



The Farmers' Voice

BY SERENA KENNA

FOR THIS ISSUE OF OHV, I was fortunate enough to interview Leda Blumberg, who with her husband, Steve Cole, owns and operates Faraway Farm Alpacas in Yorktown Heights. On a perfect autumn afternoon, we plopped right down on the grass in the field where her beautiful alpacas were grazing. It was a scene right out of *Little House*, with the barn in the foreground (where Leda holds charity events, square dances and educational seminars) next to the farm store, which holds all of the marvelous items made with unimaginably soft and silky alpaca fleece. (Note that the alpacas are shorn carefully and never harmed.) One-week-old baby alpaca Troubadour, seized with uncontrollable curiosity, kept toddling over to kiss Leda on the nose while trying to figure out what my pen was. I could hardly keep myself from watching these adorable animals long enough to write anything.

SK: These animals are amazing; curious, sweet, gentle, friendly, as well as beautiful. What inspired you and Steve to embark on an alpaca-raising adventure?

LB: We started out with a horse farm years ago, and indeed still have some horses. We were looking for an additional source of income to enable us to keep our property as a sustainable farm. We researched a variety of options and decided to focus on alpacas to see if they would be a good fit for us. We visited a dozen or so alpaca farms, went to shows, attended seminars and researched the requirements for raising them properly. We realized we had to make some changes to the infrastructure of the farm to accommodate them, but we knew this was what we wanted to do. We now have 25 alpacas on our farm.

SK: Watching them, I can certainly see why. You said you had to make some changes; what kind of changes?

LB: Changing the fencing was a priority. We added five-foot no-climb fencing and ran some electric wires on the outside in order to keep predators away. The alpacas never come into contact with the electric fence. It was installed to deter coyotes, dogs and any other animals that would present a danger. Then of course, there was preparation for annual shearing, having the fleece spun into yarn, and creating hand-made items for our farm store. Alpaca fleece is amazingly versatile: fleece from

the younger animals is ultra-soft and is used for clothing such as hats, sweaters, gloves, scarves, shawls, baby clothes and teddy bears; fleece from the older alpacas is used for socks, rugs and throws.

SK: Tell me about breeding alpacas. What is their diet? How many crias [baby alpacas] are born at a time, and how much do they weigh at birth? Which animals are mated? Is their milk fit for human consumption? How long is gestation?

LB: Alpacas are able to breed at about two years old. We choose our matings very carefully in order to improve each generation and create the best possible fleece. Orlando Cloud—who is coming out of the barn right now; notice how the girls are getting excited and flirty—is our multichampion sire. His offspring have won more than 80 championships and he is one of the best male alpacas in the country. Baby alpacas, called crias, weigh between 14 and 20 pounds at birth, and gestation is 11½ months. Female alpacas only produce enough milk for their crias, so their milk is not used for anything else. Alpacas normally give birth to one cria at a time; twins are rare. They eat a typical herbivore diet of grass, hay and vitamin-enhanced grain along with free-choice minerals to keep them healthy.

SK: I can certainly understand the girls' reaction; your Mr. Cloud is quite the looker. He is impressive, both in stature and coloring, and of course I would imagine grows the most exquisite fleece of the breed. How much would a breeding to an alpaca like Orlando cost, assuming you are choosing top-of-the-line animals?

LB: Stud fees range from about \$750 for younger males, while proven champions' fees can be upwards of \$3,000. Alpacas purchased just for fiber cost about \$500; however, high-quality animals purchased for breeding can run anywhere between \$5,000 and \$15,000.

SK: Do you and Steve have other sources of income, or is the raising of alpacas enough to sustain you?

LB: I am an author, editor, photographer and freelance writer. In addition, I edit and publish *Hudson Valley HorseSource*, a guide to essential businesses and services for equestrians, with my business partner, Mary Kornblum. Steve is a research psychologist, and we are both very lucky to be able to work at home so we can care for the animals as well. When the pregnant alpacas get close to their due dates, it is especially important to be available on the farm. Steve and I have a wonderful balance of intellectual work and hands-on farming in our lives, which I believe is what makes us so successful and keeps us quite content.

SK: How much land do you own, and is it costly to maintain the land for the herd?

LB: We have 43 acres, about 12 of which is farmed. Alpacas are easy on the land and their day-to-day care is fairly easy. Maintaining the property can be quite costly because Westchester is an expensive county to live in. We received some assistance from an organization called the Watershed Agricultural Council that works with farmers to improve their soil and water quality. If a farm is approved for a grant, they will help to make any necessary improvements.

SK: That is wonderful and extremely helpful, considering all of the hard work and devotion it takes to maintain a farm like Faraway Farm and have all of the fleece products made. How are they made and how do you sell them?

LB: The alpacas are shorn once a year in May. After shearing, I sort through all the fleeces and send them to a small fiber mill to have them made into yarn. Several local fiber artists then turn our yarn into the beautiful garments we sell at our farm store and online. We hold Open Houses during the year, usually the last weekend in September, the weekend after Thanksgiving, and a weekend in April. Between Thanksgiving and Christmas we are open every weekend from noon to 4:00 p.m. for holiday shoppers. On all other days we are open by appointment only.

SK: Awesome! Let's wander over to the shop; I'd love to see what you have. Thank you for a truly wonderful experience today and for sharing your experience and knowledge about being an alpaca farmer with our readers. Your alpaca herd is, I'm sure, an inspiration to other farmers as well as to visitors.

You can visit Leda, Steve, Troubadour, Ambrosia, Orlando Cloud and the rest of the herd online at www.Faraway-FarmAlpacas.com, where you can learn more about alpacas and purchase some of their exquisite garments.

We welcome your comments; send them to: pointofview@organichudsonvalley.com. Some of the comments we publish will be posted on our Facebook page. ■

