

Gimme Two Pounds of The ‘Good Stuff’

Assessing Your Fiber for the Handspinning Market

by Cindy Lavan

Quality fiber is the key in developing, maintaining, and expanding your cottage industry market. We have been breeding and raising alpacas for six years and have seen the quality of fleeces improve annually, both with breeding on our farm and across the country as well.

When we started with our first alpacas, we were fiber novices. In fact, we really did not explore that aspect of alpaca ownership in the purchasing process, but focused, instead, on high-quality foundation stock onto which we could build. Color was not as important as quality. Our goal was to secure the best animals we could get for the prices we could afford.

That was six years ago. This is what we still tell our customers today: find the best alpaca you can for the price you can afford. Do not worry so much about color. Breeding for fiber quality can easily be seen in breeding with quality herdsires. Plus, as we all know, what color you think you might get, might not be what you get at all in the cria.

After our first alpacas were settled in for a few weeks, we began our fiber adventure. Now that we had the animals, what to do with our fiber? How do we sell it? To whom would we sell it? We quickly learned the best way to approach this situation was to educate ourselves on what the buyer would be looking for in our alpaca fiber. One day, I found myself at a local spinning group referred to me by an angora goat breeder. I walked in, stated, “I would like to learn how to spin,” and since then, I have been spinning (or knitting) almost every night.



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What do we know about fiber? We know what has sold for us successfully over the past six years is clean, well skirted, and/or well prepared fiber. We know that customers will keep coming back to us year after year for the ‘the good stuff.’ [We sometimes wonder what law enforcement officials would think if they overheard us talking over the phone with our fiber clients, “Hey man, I want two pounds of the good stuff!”] We know what sells and what does not. We know our market.

The ‘good stuff’ can make you some good money if you present it well. Know that each alpaca’s fleece is different. With a smaller herd, it is very easy to keep track of each fleece. When offering your fleece for sale, offer pictures of the alpaca along with the fiber. A lot of folks like the ‘personal touch’ this adds and makes the fleece even more special. When shear-

ing your alpaca, try to skirt your fleece right away. It’s easier to do it while you are already dirty. When we shear, we skirt as we shear. That is, we will automatically cut the fleece where we want. We include what we want, or don’t want with each blanket, etc. Segregate the qualities of fiber, using a visual and tactile basis to start.

Prior to shearing, we do not overly groom the alpacas. We will begin picking up all straw and vegetable matter in their barns and fields. We usually start the field and barn-cleaning process at least one month before shearing will actually begin. We then, on an almost a daily basis, continue to pick up straw and vegetable matter that somehow reappears and comes off the animals when they dust-bathe. We do not groom the alpacas until right before shearing, and sometimes all we do is a quick once-over with a blower or hand to remove dust and debris on the outside of the fleece. The suris we do groom a bit more, especially to make sure their locks are even and straight with little vegetable matter on their top line that might contaminate the rest of the fleece.

Cria fleeces traditionally are the dirtiest fleeces your alpaca will ever have. Those wonderfully-microned little monsters collect everything. We have been known to shear as early as three months, not only for the health of the animal (a lot of fiber growth already), but also to maintain the cleanliness and integrity of their cria fleece before the little buggers begin to ruin it. We might not get as much poundage if we waited another 6-12 months to shear, but we get a cleaner, more valuable product right away. Some of

these lovely creatures do a wonderful job of growing back a denser coat the second time around.

When shearing, work with a clean area prepared to lay your fleece out while taking it off the animal. Always remember: the cleaner the fleece, the better. It is easier to clean the fleece while it is still on the alpaca. However, if you spend one hour grooming the alpaca, then expect to shear the alpaca, taking maybe another 20 minutes; no doubt you will have a very unhappy, if not totally stressed-out alpaca on your hands. No one wants that.

Skirting. It literally means just that. Taking off the different or non-consistent fibers from the edges or skirt of the fleece. It also means removing vegetable matter, dirt, and by all means, second cuts from the fleece. You may lose overall fleece weight in the end, but it will be a better product. A well-skirted fleece is a very good thing in the handspinning community. We recommend a skirting table that allows dirt and vegetable matter to fall through cracks while working with the fleece. If you rolled up your fleece properly after



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shearing, it will be easier to work with while skirting. You will begin to know which end of your fleece is which, instead of guessing where and what you are working with.

A well skirted, clean fleece in the general wool handspinning market commands top dollar. There is no reason why alpaca cannot do the same, if not better.

