

How to improve your alpaca herd:

Taking stock

A two part article outlining an approach that will help to ensure your alpaca herd gains value in the coming years. By Hilary Shenton.

Often it is not until we actually have alpacas that we know their quality and worth. A lot of research and learning goes into preparing for them but we learn more by caring for them, breeding and developing our herd.

We may start off with one goal but, as years go by, our likes, dislikes and experiences may change that goal. In Spring each year we are planning for our crias and matings and it is an ideal time to take stock of what we have and ask ourselves if we are any nearer achieving our goals.

For example, I started breeding alpacas in 1998. At that time I was focussing only on the animals themselves. I had no intention of getting involved in processing the fibre and making products. A few years later I realised the two were inextricably linked. In order to promote quality, I needed to be able demonstrate productivity, ie, quality of progeny and quality of fleece. My first goal was to breed white alpacas and, again, I changed my mind upon seeing a few good black alpacas and decided to breed some fineness and character into the coloured stock.

Changing goals happens all the time. What I believe is important is to be clear for a given period, ie, five years, what your priorities are and invest the time, energy and money into achieving one or two key objectives. Otherwise there is a risk you will look at your herd, and your bank account, one day and wonder whether getting into alpacas was quite the most sensible thing you ever did!

This first article looks at the evaluation process. In the second article we will look at ways of making changes and improvements to achieve your goals.

Evaluation

Assuming you already have some alpacas, and perhaps you have been breeding for three to five years already, the first step to take is to see what you have got now.

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Evaluate your herd. This is a four part process that I follow and, of course, it needs to be documented as you go along! You think you will remember but, after looking at a number of alpacas, you often forget key pieces of information.

- Hands on assessment of each alpaca's conformation;
- Assessment of the quality of the fibre – on and off the alpaca;
- Review of the productivity of each alpaca – ease of breeding, quality of crias, quantity and quality of fleece, general health;
- Review of the pedigree of each alpaca and its history. I will look at these four areas individually.

Assessment of conformation

In my view, correct conformation forms the basis of a healthy and productive alpaca. An alpaca with an undershot jaw or wry face will not be able to eat properly and so will not be nourished. A female with spindly crooked legs will not provide the support needed to carry crias over many years. She may develop arthritis or suffer stress from joint pain.

Fortunately there are not too many severe genetic faults in the British herds but in Peru and in areas of Europe, where breeding is only just starting, there are some very severe manifestations of faults. The list below is by no means exhaustive but, those I have seen include:

- Incorrect ears, eg, banana ears, gopher ears;

- Blue eyes, especially when associated with deafness in a white female;
- Cataracts of the eye lens;
- Incorrect jaws – wry face, undershot or overshot jaws;
- More, or less, than four teats;
- Luxating patella;
- Polydactylia;
- Crooked tails.

So here is my simple conformation assessment guide for beginners!

To assess an alpaca's basic conformation it takes two people: a handler and an examiner, and a confined area like a small paddock, with a pen and a couple of alpaca friends. If you have need for an in-depth evaluation, ask an experienced breeder/screener or a vet experienced in evaluating alpacas.

This is one of the key reasons for halter training an alpaca! To assess them they need to be standing, relaxed and still, and should not mind being examined. You will be using your two main senses to assess – sight and touch.

