

CHOOSING A GUARD LLAMA

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So you're persuaded that a llama is a necessary guard animal for you. How do you choose one?

Answer number one is easily said, difficult to accomplish. Go to an experienced supplier that makes *providing guard llamas a special part of their business*. Acceptable suppliers have successfully sold a goodly number of guard llamas. They know what works. They know how to train you for success. There are many superior llama breeders that have no experience in selecting guard llamas. They are fine for selecting breeding, showing, fiber or pet animals – not guards.

Your supplier should make the initial guard llama selection for you, offering a choice of several llamas that will fulfill your requirements. The supplier must offer a replacement guarantee, should the llama fail to guard. This leaves out the small breeder that has what may be a great guard, but has no way to back up a guarantee. Getting your money back isn't the answer. You need an animal that almost surely will work. You have a guarantee, but don't want to use it! This also precludes your buying on the cheap – auctions and the like. You *need* a professional, not only for the purchase, but also for the knowledge of how to handle many situations that may arise later, and the all-important guarantee.

Did the supplier choose well? A quick way to judge is to ask what guarantee is offered. The best guarantee is from the supplier who agrees to replace a guard animal at no cost to you when you, the buyer, decide that the llama you have purchased is failing to guard.

A guard llama has traits normal to llamas, but has advanced degrees in aloofness, awareness, bonding, and work ethic. These are necessary traits of a guard. Can you, a buyer, spot these traits in someone else's llama? No way. I can't either. You can answer the easy questions – gelding vs. female, two year old vs. mature animal. The question of which specific animals will guard must be left to the supplier, who will back the decision with an acceptable guarantee of performance.

Be comfortable with the seller asking a lot of questions: what is your experience with large animals, what kind of fence do you have, do you want to guard males or females, what do you have for a barn, how many animals on how many acres, do you live within delivery distance (usually about three hours), what are your standards of care, do you have an experienced vet, etc. These and more will form the basis for the seller's decision on what animals to offer you. Deal openly for your own benefit. Bear in mind that the seller doesn't want to have to visit your farm on an emergency basis. Create success.

When your guard is delivered, you, the buyer, have some rather special responsibilities. You must see to it that the animals bond. The initial step takes only two or three days. It is simple acceptance of each other on the part of your animals and the guard. This should be accomplished in fairly tight quarters. Put the llama and three or four of your animals to be guarded in a box stall about 10' X 10,'

water in one corner and hay in another. When they accept each other to the point that they are sleeping closely together, the beginning of bonding has been accomplished, but they are not yet in love – a necessity!

Then turn them out with the greater herd into a corral or an area of that size – say not over 50' X 50" or so, well fenced. Let them stay all together here for twenty to thirty days. Try to watch closely to determine if the guarded animals are beginning to look up to the llama, depend on him. Try to see if the llama returns the feeling. Guarding will not take place until bonding has occurred. Yes, this is a difficult assignment, but when bonding happens is when you have a guard. Then, only then, is it time to let the animals out to larger pastures. When you do this, halter the llama and walk the fence line at least twice, go all the way around. The llama has to know what the constraints are. When you change to new pastures that he hasn't been to, walk the line again.

How to tell if your llama isn't guarding? A quick test: borrow a neighbor dog, and walk it up to the fence coming from an unusual direction. Watch the llamas' actions closely. He should spot the incoming dog quickly, and put himself between the dog and his charges as you approach. This is usually accomplished at a walk. No need to get excited. A dog or coyote, seeing a much larger animal approaching, goes down the road to the next farm for lunch. When you see your llama act this way, he is guarding successfully. Mission accomplished. If the llama is still asleep at the barn, question his capabilities. In conjunction with your supplier, consider exchanging this llama if this is the case after bonding.

Occasionally a llama will herd his charges away from perceived danger. The llama at rest will spend most of his time on the highest spot in the pasture so he can survey the surrounding area. He will always be alert to the slightest changes around him and will awaken even from a sound sleep to check things out.

We have had a number of interesting occurrences with guard llamas we have sold. The one that gives us all the most assurance is the llama that ended (with prejudice) the entry efforts of a Malamute/Chow cross dog that had been threatening for over a year. Another llama, located near a naval air base, continues to guard against incoming helicopters. One llama herded a neighbors pig home. Another became worried about the domestic geese that lived with "his" sheep. When the geese went across the road to a pond, he jumped the fence, went and herded them home where they belonged. Another ended the threat of a passing beaver. There are many stories, mostly true, of encounters with porcupines and skunks. Just part of the job, the llamas say.

Then comes the establishment of basic standards that apply to all guards. Females guard as well as geldings, but if the need might come that you will need this llama for a male herd, choose the gelding. Age matters! We have sold llamas as young as two as guards and it worked fine. We are more comfortable with fully mature animals – say age four or more. They have their heads on as straight as they ever will be. Large or small doesn't seem to matter. It is the age-old question of "the fight in the man, not the man in the fight."