

I HAVE MY LLAMAS –‘NOW WHAT’™

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The information expressed in this article is based on the experience and the opinion of the above farm. Whether it's feeding, training, or basic care, there is always help available. Remember the only inappropriate question is the one that has not been asked. A unique aspect of the llama community has been its willingness to share information and give help to each other whenever necessary. If something is worrying you, or if you have further questions, make sure you take advantage of the wealth of knowledge in the llama community. However it is up to you to determine the value of the information you are given. Also remember to access the extensive GALA, LAMAS, or LANA libraries. Books, tapes, and videos are available on numerous subjects, and all of this help is only a phone call away.

EDUCATION

Llamas are livestock, and whether you intend to just own two to enjoy in your backyard or have plans to show or breed, it is your responsibility to learn how to best take care of your animals. Some ways to learn more about llamas are: visit other farms that have good reputations and ask questions about their programs; read books on the subject (you can either buy them outright, or utilize the GALA, LAMAS, LANA libraries and borrow books and videos); join one or more organizations; attend training clinics, workshops, and conferences to learn from the speakers as well as the other attendees. The internet can be a good resource for finding information on all aspects of llama ownership. Remember that all information on the internet may not be accurate.

KNOW THY VETERINARIAN

It is a good idea to develop a good relationship with a veterinarian before you have to use one. Find a large animal veterinarian who WANTS to work with llamas. They do not have to be camelid experts, but they should be willing to learn about them. Have your vet come out on some routine calls (deworming, shots, etc) to let them get acquainted with you, your farm practices, and your animals. Then if you need them at 1:00 a.m. on a January night they will be familiar with who you are, and will have some idea of the animal they are going to have to treat.

TRAINING HELP

There are quite a few trainers and training methods available to help you work with your animals. Most emphasize developing a respectful, working relationship with llamas as opposed to dominating them. Llamas are intelligent and learn quickly. It will make your life and your llama's life infinitely more enjoyable if you learn how to properly work with them. Since there are different training styles, chose the one you are most comfortable with, and if at all possible attend a workshop, or a clinic. Videos are useful, but training sessions are usually more beneficial. If and when you take your llamas out in public, you are going to be the center of attention. Please take time to work with your animals so they can put "their best foot forward".

BUYING

When buying your first llamas it is important to look around at a variety of animals. Talk to llama people. Visit many llama farms. Attend fairs, shows, and festivals. Look at llamas. It helps to know what you want your llamas for (what are your goals) so you are not approaching your first purchase on a totally emotional level. We all know that emotions play an important role also, but it truly is important to think about what your goals are. Are you looking for animals with good fiber? Do you just want companions? Do you want your animals for packing? Are you going to be breeding your animals? It is important to think about the difference of purchasing your animals at an auction vs. at a

llama farm. The inexperienced buyer at an auction can be overwhelmed and tend to make quick purchases based on an emotional level, which do not always follow what their intended goals are. It is unfair to purchase unregistered, unfit, untrained, or sickly animals at livestock auctions, through brokers, or from unethical breeders, and then expect your local farm to educate you after the fact or to save your new llamas from harm. We will do it for the sake of the animal, however it is still unfair. When you purchase a llama from a farm you are also buying a relationship with that farm. You need not make a quick decision and you can return many times to see the animal, work with the animal, and talk with the owners. After the purchase you have a ready source to call upon if you have further questions or concerns. Take your time. Look around. When the animal is right it will still be there.

PASTURE MATES

Young females should not be pastured with males. It is not uncommon for pregnancy to occur in females much earlier than expected. Geldings can be an invaluable aid when grouping your herd. They can keep weanlings company or be placed in with bred or open females when necessary. Intact males will need separate areas within sight of the herd. Some farms run intact males together. This can often be safely accomplished by an experienced owner with the appropriate amount of room for the males to run together. In our opinion new owners should be cautious of starting with a purchase of a breeding pair of llamas. This set up creates pasture management problems once a cria is produced. New pasture areas will have to be made ready immediately as you now have an open female, and intact male, and a cria. New owners will be better served to purchase geldings and or females as their first purchases.

