

Leader of the Pack

FEATURES EDITOR LAURIE YARNELL CHATS WITH LEDA BLUMBERG, ALPACA BREEDER AND CO-OWNER OF FARAWAY FARM IN YORKTOWN HEIGHTS.



Your farm has been in your family for sixty years. How did that come about?

My parents weren't looking for a farm of forty-five-plus acres—just a good place to raise a family. But they fell in love with this beautiful piece of property and bought it in 1951. I was born and raised here, riding horses and helping to tend the sheep, chicken, cows, and goats before I left for college. I returned in the early eighties to raise my own family.

What made you decide to introduce alpacas?

We were looking for another source of farm income and fell in love with alpacas after spotting some babies in a field in upstate New York. We were just smitten. Today, we have fifteen alpacas—five males and ten females.

What about them do you find so appealing?

'Enchanting' is the word everyone uses.

Are they dangerous?

Not at all. They don't have top teeth in the

front so they don't bite, and they will only kick if cornered—and even that is rare.

Do they spit, like their camel cousins?

They are more likely to spit at each other, although they might spit at the vet doing a procedure they're unhappy with.

How much does it cost to raise one alpaca?

About three hundred dollars a year, an amount that the sale of its fleece pretty much covers.

How is their fleece made into yarn?

Alpacas are shorn once a year, in May; it's a painless procedure done with an electric clipper, and we send the raw fleece to a small mill in New England where it is washed, carded or combed, and spun into yarn without any chemicals, pesticides, detergents, or dyes. We bag the fleece from each animal separately so that buyers can meet the actual alpaca their skeins of yarn are from.

Describe alpaca fleece.

It's extremely soft, like cashmere, and incredibly warm, yet lightweight. The fashion industry considers alpaca fleece a luxury fiber, and it comes in more natural colors—sixteen—than any other animal fiber.

You sell alpacas, too. How much does one cost?

Anywhere from five hundred dollars for a non-breeding boy to twenty thousand for an award-winning, top-quality breeding female. And a stud fee for breeding with one of our boys is one thousand to two thousand, five hundred dollars.

What's next for Faraway Farm?

We're interested in using alpacas in therapeutic settings, like working with children and adults with special needs as well as the elderly, and continuing to host workshops about alpaca health and fiber arts, such as knitting, weaving, crocheting, and hand-spinning.

Are there any other interesting facts about alpacas you'd like to share?

Alpacas are pregnant for an average of eleven-and-a-half months, and we confirm their pregnancies by something called a spit-off. A week or so after they've been bred, we bring the male to the female. If she's already conceived, she will spit at him. **W**

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