1. Observe the alpaca walking around on her own. Now you can look at the overall body shape and proportions and how she moves. Look at the way she holds her head. Is her overall movement free and easy? Does she stumble or limp? Does she appear stressed or relaxed? Is her spine roughly horizontal and her tail tucked in?
2. At this stage you can also make some initial judgements about her fleece. Look at the overall coverage. Does she have a dense up-standing topknot (huacayas)? Does the fleece appear thick, even and well-grown from the top of her neck to the feet? Does it appear to be of single colour or are there patches of other colours that need closer examination? Does it have a healthy sheen to it? If a suri, what type of locks does she have? Is there a lustre (shine) to the fleece?
3. Catch the alpaca, put on a halter and leading rein and ask the handler to walk the alpaca around in straight lines away from you, towards you, and to pass by you on both sides. Are her legs straight when viewed from in front and behind? Are her toes pointing forwards? Then ask her to run. Does the alpaca get breathless? Does she stumble? Does she have an easy movement?
4. Ask the handler to stand with the alpaca in the pen in a relaxed manner. Ensure the alpaca can see her friends so she is not overly anxious. Examine the alpaca starting with her ears, eyes, nose and jaw. Are her ears spear shaped and normal? Are her eyes brown, bright, evenly open and clear and have a pink membrane? Look at her teeth and check length and bite. Check the jawline and face for unexpected lumps. Work down the neck and back towards the tail

Why is conformation important?

- Quality of life
- Longevity
- Strength
- Health
- Reproduction
- Production
- Cost-effectiveness

An alpaca with a wry face and blue eyes



noting any lumps and bumps, dryness of skin, evidence of bites or mites, inequalities between left and right sides. The tail should be straight.

Look under the tail and check the genitals. Males should have two even-sized testicles that are firm to the touch and not lumpy.

Both males and females should have four teats.

Check the body condition, scoring out of five where a score of one is emaciated and five is obese. The healthy non-pregnant alpaca would be 3/5, the pregnant or feeding alpaca 3/5-4/5.

Check the legs for straightness and correct angles. Check the feet and toenails. Alpacas should have two separate toes on each foot. More than two is called polydactylia and is a genetic fault. This includes the presence of a third small toe higher up the foot, similar to dogs' dewclaws.

This is a very basic guide that focuses more on conformation than health but you can read more or come on one of my courses where I will show you in more depth how to check for correctness of conformation and signs of good health.

Assessment of fibre quality

Fibre quality encompasses many characteristics and is a big subject. You can examine the fleece on the alpaca and also after shearing when you spread it out on a big table. It is important to do both if at all possible. You can also take a sample of fleece from the mid-side of the body and send it to a specialist laboratory for analysis. Many breeders do this annually at shearing time and so build up a picture of the fleece statistics for each alpaca over a period of time.

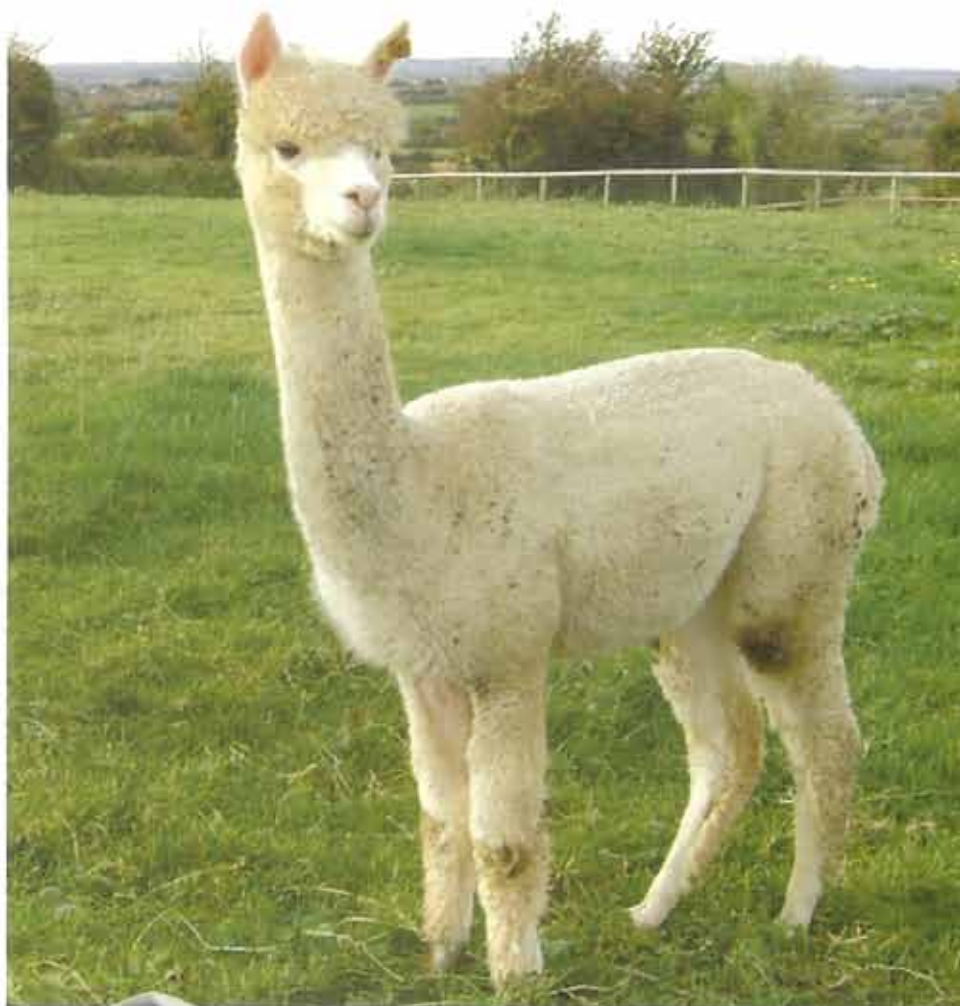
Some characteristics are highly heritable, some are not. (See box for the usual characteristics)

