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## So You Want To Be An Alpaca Farmer? - Tips For Getting Started

1. The best way to learn about alpacas is to spend time on an alpaca farm! Visit at least three farms before you decide that alpacas are right for you. Each breeder's philosophy and methods are a little different. Ask questions and take notes on barn and pasture layout, fencing, healthcare, nutrition, breeding and management. Ethical breeders will enjoy sharing information with you and will never pressure you to purchase before you have researched ownership thoroughly. Go to the AOBA website ([www.alpacainfo.com](http://www.alpacainfo.com)) to find alpaca farms near you.
2. If you like what you see, join AOBA (Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association). Join as an affiliate member and upgrade your membership to Farm/Ranch status anytime you wish. This small investment entitles you to a subscription to *Alpacas Magazine*; a bi-monthly newsletter; access to the AOBA library; and other support services. This also gets your name into the "loop" so you can receive information about farms, shows and educational events across the country.
3. Attend alpaca events like open farm days, show ring competitions, the ABOA National Conference and the Fiber to Fashion Conference. These events allow you to network with alpaca enthusiasts and can be lots of fun! Go to the AOBA website ([www.alpacainfo.com](http://www.alpacainfo.com)) for a calendar of events. At alpaca shows, pay particular attention to the animals that excel in the show ring. Visit the booths where ribbon winners are stalled and ask the owners why they think their animal won a ribbon. Listen closely for explanations of conformation and fiber characteristics.
4. If you decide to move forward, develop your game plan first. What do you want to do in the alpaca business? Will you start with pet-quality alpacas or begin by purchasing breeding stock? Do you want to start producing crias quickly by purchasing bred females, or do you want to start more slowly by purchasing younger maidens? Do you plan on bringing your alpacas home right away or will you board them at a nearby farm? How will fiber production and products factor into your plans? Where do you see your venture 3, 5 and 10 years from now? A great place to help you make these informed decisions is the Finca Alta Vista 'Paca Boot Camp™.
5. Take an objective look at your financial resources. Get different opinions about the cost to purchase and maintain QUALITY and HEALTHY alpacas from breeders in geographic areas similar to your own. Don't forget to budget for higher ticket items like scales, livestock trailers and other farm equipment that will make your venture easier. Do you have adequate shelter and fencing for the climate and predators in your area or will you need to budget for upgrades? Ask breeders how long it took them to achieve profitability and how they did it. Consult your tax advisor and/or financial planner about how alpaca ownership will fit into your overall financial goals.
6. Locate a caring local veterinarian with camelid experience or one that is eager and willing to learn about alpacas. Schedule an appointment with him or her before you make your first purchase. An emergency is a bad time for you to call for the first time. Understand the vet's fee structure and decide what will be his or her level of involvement. Ask what vaccinations are required for your area. Also, it's good to have at least one back-up veterinarian that you can call if needed. Purchase a copy of Norm Evan's Field Manual (available through Useful Lama Items (800)-635-5262) and read it from cover to cover. Purchase a copy for your veterinarian if he or she has limited camelid experience.

7. When you are ready to buy, focus on quality not quantity. If you are purchasing pet-quality alpacas, focus on temperament and ease of handling. If you are purchasing breeding stock, focus on conformation, fiber quality and temperament. Remember that it will be easier to improve fiber characteristics than to correct any negative conformational trait. For your breeding stock selections choose only ARI-registered alpacas. Medical records should be readily available and reviewed thoroughly by you and your vet, and a pre-purchase exam is strongly recommended. Read contracts carefully and make sure they address things such as live-birth and reproductive guarantees, transportation to your farm and whether or not you will gain ownership of crias if the dam is being financed. Ask farm for names of others that have purchased animals from them and contact these customers for a reference. If you will be boarding your alpacas, be sure you clearly understand how they will be cared for and all things that you will be billed for. Remember that auctions can be exciting, but tread carefully with an experienced breeder at your side if you decide to purchase through this route. If you have chosen to insure your purchases, make sure that coverage is bound when you sign the sales contract.

Most experienced breeders will tell you to buy the best you can afford . . . but as a new owner or breeder, how do you know what is the best? Are you purchasing alpacas that another breeder is looking to cull from their herd or are they offering the best examples of their program? Before you purchase any animal, imagine that you are trying to sell this animal to an experienced breeder . . . Could you do it? Why would an experienced breeder be interested in this animal? If you have doubts about either question, it is best to continue your search or get a second opinion from a trusted and experienced advisor.

8. Locate a local source for hay and understand how to obtain and interpret a forage analysis. Locate your local farm supply dealer for purchasing equipment such as feeders and gate panels. Decide which grain and mineral supplements you will use and where you can obtain them. Call camelid suppliers (see our RESOURCES section) and ask for their latest catalog. Talk with other owners about what supplies you will need relative to the alpaca path you have chosen.
9. If you have chosen to become an alpaca breeder, attend the Ohio State University Neonatal Clinic or comparable hands-on birthing seminar. Contact OSU at (614)-292-6661 for more information about their next class. Encourage your vet to attend and offer to sponsor him or her if your budget allows.
10. Before your alpacas arrive, take a tour of your farm. Do you have the supplies you need? Are there any potential hazards (sharp wires, hanging electrical cords, slippery surfaces, poisonous plants within reach or in the pasture)? Have you scheduled additional vaccinations that your alpacas may need once they enter your geographic area? Do you have adequate supplies of hay, bedding, feed and mineral supplements on hand? Are phone numbers for your veterinarians and support farms posted for quick reference?

Now pat yourself on the back for taking time to thoroughly research and prepare for this life-changing venture! Raising alpacas can be hard work at times, but for most it is a labor of love. Just wait until your first cria stands on her own for the first time and takes those first shaky steps. You'll know what we mean...

