

# WHY LLAMAS? FOR FUN, OF COURSE!

Lars Garrison

West Mountain Farm, Inc.

Llamas are really fun to own! They appeal to a broad range of potential owners - possibly you?

One of our first customers, in 1988, simply wanted llamas to look at – to be well cared for pasture art. Many people enjoy showing animals competitively. We have a friend who trains llamas for pulling a cart. Many people enjoy camping and hiking, but don't want to carry the load that extended wilderness stays entail. Use of their fiber offers a whole new dimension in life – spinning, knitting, felting and weaving. Simply caring for large animal pets is satisfying to many. Many carefully chosen llamas make great sheep and goat guards, against dogs and coyotes.

In South America llamas are a beast of burden, sometimes called "the jeep of the Andes." They are the farm to market transportation medium. Every year they are sheared for their fiber (we call it wool, but that really applies only to sheep). And at a certain point, they do become a food animal. Nothing is wasted where the annual family income is under \$300, in Bolivia, for example.

Why are they fun? They offer something to almost everyone. We thoroughly enjoy working with intelligent large animals on a day to day basis. We have about 100 llamas and alpacas on a bucolic mountainside of southern Vermont. They are eminently trainable if you teach in the manner which they learn. Llamas are aloof, preferring their human to be about three to four feet away. They seldom react to petting or food as a reward. The trainer has to learn the traits each animal to gain trust and cooperation – a truly fun challenge. We enjoy taking our llamas in parades, to nursing homes, using them for pet therapy, making school and library visits. People really like seeing and touching these regal, serene, calm animals!

Health care for llamas and alpacas is quite simple. They need about 2% of their body weight per day of good quality first cut hay (they have a very efficient ruminant type multiple stomach). We feed about a pound per day of grain which carries the minerals they would get in South America but are lacking in the soils here; and we have a mineral and salt mix available to them at all times. They get annual shots for rabies and clostridia diseases, and are dewormed monthly. On an average day we do chores for our 100 llamas and alpacas in two hours. With, say, four animals, chores take only a few minutes morning and evening. Be forewarned, however. You will enjoy their company so much that you will be with them much more than that!

Llamas have gained an unfair reputation for spitting. This almost invariable arises from their being raised in petting zoos and the like. When raised as part of a herd, spitting is reserved for other llamas, not people. We have over 100 llamas and alpacas. None of them react to people by spitting.

Llamas can be green-broke to pull a cart in only a few days of professional training. They are taught to react to both voice command and reins. Putting the trainee llama in a cart between two trained ones is easiest. The green llama learns commands within a few hours, following the example of the other llamas. After the initial training, it is up to the owner to regularly, every few days, reinforce the lessons. Not all llamas are able to be cart animals. Careful selection is the rule.

Llamas and alpacas are shorn every spring; both to harvest the fiber and to relieve heat stress during the summer. Llamas yield about three to five pounds of fiber, while an alpaca gives four to eight pounds. Llamas tend to have more guard hair in their coat than does an alpaca. Unless the guard hair is removed, a manual process, their fiber can be itchy in garments worn near the skin. Properly prepared, both llama and alpaca fiber can be used for anything that wool from sheep can be. A wonderful renewable resource!

Llamas and alpacas are a part of the camel family. The llama was developed from the wild guanaco, while the alpaca came from the vicuna, about 6,000 years ago. The original camel family came from what is now the Mississippi River valley some forty million years ago. In due course the bactrian and dromedary camels went over the Bering Straits, while the vicuna and guanaco went South through Panama to the Andes. The rest became extinct.

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# SHEEPGUARDS - LLAMAS?

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Yep, llamas work. They make great guard animals, inexpensively too!

**Sheep predation loss reduced by 95% by the use of carefully selected guard llamas.** This is according to Dr. Bill Franklin, Iowa State University, in a 1993 study of 145 ranchers using llamas as sheep guards. On open range with just the shepherd and herding dogs predation loss was 11%, mostly lambs. Same factors but add a llama - predation loss reduced to 1%. A 95% decrease!

In the Eastern part of the United States sheep are fenced in, but fences often do not keep dogs and coyotes out. The guard animal is often the sole line of defense. We have delivered many llamas to sheep owners with fence 36" or less high. Predators just step in for dinner. Multiple lines of defense are a necessity. **Good management, good fences and good guards are partners.**

How does a llama guard? By **intimidation**, by going toward perceived danger. When a llama sees something unusual, he checks it out. He approaches danger, staying between it and his herd. This persuades dogs or coyotes to go next door for dinner. If they enter his space, usually a fence line, he attacks using his front feet to stomp. A guard llama killed a chow/malamute cross last summer in Vermont. When the dog was found he was partially in, under a gate. The llama got him right there, before he entered. It is unusual for them to have to attack. **Intimidation!** Some llamas actually herd their charges away from danger.

Llama guards are selected by age two when they are gelded. In choosing a llama guard, the breeder should look carefully at the prospects' personality. He must be among the most alert and watchful in the herd. He must bond well within their herd. He must be in excellent health. He must have a desire to remain aloof. This is not the llama that you want as a pet. There is such a thing as a "berserk llama," a hand-raised llama that has lost the defining line between people and llamas. This animal is dangerous, and must not be used as a guard. Otherwise, your guard llama will be fine with you and your grandchildren. Your pet dogs should not be allowed in the pastures. Llamas will learn to differentiate between predators and your working, herding, dogs. Careful introduction is the rule.

A guard, a work animal, is the only time when responsible breeders will sell a single llama. It is probable that you should not have two llamas guarding the same herd, due to the risk of their bonding and not guarding. This has been proved wrong on occasion, but is the general practice. Extreme care must be taken by the breeder in selecting llamas to be sold as guards. We find that about 10% of our gelded males are prospects, and only half of those end up as guards. **Not a llama you buy at auction!** Buy from a professional. They have the same feed and veterinary regimen as sheep, goats and cattle, reducing expenses.

Guaranteed guard llamas sell for around \$1,000, and will normally be effective for ten to 15 years, for a cost of under \$100 per year. This is significantly less than a guard dog, for example, which costs around \$700 and is effective for three to four years. All guards are inexpensive compared to predation loss. Do not buy a guard llama at an auction any more than you would get a guard dog from a pound. You need a professional to back your purchase, answer your questions, and if necessary, exchange the animal. **Your good management is the first line of defense.**

If you have questions, call us at 802 694 1417, e-mail [llamawmf@sover.net](mailto:llamawmf@sover.net).

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