NOT BEING ALONE

Llamas are a social herd animal. They do not like being alone and need another llama for companionship. If you have only two llamas you need to think of this whenever you remove one from the pasture. Have someone observe to make sure the llama left behind remains calm and does not challenge their fencing. Many starter farms who originally purchased two animals eventually find it easier to manage with three or four, since there is less stress on individual animals when they reside within a herd. Animals left alone, even for a short period of time will display behavior changes or experience stress. When llamas are young they learn a lot of proper behavior from the herd as the true nature of a llama is unable to fully develop without the influence of a herd. This in part is why it is unacceptable to remove a llama from a herd at too early an age. One can notice a change in herd dynamics whenever animals are introduced or removed from their setting. Extreme problems are being created by unethical breeders by raising young llamas on a bottle and selling them as early as twelve weeks of age. Llamas raised in this manner will have serious behavior problems as they mature. Young llamas should remain in their original herd until weaned which is between five and six months of age, unless it is sold with the dam.

HALTERS

When purchasing your llamas you should always ask to halter the animals yourself so you can see the llamas' level of training. Your llamas should arrive with a halter and a lead. Halters should not be left on the animals all of the time. Because many owners are not able to easily put on and take off halters, some resort to leaving the halters on. The halters can get caught on something in the pasture resulting in injury or death. The halter when left on can also produce sores on the animal's nose and face. In extreme cases the llama is still wearing the halter it has outgrown. For the animal's safety take time to learn the proper fit of a halter.

SHELTERS

Llamas are very adaptable to most climates, therefore shelters can be as simple or as elaborate as your budget will allow. Even though llamas tend to prefer to come and go as they please, it is important to offer some type of protection from the elements. Sheltering from the direct driving winter/spring winds in your area is as important as providing shade for the warmer weather. Shelters also provide a perfect place for water and barn fans. When setting up your shelters, it is important to include an area that can

be closed off from the rest of the herd for use as an isolation stall if you have an animal that needs to be confined because of an injury or sickness.

SAFE PASTURES

If you are new to livestock have someone walk your pastures with you. They can detect any factors that are safety hazards. Many different types of fencing are used and each owner has a different preference. Whatever you chose needs to be safe for the llamas. Barbed wire is always a bad choice. Also know your poisonous plants. Llamas are browsers and like to eat a number of things that can be fatal for them.

CATCH PENS

Catch pens or smaller enclosed paddocks are important to allow for the owners to work safely with their animals. They offer a stress free way of catching, haltering, and training the llamas without having to resort to chasing them around the field. The catch pen should be designed so that the animals funnel naturally into the smaller area.

BE PREPARED

Every farm should have a first aid kit, (and birthing kit where appropriate), readily accessible. See attached: *'Be Prepared Checklist'*.

FEEDING

Ask ten people what is best to feed llamas, and in what quantity, and you will get ten different answers. Here are some things to keep in mind: What is your pasture situation and climate like? Do you have animals that are "easy keepers" (they gain weight just walking over the pasture), "difficult keepers" (they burn a lot of calories just breathing), or a combination of both types? What do your animals weigh? (Guessing does not really count). What is your animal's body score? Is you animal nursing a cria or just weaned? Before giving mineral supplements, have you checked with your veterinarian to make sure that is what the animals at your farm need (i.e. selenium check, etc.)? Do you have good quality hay? What is the percentage of protein in your hay? Are you feeding your llamas too much grain and treats because you like to see them eat? Be aware that llamas do choke on pellet food. Sooner or later it will happen. A source of fresh water must always be available for llamas. Worried about how to keep it ice free in the winter? There are a number of bucket heaters and heated buckets available. Again ask other farms their experience and preference. Net hay bags should never be used with llamas. As the hay is depleted, the llama will stick their entire head into the bag searching for hay. We have untangled many llamas from these bags at festivals. Llamas have also been known to die in these bags.

HAND FEEDING

Be careful not to fall into the trap of using grain and goodies to control your llamas. Visitors to your farm should not be allowed to hand feed your animals. If you start hand feeding your llamas you will encourage bad behavior. You need to look no further than petting zoos for examples of the results of hand feeding. We consider hand feeding to be the single biggest contributor to disrespectful and pushy llama behavior.

DEWORMING AND SHOTS

Depending upon how many animals you have, and your general environment and climate, deworming and vaccination schedules vary. Some tips are: do fecal samples on a regular basis (a few times per year) to check for the parasite load in your pasture; keep your pastures as clean as you can; and check with your local veterinarian to see what vaccinations are recommended for your area.

LLAMA BEHAVIOR

Knowing llama behavior will prevent unnecessary calls to the vet. Open mouth breathing is not normal. Open mouth breathing of an animal that may have just spit is different than open mouth breathing of an animal in heat stress. Watch your animals in the heat of the summer and know your

animals' normal behavior. Many people over react the first time they see their llamas fighting to establish the hierarchy in the pasture. Llama herds tend to be peaceful. If you have animals fighting in your pasture try to avoid intervening to end the fight as they will have to resume the fight later to resolve the issue. One exception is if you observe an extended fight on a hot day that could lead to heat stress. Simply aim a hose at their legs and the fighting will usually cease for the time being.

