



the **ARCHIBULL** PRIZE

CUTE BECOMES A
WAY OF LIFE



ALPACAS HAVE PROVEN TO BE A PASSION AND A PURPOSE FOR CHERYL UREN.



In 1995, Cheryl and her husband, Geoff bought Tanglin Lodge, a 10 hectare property in Tennyson, in the Hawkesbury Valley, with no real plans for its future.

However, after first seeing alpacas at her daughter's friend's farm in 1997, she began investigating how she could make this new love become a part of her life. This started two years of research, including a 12-month course on alpaca farming.

"We bought our first two alpacas in 1999," she said Cheryl. "They went on to become five, then seven, then more than a dozen."

The introduction of the alpacas on the property has required new buildings and some others rebuilt, and the house renovated.

The fences have had to be improved, not so much to keep the alpacas in, but to keep dogs out.

"Dogs can do tremendous damage in a very short period of time," said Cheryl. "We have put in high mesh fences, that also run underground to prevent dogs getting in from underneath."

The property sits in hilly country and runs to a natural creek, the water from which is not used on the property. The Urens collect rain water in tanks and dams, which is pumped to water troughs around the farm.

"We don't give the animals access to the dams," said Cheryl. "We give them wading pools in hot weather, though. They love sitting in the water. If we don't give them the wading ponds, they all try and get in to the water troughs to keep cool!"

The farm runs about 80 alpaca at present. And although the Urens maintain a ratio of 50:50 machos to hembras (males to females), only six of the males are entire. The entire males are kept away from the females and joinings are well-planned to ensure that there is no mating between relatives.

"Alpacas are spontaneous ovulators, that is, mating triggers ovulation, so we ensure the machos don't meet the hembra by chance," said Cheryl. "Two weeks after a planned joining, reintroduction to the macho indicates the success of the first joining. Non-pregnant hembra will sit to be rejoined. Pregnant hembra will spit at the macho."



The pregnancy is confirmed with an ultrasound about three months after joining.

New blood is brought in to the herd by purchasing new entire machos. The gestation period is about 335 days. Cheryl added: "We also time the joining so that the cria (baby alpacas) are born in autumn or spring, when it is not too cold or hot."

Alpaca only give birth during daylight hours and births are usually short, making it a convenient process for farmers, especially if any birthing problems occur.

"We name new cria after beers - a custom started by our son-in-law," said Cheryl. "We have a Copperpenny, a Maxx, a Stella, a Heidi, the list goes on...and we don't even drink beer!"

The animals live on the property until they die a natural death sometime between 20-25 years of age.

The property participates in the voluntary Australian Johne's Disease Market Assurance Program to identify, protect and promote individual herds and flocks that are assessed as having a low risk of being Johne's-infected.

"Participating in the program is an additional expense as any animal deaths require an autopsy to check for the presence of Johne's," explained Cheryl. "But it also opens up the breeding market for us as our stock is guaranteed of Johne's-free health status."

Pasture management on the property is important as alpacas are constant grazers. They are rotated around various paddocks according to feed levels. The animals are also feed twice a day on hay and a muesli-type mix, which includes added trace minerals to optimise health.

Pasture improvement includes a fertiliser program based on visual assessment.

"Soil analysis is very expensive and we find we are able to tell what the soil needs by looking at the pasture," said Cheryl.

Alpaca fleece is similar to wool from sheep, but is warmer, not prickly and has no lanolin, making it hypoallergenic. The alpacas are shorn once a year, in spring. A professional shearer and a rouse-about are hired to ensure a quick, smooth process. The shearing includes taking a sample of side fleece for assessment to determine a price.

"Last year we got about \$13.80 for 100 grams, which is quite reasonable," said Cheryl.

"We need to sweep and clean between each shearing to ensure the fleece stays as clean and as dry as possible."

The property is run by Cheryl and Geoff, but both continue to work part-time elsewhere. The couple's children and their families also help on the farm as required.

Cheryl thinks their property differs from the other 112 alpaca breeders in the region by its inclusion in the Hawkesbury Harvest farmgate trail which sees the property open to the public for product sales.

“We have a small shop on the property where we sell our fleece and various products made from the wool of alpacas,” she said.

The property is located about an hour’s drive from Sydney and is open for visit by appointment, in addition to holding two open days each year.

“Visits are for groups of 15 or more and include Devonshire tea or lunch, all of which we prepare ourselves,” said Cheryl. “We get in lots of business clubs, retirement villages, and other clubs looking for somewhere to go.”



She is very pleased with the how the alpacas have added to her life.

“We have a great lifestyle, we have good health, we are servicing people and we love showing off our animals,” she said. “And people love looking at them.”

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