

Paddocks, Fencing, Shelter and Water

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The basic requirements for keeping alpacas are not complicated and only slightly different from other stock. Following are the main subject areas:

Fencing and Paddocks.

In New Zealand, fencing for alpacas serves more to keep predators such as dogs out and alpaca groupings apart rather than keep alpacas in. Alpacas rarely challenge fences but intact males may rear up onto one when in close proximity of females and crias may try to go through a fence when they are first weaned from their mothers. Most New Zealand fencing types are suitable for alpacas, from standard eight wire sheep fencing to post and paling, are all very acceptable as long as they meet the minimum recommended height of 1.2 metres. Barbed wire must not be used as it causes injuries and can get caught up in the fleece. Thick fleeces are a good insulation layer and make electric fencing largely ineffective. Moreover, electric wires and tapes can be dangerous, particularly to crias as they can become entangled.

Alpacas are intelligent and can be moved between paddocks with little effort or stress. Opening a gate is frequently enough to indicate that they should pass through and they can be readily trained to come to you on clapping or calling out, even when at a distance.

For pasture, ryegrass is by far the commonest grass grown on New Zealand farms. It is suitable for many herbivore species but since alpacas are browsers and not grazers, they prefer variety in the plants to be eaten. A number of seed suppliers (for examples, [Specseed](#) and [Wesco](#)) have formulated seed mixtures more suited to alpacas which include bromes, fescues, lucerne, cocksfoot, clover, plantain and others. These mixtures do have to be resown every few years as ryegrass will reappear in the paddocks and eventually take over. One important issue with ryegrass is the Argentinian weevil which feeds on the roots of the grass eventually causing plant death. Seed suppliers have solved this problem by the introduction of an endophyte fungus which produces alkaloids that are toxic to the insects. Unfortunately, these chemicals are also toxic to alpacas and can result in ryegrass staggers (more detail is given in [this section](#)).

Alpacas will safely browse many plants but care must be taken to prevent access to poisonous species. This applies not only to what is growing in the paddock but also overhanging trees and given their neck reach, what is accessible one metre outside the fenceline. Discussion on this subject is given in the [toxic plants](#) page.

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Shelter and Shelters.

Alpacas are now kept in many countries around the world and in diverse climatic conditions. In spite of being cold-adapted animals they are able to thrive in wide ranging temperatures. However, higher temperatures can cause them to become stressed so shelter from the direct sun is very important. Shade trees are a common option and animals can be frequently seen sitting under them during the hottest hours. Some owners provide a shallow pond or other water they can sit in but this does not benefit the fleece. Some alpacas that particularly enjoy water have even been known to sit in cattle drinking troughs.

Whilst alpacas will usually sit in the paddock during showers and light rain, no animal enjoys the impact of heavy raindrops or hail and will seek shelter. Again, trees are a common solution (only really effective when they are in leaf) but many owners have provided constructed shelters or run-in buildings for their alpacas. There are many possible [designs](#) for these though herd size, local climatic, ground and economic factors will mean that some are more suitable than others for owners. At their simplest, 'bus stop shelter' types with the back to the prevailing wind serve to give cover though the more elaborate types resemble barns and may incorporate stalls, a feeding area and hay storage above. For the latter type, an electricity supply is invaluable, especially during the winter months. Apart from being able to light up the barn, power outlets make for easier shearing, amongst other things.

A number of owners have commented that their herd use the shelter only as a toilet. However, if the herd is shown from day one that food is provided or found at the shelter, this is less common. Either way, the alpacas have an option during poor weather.

Examination/Mating pens.

Ideally, alpaca owners should have a pen, perhaps attached to or beside a shelter, in which one or more animals can be held. An square area with sides of 3 to 4 metres is appropriate and having sides of at least 1.2 metres, preferably constructed in a way that legs cannot become stuck between the rails or boards. Two gates on opposite sides of the pen are useful. At minimum, it can be used for veterinary examination of an animal but will also make a suitable area for managed matings and the subsequent [splitting off](#) tests.

Water.

Water should always be freely available to your alpacas. Obviously, it must be a clean source. Given that alpacas do not drink large quantities of water, concrete cattle or horse troughs are unsuitable as they will become dirty and stagnant, especially during the summer. Notable is that any shallow trough or tank located on the ground is likely to be climbed into or splashed about by alpaca feet during hot weather or even, seemingly, just for amusement. One solution for this are smaller volume [fence mounted types](#). These can be easily plumbed with a garden hose connection to a tap so are self-refilling and fresh water is always added. Whichever type of container is used, it must be cleaned regularly otherwise dirt will accumulate and during summer months, slime and algae will grow turning the water green. Some of these algae can be harmful.

Halters and Leads.

Suitably sized halters and leads are needed as appropriate for the animals you have. These are widely available (eg. [Halters Plus](#) and [Alpaca Dynamics](#)) in various designs, colours and qualities.

Other equipment.

Items recommended for unpacking crias are given on the [reproduction page](#). Only a few other items are actually necessary:

- Toenail clippers. Although shearers will cut toenails whilst the alpaca is on the shearing table, this is an annual event. As discussed in the [maintenance](#) section, alpacas with white toenails will need them trimming more frequently. Widely used are [straight-bladed clippers](#) which although intended for sheep hooves, are sturdy and easily sharp enough to cut alpaca nails. It is advisable to blunt the tips of the blades before use.
- For feeding. Where there is a solid fence line, lengths of plastic guttering with the end caps glued in can be screw attached back-to-front. This is an especially useful method if you have larger numbers. For only a few alpacas, an alternative is wide-based shallow plastic bowls - these are cheap and available at all hardware stores.
- Dung collection. The removal of dung from paddocks is essential for controlling worm numbers and preventing nitrate accumulation in the soil and grass. At its simplest, this can be done using a pan and rake but even with the best efforts, this method will leave a quantity behind, especially so in longer grass and weeds. The most effective method is inevitably the most expensive but essential for those owners of significant herd numbers. The [Paddock Vac](#) and [Paddock Cleaner](#) use vacuum created by a small petrol engine to suck the dung through a wide pipe and into a chamber. These machines can be easily towed behind a lawn tractor or quad bike and are very effective even in long grass or in the wet. As the alpaca digestive system kills most seeds, the collected poo is a superb easily distributed fertiliser in its own right but can also be added to compost piles.

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