BEING OBSERVANT

Llamas are stoic animals. They are also quite hardy. However they are not invincible. Many times llamas will not show signs of illness until they are really sick. The best way to keep track of your animal's health is to know their usual behaviors and demeanor. Watch while they eat, play, and lay around chewing. Observe their pecking order. If you notice they are deviating from their usual routine, look for some causes: Too hot? Too cold? Change in pecking order? Close to giving birth? Or animals moving on and off the farm. If your llama is "off", and you are at a loss for an obvious reason, call your veterinarian to come and check things out.

FARM EQUIPMENT

There is some equipment that is very important to own. Each farm should have some sort of restraint chute. There will be times that you may have to stabilize an animal, and a chute is invaluable for keeping either you or your llama from getting hurt. Examples of when a llama may have to be restrained are: sawing fighting teeth, lancing a cheek abscess, doing eye exams, or drawing blood. For breeding purposes a scale is indispensable, as cria weight gain will need to be monitored, as well as weight stability for lactating females and older animals. Knowing the weight of your animals is important because most injections and medicine doses are based on body weight. If you find you will not be breeding, the large purchase of a scale may not be necessary if you can gain access to a scale by bringing your animals to a nearby farm a few times per year, or the expense of a scale could be shared by a number of close farms.

TIME

Take time to work with your animals in situations that are not stressful and rushed. If the only time you try to halter your llamas are ten minutes before the veterinarian arrives, they are not going to have a rosy picture of being haltered. Set aside some time, bring a cup of coffee, a glass of wine (you get the idea), into the pasture and just relax watching your animals. Let them know you can be there without chasing after them. Practice haltering and then let them go back to the life in the pasture without doing anything else, or go for a leisurely walk. Yes, it seems everyone is more than busy. However, many people buy llamas to help them relax, but then fall into the trap of trying to make the animals fit into their hectic schedule, rather than enjoying life at "llama speed". So take some good deep breaths of fresh air, put on some comfortable clothes, forget about the answering machine and go spend some time with your llamas.

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BE PREPARED CHECKLIST

Medical Supplies and Birthing Items to have on Hand

List compiled by Sandy and Marc Page, Sputtermill Ranch, Petersham, MA

First Aid Kit

- ✓ Stethoscope
- ✓ Gauze
- ✓ Cotton Balls
- ✓ Roll Cotton
- ✓ Vetwrap Bandaging Tape
- ✓ Non-Adhesive Pads
- ✓ Cling – Form Fit Bandages
- ✓ Bandage Scissors
- ✓ Rectal Thermometer
- ✓ Small Hand Towels
- ✓ Paper Towels
- ✓ Surgical Blades with handle various sizes
- ✓ Syringes – most useful sizes 1cc; 3cc; 5cc
- ✓ Needles 20g X 1” to 1 ½”
- ✓ Alcohol for sterilizing
- ✓ Kaopectate
- ✓ Saline Solution in squeeze bottles
- ✓ A & D ointment with zinc
- ✓ Ophthalmic Ointment without steroids
- ✓ UAA GEL – Universal Animal Antidote Gel
- ✓ Betadine Scrub
- ✓ Hydrogen Peroxide
- ✓ SWAT Fly repellent ointment that can be applied directly on wounds. Clear or Pink.
- ✓ Dose Syringe with extender- Oral Medication Dispenser
- ✓ Penicillin G
- ✓ Dewormers – Injectable Ivomec, Dornectin (Dectomax), Safeguard/Panacur
- ✓ Blue Kote – Antiseptic Spray
- ✓ Blood Stop

Birthing Items

- ✓ Clean Bath Towels
- ✓ 7% Iodine Solution
- ✓ Obstetric Lube – lots
- ✓ Disposable Enema
- ✓ Bulb Syringe
- ✓ Plastic Obstetric Sleeves
- ✓ Latex Gloves
- ✓ Container for dipping umbilical cord – film canister or 20cc syringe casing
- ✓ Cria Coat
- ✓ Hair Dryer
- ✓ Pritchard Nipples – 60 cc Feeding syringe
- ✓ Feeding Tubing
- ✓ Colostrix
- ✓ LAMA Milk Replacer or Lambs Milk Replacer
- ✓ Electrolytes
- ✓ Scale