

Harvest Time on the Alpaca Ranch

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In the world of alpacas, "harvest time" comes much earlier than autumn. In fact, it usually occurs in the spring in conjunction with "Shearing Day", when the annual fleece growth is shorn off the alpacas to prepare them for comfort as the hot summer weather approaches.

Alpaca shearing is a specialized craft and we are fortunate to have Mark Loffhagen, a transplanted New Zealander who is in demand across the USA but living in Colorado. This means we "locals" must book his services at least 6 months in advance as he juggles a complex schedule. Weighing our 7352' elevation and cold spring snows against summer heat, we book two days: one in late April or early May for our pregnant females/breeding males and another after the show season is ended for the alpacas kept in full fleece for showing or sale purpose.

Mark had a busy 2001 season planned for Ohio and New York in May, so he persuaded several of the Colorado breeders to let him schedule shearing days in April. Ours was planned for April 13---the day a heavy spring blizzard descended dumping 24" and closing I-25 for the day. Mark rescheduled us for May 31, leaving me with less than 2 weeks to prepare fleeces for the big Estes Park Wool Market Alpaca Fleece Show. Why is that important? Let me explain the shearing process we follow to harvest and prepare the fleece:

About 10 days prior to the scheduled shearing, I inspect the alpacas to be shorn, judging the fleece on the animal to determine the best fleeces to enter in shows and looking for minimum 3" length, cleanliness, luster and crimp. The age of the alpaca and desirability of particular colors is also weighed into the equation. From the 30+ to be shorn, usually I select 8 or 9 possibilities for exhibition.

Special attention is paid to these alpacas in preparing for shearing. As much debris as possible is picked off the fleece. If they are very dusty, I get out the shop vac and go over them gently to remove as much as possible without disrupting the character of the fleece. If the female is very pregnant and cranky, I let her alone and work with the fleece after shearing rather than take a chance of a premature birth caused by stress.

A list is compiled in a database of all the alpacas to be shorn, with name, date of birth, color and registration number included. I sort these by color, from the lightest to the darkest, then produce 2 sets of brightly colored labels: one color for the Prime fleece and another for the "seconds", also called neck and leg. These are ready for volunteers to stick on clear plastic bags as each alpaca's fleece is removed from the shearing floor. With clear bags and the color-coded labels, I can locate particular fleeces easily.

Cleaning the barn floor, clearing out tools, spare equipment and other stray items is a necessity. Workers must move fast and the area needs to be free of impediments. And speaking of workers: a list is posted on the Alpaca

Breeders of the Rockies web site giving shearing locations and urging smaller breeders contact a larger breeder so that their animals can be done at a central location. Usually we have 3 or 4 other farms joining us for the day and those owners assist where they are needed in the process. We also enlist fiber artist/friends, family members and the occasional neighbor who sometimes show up to help.

Plenty of soft drinks, bottled water, snacks and sandwiches are readied on ice in a cooler so that workers can grab something when there is a lull. Have I forgotten anything? Garbage cans, first aid supplies, brooms, dustpans, cameras---and big smiles! After all, it's harvest time!

Shearing Day starts at 7:00 a.m. as our normal chores are completed early and the roundup of alpacas to be shorn begins. White and very light colors are first, so those are brought into a corral and halters put on. Temporary pens are set up for visitors and as alpacas and owners arrive, they are assigned space and duties.

Usually the Shearer arrives by 8:30 to set up his restraint equipment, get blades oiled and ready and make certain that volunteers understand their assignments. Mark uses a leg restraint system in which the alpaca is put on a mat on the floor by two strong men, harnesses are placed on each leg and a pulley draws the alpaca's legs out into a straight position in which kicking is impossible. Someone is assigned to hold the head, removing the halter before shearing and replacing it afterwards. We hear that some people think this method is cruel, but the alpacas relax quickly and are safe from cuts caused when they jump around.

Mark begins by making a first stroke along the belly, then carefully and quickly moves up the side in parallel cuts on the blanket area from the tail to the neck. After doing one side, the alpaca is rolled to the other and the blanket fleece is removed carefully and bundled into a plastic bag, labeled and moved out of the way. Fleeces to be shown are shorn over an old cotton sheet and rolled up for later skirting.

The intricate job of removing the fiber from the legs, neck and tail is then accomplished and the best of these pieces gathered in another bag with a "seconds" label. When Mark is finished, the halter and lead are replaced, the leg restraints removed and the alpaca allowed to stand on it's own. The whole process takes about 10-12 minutes and a "nearly nude" animal goes to the pasture to show off her haircut. Workers quickly sweep the debris off the mat and surrounding floor, another alpaca is led in and the process repeated.

At our farm, over 70 animals were done each shearing day and we were exhausted by 4:00 p.m.; however, Mark tells of shearing 80 in one day!! Everyone collects their fleece bags and animals, leaving me with a huge stack of my own fleece bags to deal with.

Every fleece must be "skirted"---put on a large frame covered with chicken wire, picked relatively clean of vegetable matter and the coarser fiber removed from the edges of the fleece. If the workers have been careful in

gathering the prime blanket from the shearing floor, it is possible to spread out the fleece just as it would have come from the animal. Show fleeces are more carefully skirted, with attention given to removing fiber not consistent with the best parts.

We belong to two fiber cooperatives: The Alpaca Fiber Cooperative of North America (AFCNA), a shareholder cooperative to which we pledge ½ of our clip, and the New England Alpaca Fiber Pool (NEAFP) which is voluntary but has products which make use of the “seconds” as well as the prime fiber. After skirting, fleeces are selected for shipment to each co-op, weighed, inventoried, boxed and taken to the post office or local Pack & Ship.

Some fleeces are reserved for spinners who are repeat customers. Those must be contacted, prices set and shipping arrangements made. Some fleeces I also reserve for teaching demonstrations and for marketing of alpacas for sale.

Now that the shows are over and most of the skirting is finished and bags of fleece removed from the barn to make room for hay, I can celebrate a personal “Harvest Home”--- with some excellent fleeces set aside for entering in autumn fleece shows.