

WALNUT CREEK SUPPLY

THE COMPLETE CARE GUIDE

Llama & Alpaca

Herd animals, shearing, minerals and the dung pile gardeners love



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New owner? Go straight to Section 1. It is written so you can set up a safe, correct home and get through the first 48 hours without reading anything else first.

*There is a moment, usually about ten minutes after the first pair of alpacas steps off the trailer, when the whole farm goes quiet. Two long-necked, big-eyed animals stand at the pasture gate, ears swiveling, humming softly to each other, and everyone watching suddenly understands why people fall for these animals so hard. Llamas and alpacas are gentle, curious, clean-living, and surprisingly easy keepers compared with many livestock species. They are also **herd animals with real needs**: they must have company of their own kind, they hide illness behind thick fleece and a stoic nature, and they live **15 to 20 years or more**. They are a long commitment, not a lawn ornament.*

This guide is written for the first-time keeper and for the family that is still deciding. We are a family farm and pet shop in Christiana, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and we want you to start with open eyes. Camelid care varies by region, by herd, and by individual animal, so treat everything here as a solid foundation and not a substitute for two people you should line up before any animal arrives: **a veterinarian who has real experience with camelids** (llamas, alpacas, and their relatives) and **a local mentor or breeder** who has kept animals through your climate's seasons. Where numbers vary in the real world, we give a range and tell you so. Read the Quick Start first, then come back for the rest.

SECTION 1

Quick Start: Your First 48 Hours

1. **Line up your veterinarian before you line up your animals.** Call clinics and ask one direct question: "Do you treat llamas and alpacas, and will you do herd health visits and emergency calls?" Many general livestock and large-animal practices are comfortable with camelids, and some are not. Camelids have quirks in dosing, anesthesia, and disease that make experience matter. Put the clinic's after-hours number somewhere you can find it in the dark.
2. **Check your zoning and local rules.** In general, livestock are allowed on agricultural or sufficiently large rural parcels and restricted in residential neighborhoods, but this varies enormously by township, county, and state. Call your local zoning office and ask about camelids specifically, including any limit on animals per acre, fence setbacks, and manure rules. Do not buy first and ask later.
3. **Plan for at least two animals of the same species.** Never keep just one. A single llama or alpaca is a stressed, lonely animal. Two alpacas, or two llamas, is the minimum. Do not pair an alpaca with a llama as the only companions for each other, because they are different species with different body language and needs; keep them with their own kind.
4. **Have your fencing finished and checked before arrival.** Walk every foot of the fence line. Look for large openings, sharp wire ends, loose posts, and gaps under gates. Camelids are not usually fence-jumpers, but a panicked animal or an animal chased by a dog can surprise you.
5. **Set up a three-sided shelter with shade and airflow.** It should be dry, well ventilated, and large enough for the whole herd to lie down out of the wind. In our Pennsylvania summers, shade and cooling matter at least as much as winter shelter.
6. **Stock hay and a camelid-specific loose mineral.** Buy grass hay you have looked at and smelled: green to golden, sweet-smelling, free of mold, dust, and weeds. Ask your vet or mentor what your region's soils require for minerals, and read every label for ionophores (see the Diet & Nutrition section; they can be fatal).
7. **Set up clean water, more than you think you need.** At least two water points, buckets or troughs scrubbed clean, in the shade. Plan for a way to keep water from freezing in winter.
8. **Let the new animals settle for 48 to 72 hours.** Release them into a smaller, secure area that is not too big and not too open. Let them find the water, the shelter, and each other. Watch from a distance, speak quietly, and do not rush to touch them. Check that everyone is eating, drinking, and passing manure.
9. **Look for the communal dung pile.** Within the first day or two you should see the herd choosing a spot and using it. This tells you the animals are settling in and it makes your cleaning job much easier.

10. **Ask the seller for health records and book a vet visit within the first week.** Request any vaccine history, deworming and fecal results, body weights, and shearing dates. Schedule a new-animal exam, and discuss your region's parasite risks, especially meningeal worm if you are in deer country.

