpacas are hardy animals and so can live outside on the farm all year round provided they have some shelter. This could be a natural shelter like hedges and trees as well as specially designed field shelters. Have a small pen in each area. Alpacas can then be encouraged into the pen when you or the vet need to examine them. A good tip is to feed your alpaca herd from this pen. This will help them get used to going into it.

You will also need to provide a shelter in case an alpaca is sick or a cria and mother need to be kept out of the weather. This could be a stable, a garden shed or a garage with a pen in it and adjoining the small paddock. It must have an electricity supply and floor of wood or concrete. Rubber matting on the floor is warm and easy to clean.

Food

Alpacas need hay all year round, even when the grass is growing. Unless you are very sure of the high quality of the hay you should also provide some extra nourishment especially for pregnant and feeding mothers and crias. This could be alfalfa pellets which can be bought or ordered through your local agricultural merchant. The product is called Erbamedica Disidratata 17% pellet 6mm and there are two websites you will find useful www.erbamedica.it and www.gruppocarli.it

All alpacas benefit from additional nutritional support which can be supplied from a product especially designed for camelids called Camelibra. Zarza is a stockist throughout Italy for Camelibra. (insert link)

Camelibra is supplied in bags of 20 kg and an adult will need about 60 g per day which can be mixed with their alfalfa pellets.

Water must be available at all times and in all areas. It can be supplied in tubs or small tanks. It must be fresh and topped up each day and the containers should be regularly cleaned.

Healthy alpacas

For the untrained, buying your first herd of alpacas might seem a daunting prospect. The risk of purchasing an animal that has health problems or a defect is real to the untrained eye and if you get it wrong, then it is not only your financial commitment that you are putting at risk.

Ensure your breeder has the alpacas examined by a vet before they are delivered to you. You will then be given a certificate of health from the vet.

Make sure that you check your alpacas every day. You will need a minimum of 30m of coloured rope to herd them with. Zarza supplies headcollars for all sizes of alpacas.

By spending time with them you will get to know them better and are then more likely to detect when something is not quite right. As with all livestock the earlier that you can detect and treat illness the quicker your alpaca will recover. Any unusual behaviour should be properly investigated, and if you are ever in any doubt call in the vet to take a look.

Buying the right alpacas

An alpaca with genetic problems could affect your entire breeding programme making the sale of offspring more difficult. Some problems can also affect the general well-being of the animal.

There are many different things to consider when making your purchase. For example, are the alpacas the right size? A tall animal might suggest that it has been in-bred with llamas, while an alpaca that is too short may have had nutrition problems.

The ideal alpaca should have a short muzzle with a triangular and symmetrical head, the jaw and bite need to be even and its eyes should be bright and alert.

If you are now starting to think there may be more to this than meets the eye, then don't worry, because help and information is available. Ensure you have the support of your breeder. Hilary Shenton is always available by telephone and runs training courses on selecting alpacas and all aspects of alpaca care and breeding.

Preparing for the crias

There are a number of items we recommend you have in stock before crias are born. Zarza stocks a full Cria Kit which you can buy.

You also need to be sure you have access to a supply of colostrum in case your cria has problems feeding. This could be colostrum from another alpaca (difficult to obtain), or colostrum from a goat or a dried commercial product which is obtainable from Zarza.

Registered breeders

Ensure the breeder from whom you intend to purchase is a member of a recognised breed society such as the British Alpaca Society (BAS). In England membership requires breeders to abide by an industry-recognised and approved code of conduct when selling alpacas.

But if you want to be really sure that you are spending your money wisely, then there can be no better person to ask than a professional breeder.

Zarza has everything that the new breeder could want. This includes training courses in how to care for and manage your new herd and top quality breeding stock from which to choose your animals. All this comes with as much advice, information and hand-holding as you need to get you going and give you the confidence to make alpaca ownership enjoyable.

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