What about staple length? Color? Crimp in huacaya? No crimp in suri? Staple length of about 3-5 inches in huacaya alpaca is adequate for the handspinner. Some would not even mind it around 2-3 inches if they were planning on blending it with a shorter staple fiber like merino or angora. A staple length of over 7 inches will most likely have weathered ends and be less desirable to a handspinner. Weathered means damaged ends, not lighter in color. Weathered ends or tips will affect the yarn's ability to stay strong.

When evaluating a fleece, a handspinner may take a lock from various areas of the fleece and examine it. They will check the ends for strength and pull on the lock close to their ear, listening for cracks or breaks. If they hear cracks and the fiber falls apart in their hands, forget it. Think of what the yarn would be if the fiber breaks before you even begin spinning with it. Staple length is important, but may not be the end-all in huacaya if the spinner intends on blending the fiber with another fiber as mentioned above.

Between Shearing and Skirting

Now that you have the fleece off the animal and lying on a sheet in front of you, how do you get it into a bag or sack for more in-depth skirting later? Know that the fleece of an alpaca is similar to human hair in structure. The more you ‘play’ or ‘manhandle’ it, the more likely you are to destroy the integrity of the fleece and lock structure, which devalues your product.

If you are working with two halves of a blanket fleece, lay them out side by side with cut ends up. Pick away all second cuts. Lay the two sides on top of each other with cut ends facing each other. From one end of this fiber sandwich, begin to roll it into a log shaped piece. If working with a whole fleece that has been taken off in one piece, lay the fleece out with cut end up (Figure 1). Fold the sides in and then roll into a log shaped piece (Figure 2). (HINT: If you

place each show fleece on a sheet, you can roll the sheet into the fleece itself. This prevents the fleece from sticking to itself if you have a very fine microned fleece.) Place this piece in your sack or bag (Figure 3). We use computer generated labels (4 x 3) with the following information on it: name of animal, date of shearing, an area to circle if its B (for blanket), NL (for neck and leg) or O (for other). We also have an area for fleece weight and whether H (huacaya) or S (suri) as well as A (adult) or C (cria) if others are helping me later in sorting. We put these labels on tie string tags and lace them around the tops of the bags for easier identification. We will also, if we feel necessary, put an identically filled out label on a tie string tag inside the bag, just in case we are dealing with multiple alpacas of the same color.



Suri staple is a bit more important. Suri fiber traditionally possesses a longer staple and should be longer than huacaya in general. The longer staple also makes for a more even yarn when working with suri. Shorter fiber may stick out and make a scratchier yarn after spinning. Too long, however, is not good either. Suri fiber ends can weather as well.

Color is a subjective, personal preference. Our theory behind the higher interest in gray and black alpacas is this: There is no truer black in any other animal fiber and gray is so commonly known in a wool industry, that these two are immediate draws for any wool-based handspinner. However, we also hear: "Look at that brown. Look at that camel color. Look at that rosy gray." Each person has their own preference. Some handspinners only want white to dye or blend with other fibers. Some want only shades of brown. Some want a bit of all colors. Having a variety of natural colored alpacas will increase your chance of selling to a wider audience. If you decide to 'specialize' in certain colors, know that you are limiting your market in doing so. However, you may gain a higher reputation for that particular color of fleece if your product is worthy.

Crimp in huacaya. Crimp is good. Crimp is very good from a handspinning perspective. From a machine processing perspective, as we were once told, "We can get rid of that." (As a handspinner, I nearly keeled over.) Crimp provides elasticity to a fleece and elasticity is a rarity in commercial alpaca tops available in yarn stores today. At a recent lecture to future alpaca fiber artisans (I hope), I found that they were amazed to see alpaca with crimp. A lot of hand spun roving available by suppliers today, does not always look like 100 percent alpaca to a more trained eye. Those purchasing this product, however, think it is. Education will change that.

Crimp in sheep fleeces is a sign of elasticity and elasticity equals strength and give to the handspinner. It means a more durable, useable yarn. When



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my students saw raw alpaca for the first time, some were amazed. They saw right from the lock the elasticity alpaca can have. No, it does not have as much as merino wool, but it does have some crimp built in. Now, let us be honest. Not all alpaca fleeces have a whole lot of crimp. We have seen some alpaca fleeces that have a finer handle or feel, that don't have as much crimp or as much density. There are fleeces that possess crimp, density, and fineness. Each fleece is different. The less crimp fleeces could be blended with wool to add crimp, making its yarn even more versatile to handspinners and more attractive to spin. Remember: each fleece is different and each handspinners desire for the end product and yarn are different.