First-Time Starter Bundle

What should be in the barn and on the fence line before the animals step off the trailer, and what to look for in each category.

Essentials

- **Woven wire fencing, 4 to 5 feet high** with openings small enough that a head or hoof cannot get trapped, on sturdy posts. No barbed wire. Choose fencing with no large squares or loose ends.
- **A three-sided shelter** with a solid roof, good airflow, and room for every animal to lie down without crowding, plus a shaded area outside it for summer.
- **Grass hay**, tested or at least inspected, stored dry, off the ground, and away from rodent and moisture problems.
- **Hay feeders** sized for camelid heads and placed at a comfortable height. Low, wide feeders that do not trap a head and keep hay off the ground are best.
- **A camelid-specific loose mineral** with selenium and vitamins A and D, in a covered mineral feeder that keeps rain out.
- **Water buckets or troughs**, scrubbed regularly, plus a plan for winter (heated buckets or a daily break-the-ice routine).
- **Halters and lead ropes** sized for the species and the animal's neck, so you can lead, examine, and restrain safely for toenail trims and vet checks.
- **Toenail trimmers** made for livestock hooves and nails, and a non-slip surface or small handling pen to use them on.
- **A basic herd first-aid kit** assembled with your vet: a digital thermometer, clean towels, gauze and wrap, and anything your vet specifically recommends. Ask your vet what the normal temperature range is for your animals.
- **A hanging or platform scale** or a livestock weigh tape, because a regular weight record is the earliest way to catch a problem.
- **A fecal sample kit** (small containers, labels, and a cooler bag) so you can bring in samples for parasite counts.

Ready to set up? Browse the essentials in our collections: Homestead Supplies.

Enrichment

- **A shallow dust bathing area** with a patch of dry dirt or sand. Alpacas and llamas love to roll in dust, and it is a normal, healthy behavior.
- **A kiddie pool or sprinkler** for summer cooling. Many animals will stand in shallow water and lie in a wet spot to cool off.
- **Pasture variety** that includes several grass species, a few safe shrubs and tree branches (verified non-toxic), and safe places to explore.
- **Safe, sturdy hay feeders and slow-feed arrangements** that make meals last longer and give animals something to do.
- **A shaded rest area** where the animals can lie down in a group (called "kushing" for a camelid folding its legs under its body).
- **A mentor, a local camelid club, or a breeder's herd to visit**, which is enrichment for you and costs nothing.

SECTION 2

Meet Your Llama or Alpaca

Llamas and alpacas are members of the camelid family, South American cousins of the camel, originally from the high Andes of Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina. They were domesticated thousands of years ago: llamas largely as pack and fiber animals, alpacas largely for their soft, warm fleece. Both are **pseudoruminants**, which means they chew cud and digest grass in a multi-compartment stomach like a cow or sheep, but with three compartments instead of four. In the United States today they are kept for fiber, for companionship, for guarding small livestock, as pack animals on trails, and for fun.

Here is how the two compare. These are typical ranges, and individual animals vary.

Trait	Alpaca	Llama
Typical adult weight	Roughly 100 to 200 lb	Roughly 250 to 450 lb
Height at the withers (shoulder)	About 3 feet	About 4 feet
Ears	Short and spear-shaped	Longer and banana-shaped
Face	Short, blunt, often with a fluffy topknot	Longer, with a more prominent muzzle
Fleece	Fine, soft, and dense; two types (huacaya and suri)	Coarser, with a double coat; lighter fiber yield
Main uses	Fiber and companionship	Pack, guard, and fiber
Temperament	Shy, gentle, herd-minded, easily stressed	Bold, independent, more confident with people and other animals
Typical lifespan	Roughly 15 to 20 years, some longer	Roughly 15 to 25 years, some longer

Huacaya and suri

Alpacas come in two fleece types. **Huacaya** (wah-KI-ah) alpacas have a dense, crimped, fluffy fleece that stands out from the body and gives them a teddy-bear look. They are by far the more common type. **Suri** alpacas have long, silky, lustrous locks that hang in ringlets or cords like a drape. They are rarer and often prized by fiber artists. Both types are shorn once a year, and both come in a wide range of natural colors, from white and fawn through brown, gray, and black.