“To assess them they need to be standing, relaxed and still, and should not mind being examined”

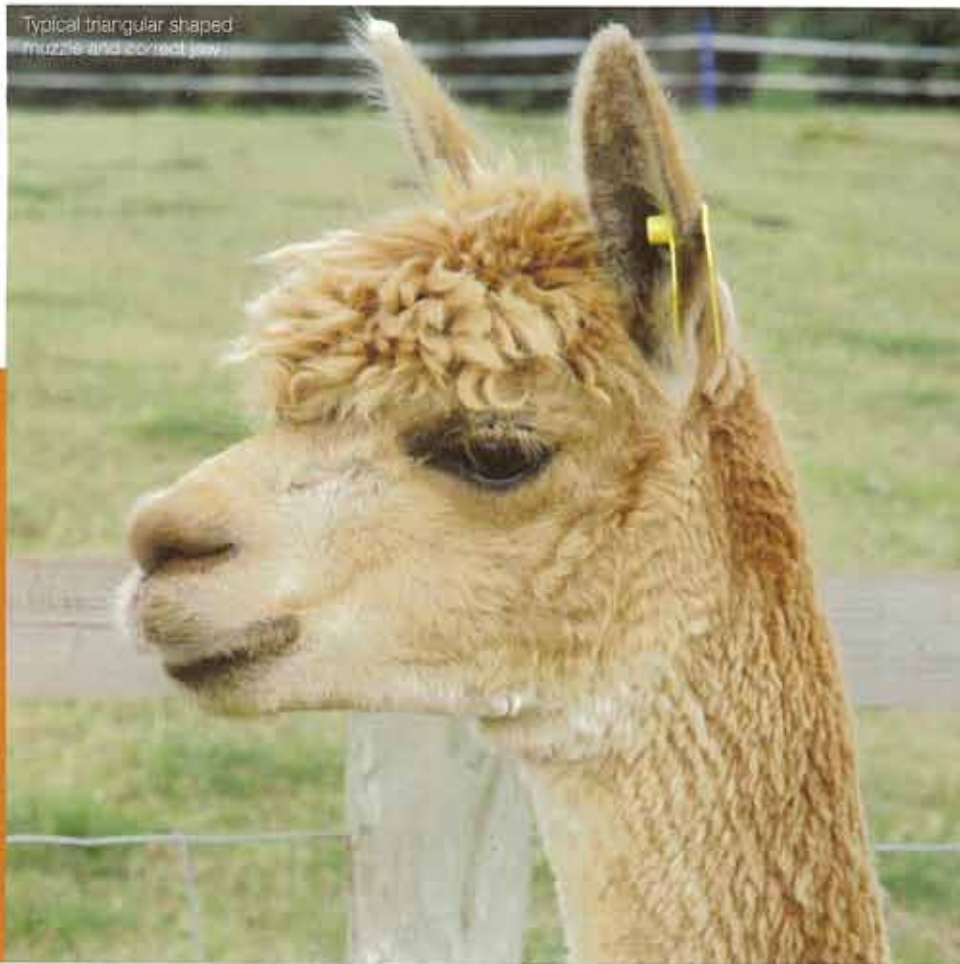
Fibre characteristics

- Fineness – highly heritable
- Staple length – moderately heritable
- Density – moderately heritable
- Crimp – moderately heritable
- Lack of coarse fibres
- Lock definition, especially in suris
- Handle – tactile feel
- Uniformity – of fineness
– of colour
– of length
- Brightness – of colour
- Lustre – in suris
- Strength/condition
- Overall coverage

Sound conformation



Typical triangular shaped muzzle and correct jaw





Note the lock formation on this suri

“In my view, correct conformation forms the basis of a healthy and productive alpaca”

Productivity

In your herd a number of factors relate to productivity. The most commonly noted are numbers of crias and quality/quantity of fleece. When I am reviewing the productivity of my own stock I look at the following factors and compare them over the years:

Fibre quantity – Weight of fleece shorn annually
Length of staple growth
Density

Fibre quality – Fineness and character
Uniformity
Staple style
Handle

Fibre colour – Strength and condition
Solid colour preferred
Is it the colour I want?

Reproduction

Females – Ease of mating and conception
Quality of crias
Quality of rearing, eg, milk production

Males – Keeness to mate
Mating ability
Mating frequency
Potency

General health – Specific health problems
Accidents and injuries
On-going health issues, eg, predisposition to mites, worms

Review of pedigree and history

For each alpaca, revisit their pedigree, remind yourself of their genetics and relationships.

Check their purchase price and income achieved, eg, from selling crias or matings. You now have a mass of information!

I had reason, three years ago, to look critically at my own herd. My goal was to retain a small quality herd