No crimp in Suri. That's good, too. Suri alpaca is completely different and just as exciting to work with for handspinners as huacaya. It spins like silk and requires more twist than wool and can be very slippery for the novice spinner. It's more of a true specialty fiber that wants to spin thin. It wants to be made into lace-weight yarn and delicate items such as shawls and scarves. In fact, from roughly \$15 worth of raw suri, a handspinner could make almost two scarves if spun lace weight and knit on larger sized needles. Suri with its longer staple requires a longer draw or distance between hands when spinning.

Its natural tendency to twist at the ends can be annoying, yet advantageous in hand processing. Know the suri fiber before offering it for sale. Would you be interested in buying a boat from a car salesman? Yes, he's a salesman who can fill out the registration papers and all, but what does he know about inboard engines and bilge pumps? Handspinners want to know what they are buying before they buy it. Also, the last thing you want them to do is get home and hate the fiber. Good bet that you will probably never sell fiber to them again.

Now, the question you all have been asking, "What do I sell it for?"

A very good, yet subjective question. With over 80 new fleeces to deal with each year here at our farm, our idea of selling as much as we can, while doing as little work as possible, is at the very forefront of our minds. However, by no means do we want to go cut-rate and affect the prices of the industry. If you are offering a product of quality, then ask a quality price for it. If you are offering a product of less quality, then adjust your price accordingly. Know that most experienced handspinners have tried some form of alpaca already, whether commercially processed or sold to them by another alpaca breeder. They already have preconceived notions of what alpaca is to them. A lot of new handspinners are scared of alpaca from the myths they have heard. "Don't make sweaters out of it, they will end up around your knees." "Only use it in blends to build in elasticity." Your alpaca fiber is better than that. Prove it to the handspinner and you may have a customer for life.

Handspinners are a funny breed of people. No matter how much fiber we have, we need and want more. It's innate, we can't help ourselves. I even find myself buying other types of fiber every now and then. I've even been known to buy other people's alpaca if I like the fleece enough.

Our goal as alpaca breeders should be to educate the handspinning community on the wonders of the fiber. Providing them with a good product

with which to start will not only increase our promotion of the alpaca fiber, but it will also increase the value and promotion of the entire industry as well. The alpaca fiber is another aspect of the whole industry. There are three facets of the alpaca industry: husbandry, marketing the alpacas themselves, and then working with the fiber. There is nothing more satisfying than working with the animal and then sitting down and making something from his or her fiber. There is also reward if you can get some money from it as well. Fiber sales ideally should help you support the husbandry needs of the alpaca itself. Last year, our fiber sales generated over \$9,000, which covered the cost of all our hay and most of the year's grain for all the animals on the farm.

Get your fiber out there. For fear of sounding like a drug dealer, give it away if you have to. Get them hooked. They will come back for the 'good stuff.' If you are new to the hand-spinning community, invite a spinners group to the farm for a day of spinning and learning about alpacas and



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their fiber. Offer discounts to spinning groups if they purchase fiber from you. Tell local yarn stores you have alpacas and want to offer fiber for sale. Ask to leave flyers or brochures with them. There are many ways you can promote your alpacas and their fiber. If you are not a handspinner or not interested in becoming one, enlist

the services of a handspinner to help you with your fiber while shearing and preparing your fiber. “Nothing could be finer than being paid with fiber,” is a handspinner's motto.

Assessing your fiber for the handspinning market can be work. Like all work, there is compensation. If you provide the 'good stuff,' you will be compensated year after year. Handspinners can do two things very well. One: make beautiful fibers into beautiful yarns, and two: talk. Stay on the good side of handspinners. They can be your biggest asset in assessing your fiber for the handspinning market.

About the Author

Cindy Lavan, along with husband Tim and son Charlie, has been raising alpacas on their rural 150-acre farm in mid-coast Maine since 1993. The Lavans are active in every aspect of the alpaca industry, and Cindy is a former AOBA board member. They actively educate the public about alpacas, and are also involved with a special program that brings inner-city kids to their farm – which is the first exposure most have had to a rural environment. You can reach Cindy at cindyl@ctalpacas.com or (877) 283-7222.