Herd animals: never keep just one

Camelids are **herd animals**. They feel safe in company and genuinely distressed alone. A single animal may pace, hum constantly, stop eating, or lose condition. **Keep at least two of the same species**, three or more if you can. Many first-time keepers start with two **wethers** (castrated males, also called geldings) because they are calm, inexpensive, and do not require breeding management. A wether pair is a wonderful way to start learning without the added complexity of breeding and crias (baby camelids).

Humming and body language

Alpacas and llamas communicate constantly, and once you learn the language the herd becomes fascinating to watch. Soft **humming** is an all-purpose sound: curiosity, contentment, worry, or a mother talking to her cria. A sharp, high alarm call means "something is wrong." Body language adds more:

- **Ears up and forward:** relaxed and curious.
- **Ears pinned back flat:** irritated, and a warning that a spit is possible.

- **Head and chin raised, nose in the air:** a stronger warning to another animal.
- **Tail up over the back:** alert, excited, or defensive.
- **Lying down with legs folded under the body (kushing):** relaxed, or an animal cooling off or resting. A kushed animal that refuses to rise is a different story and worth a close look.
- **Neck stretched out and very still, staring:** something has caught their attention, which might be a dog, a deer, or a stranger.

Spitting

Yes, they spit. The "spit" is actually regurgitated stomach contents, and it is a **herd-behavior signal, mostly aimed at other camelids**, usually over food, space, or rank. Humans are rarely the target, but you can become collateral damage if you stand between two animals in a disagreement. Handle it by respecting their space, reading the ears, and not stepping into squabbles. Animals that have not been spoiled by overhandling almost never spit at people on purpose.

Berserk male syndrome: why you shouldn't make a pet of a young male

This is one of the most important things a new keeper can understand. A male cria that is **bottle-raised and handled like a pet** can imprint on people, losing the normal social boundaries that other camelids teach one another. As he matures he may treat humans as rival males, becoming pushy, chest-bumping, spitting, and sometimes dangerously aggressive. The condition is often called **berserk male syndrome**. It is not a "mean" animal, it is a confused one. To prevent it, do not hand-raise male crias as cuddly pets, avoid petting young males on the face and head, keep them with other camelids as soon as possible, and handle them calmly and with purpose (halter work, examination, trimming) instead of playing with them. If you must bottle-feed an orphan, do it with your vet's and mentor's guidance, and with a plan to return the baby to the herd.

What it really costs

Be honest with yourself on this one. **Purchase prices vary enormously**, from a modest amount for a pet-quality wether to many thousands of dollars for a registered breeding animal, and the market changes. Beyond the purchase, plan for hay (the biggest recurring cost), minerals, fencing, shelter, veterinary care, shearing, toenail trims, fecal testing, transport, and winter water. Whatever number you come up with, add a cushion for the surprise vet visit. Camelids are generally economical to feed, but they are not free.

Fiber, income, and craft

Alpaca fleece is soft, warm, and light, and it spins into beautiful yarn. Many keepers find a small fiber business is enjoyable, but **do not count on fiber to pay the bills** early on. A small herd typically produces enough fleece for a hobby: your own knitting, gifts, felting, or selling to local spinners and craft fairs. Raw fleece, roving, and finished yarn can all be sold. Llama fiber is coarser and often used for rugs, ropes, and outerwear. If fiber income interests you, visit local fiber festivals and talk with spinners before choosing which animals to buy.