here in England and also to set up a more substantial breeding herd in southern Italy. This would be an expensive exercise and so I needed to decide which alpacas to take with me and which to leave behind. I went through this exercise and I decided to divide my herd into huacayas and suris, male and female, and categorise as follows:

Category A – Excellent in all areas;

Category B – Poor quality and poor productivity;

Category C – Excellent quality of conformation but not such good fleece;

Category D – Excellent fleece quality but some minor conformational issues;

Category E – Not stunning conformation or fleece but productive mothers;

Category F – Any quality with health issues.

From these categories I was able to make some decisions more easily. Some examples of my decisions follow:

1. All Category B and F would stay in England.
2. The majority of my Category A females would go to Italy, leaving behind a few good examples.
3. Category A males – one of each colour and type would go to Italy, except those that had mating bookings in the following 12 months.
4. Category C females to go to Italy – use studs to improve fleece.
5. Category D females to stay in England.

Obviously I then had to take into account pregnancy status in the light of the journey and a number of other issues peculiar to my situation.

By using the above system, I was able to take the emotion out of the decision-making and devise a plan for each of those left in England, ie, breed, improve or sell.

The next part of this article will focus on defining your goals, identifying decisions and actions you can take that will help towards achieving your goals.

About the Author

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Hilary Shenton is the founder of Zarza Alpacas, now operating in England and Basilicata in southern Italy. She is a BAS Judge (retired) and a graduate of the Alpaca Breeders Fibre School of Peru.

Hilary runs a day course entitled 'Improving your Alpacas'. The next course is on 26 June 2010 in Switzerland. For more information see www.zarza-alpacas.com.