SECTION 3

Pasture, Fencing & Shelter

How much land

A commonly quoted guideline is about **5 to 6 alpacas per acre of good, well-managed pasture**, and fewer llamas per acre because they are larger and eat more. That number is a ceiling for good conditions, not a goal. Poor soil, a dry summer, a wet spring, and heavy parasite loads all push the number down. Many experienced keepers stock lighter than the guideline, which means more pasture rest, less parasite pressure, and less mud. A beginner with two wethers on a half-acre to an acre of decent grass will find life much easier than a beginner trying to hit the maximum. Ask your local extension office or an experienced neighbor what your soil and rainfall can really carry.

Fencing

Good fencing is the best investment on a camelid farm. It keeps your animals in, and keeps dogs, coyotes, and curious neighbors out.

- **Height: 4 to 5 feet** is the usual range. Llamas and larger animals benefit from the taller end.
- **Type:** woven wire (such as no-climb or field fence) with small enough openings that a head, leg, or hoof cannot get stuck. Large openings are dangerous because a camelid will push its head through to reach grass on the other side and then panic when it cannot pull back.
- **No barbed wire.** Fleece snags on it, and the cuts it causes are slow to heal and easily hidden. This is one of the most important rules on this page.
- **Strong corners and posts**, set deeply and braced. The animals are not heavy pushers, but a fence is only as good as its weakest corner.
- **Smooth, secure latches and gates** that cannot swing into a head or leg. A gate that hits a camelid in the face will be remembered. Use double-latching systems where predators or visitors are a concern.
- **Safe corners** where animals cannot be cornered by a pushier herd mate. Round off tight corners if you can.
- **Check fences regularly**, especially after storms, deer movements, and fallen branches.

Shelter

A **three-sided shelter** with a solid roof is usually enough for most climates. The open side should face away from prevailing winter wind. Camelids handle cold surprisingly well with a dry, dense fleece, but they handle **wet and windy** weather much less well, and they handle **heat** worse than most people expect. Good airflow is more important than tight walls. Make sure the shelter:

- Has a dry floor and good drainage, with no mud holes at the entry.
- Is tall enough for airflow and for a tall llama to enter comfortably.
- Has a wide enough opening that animals do not feel trapped when a more dominant herd mate comes in.
- Has no sharp edges, protruding nails, or low beams at head height.

Cooling in summer

For many keepers, summer is harder than winter. Animals wearing a full fleece in humid, hot weather can struggle. Provide:

- **Deep shade**, from trees or from a shaded structure open on all sides.

- **Fans** in the barn or shelter, mounted where animals cannot reach cords.
- **Sprinklers or a gentle mist** that animals can choose to stand in.
- **A shallow kiddie pool** for standing and wading.
- **Fresh, cool water**, more often than you think.
- **Shearing in spring**, before the heat arrives.

Predators

Dogs (yours, neighbors', and strays) are among the most common causes of camelid injuries and deaths in many areas. Coyotes are a real threat as well, especially to crias. **Llamas are used as guard animals for sheep and goats**, and many are very good at it, but a guard llama is **not a guarantee** against predators. Predator control is a system: good fencing, closing the animals in a secure area at night if your area has predator pressure, and a guard animal if you choose one. If you are considering a guard llama, talk with a mentor who uses one in your area, and use a single gelded (castrated) adult male or a female, not a hand-raised pet.

A labeled layout

Take a piece of paper and draw your property before the animals arrive. Mark the pasture, the shelter, the water, the feeders, the dung pile, a small handling pen, a quarantine area for new or sick animals, and your gates. Label every gate. A tidy layout gives you a quarantine corner for new animals (a separate area where newcomers stay for a couple of weeks), makes it easy to separate a sick animal, and helps you plan pasture rotation.

SECTION 4

Bedding, Footing & Dung Piles

The communal dung pile

Here is one of the happiest facts about camelids: **they use communal dung piles**. The herd picks a few spots and uses them over and over. Instead of cleaning every inch of a stall or pen, you scoop a handful of piles. That makes barn chores quick, makes parasite control easier (less manure on grazed areas), and gives you a very handy daily health check. A change in the pile, such as no manure, very loose manure, or a smaller or harder pellet, is an early clue that something may be wrong.

What goes under their feet

Footing matters more than bedding for healthy feet, legs, and fleece. Choose a surface that drains well, stays dry, and is not slippery or abrasive.

Material	Best use	Notes
Pasture grass	Daily living space	Best natural footing; rotate to rest it
Packed gravel or stone dust	Heavy-traffic areas, gates, feeder zones	Drains well and limits mud; avoid sharp stone
Straw	Shelter bedding, cria area	Warm and inexpensive; check for mold and dust
Wood shavings (kiln-dried, not black walnut)	Shelter bedding	Absorbent; never use black walnut shavings
Sand	Dry lot or dust bathing area	Drains well, and animals enjoy rolling in it
Mats over compacted base	Barn and handling areas	Easy to clean and gentle on feet
Hay (as bedding)	Occasional use only	Costly and can encourage wasting; mold risk

Avoid deep mud. It is a recipe for foot problems, skin problems, and parasites. Fix drainage first, then everything else gets easier.

Cleaning schedule

Pick up the dung piles every day or two if you can, and at least weekly in the pasture. Daily removal reduces parasite exposure, and it is good practice to scoop piles in smaller paddocks more often. Turn and replace shelter bedding when it is wet or dirty.

Manure and the garden

Camelid manure is often called a "**cold**" **manure**, meaning it is milder and less likely to burn plants than hotter manures like chicken or horse. Many gardeners use it right away as a gentle fertilizer, and it is a nice side benefit of keeping animals. A few honest cautions:

- **Composting is still recommended**, especially for crops eaten raw. Composting also reduces weed seeds, parasites, and pathogens.
- If you garden under an organic program or follow organic-style guidelines, the commonly used timing rule for **raw manure** is **90 days** before harvest for crops whose edible part does not touch the soil and **120 days** for crops whose edible part does touch the soil. Check the current rules for your situation.
- **Be careful with hay and bedding from fields treated with persistent herbicides**. Some herbicides survive the animal's gut and the compost pile and can damage garden plants, such as tomatoes, beans, and peppers, for years. Ask your hay supplier

about herbicide use, and be wary of imported manure, bedding, or hay if you cannot confirm what was sprayed.

SECTION 5

Forage, Water & Minerals: The 3 Numbers

Three simple numbers will tell you more about your herd's health than almost anything else. Learn them, write them on the barn wall, and check them often.

Number	Typical range	Why it matters
Forage intake	About 1.5 to 2% of body weight in dry matter per day	Fuels the gut and keeps the herd at a healthy weight
Water	Roughly 1 to 2 gallons per day for an adult alpaca; more in heat and lactation	Prevents dehydration, heat stress, and impaction
Body condition score	1 to 5 scale, with about 3 considered ideal	Reveals true weight under the fleece

Number 1: Forage intake

Camelids need roughly **1.5 to 2% of their body weight in dry matter each day**. Dry matter means the feed with the water removed, so hay (about 85 to 90% dry matter) counts for more than fresh pasture grass (which can be 20 to 30% dry matter or even less). A rough example: a 150-pound alpaca needs somewhere around 2.25 to 3 pounds of dry matter a day, which is about 2.5 to 3.5 pounds of good hay. A 350-pound llama needs roughly 5 to 7 pounds of dry matter. These are starting points. Pregnant, nursing, growing, working, or cold-weather animals need more, and easy keepers need less. Weigh your hay, watch what is left, and adjust with your vet or mentor.

Number 2: Water

A clean, fresh supply of water at all times is non-negotiable. A rough guide is **1 to 2 gallons a day for an adult alpaca**, with llamas needing more, and every animal needing more in hot weather and when nursing. These are approximate figures and they change with the season, the feed (animals eating a lot of fresh, wet pasture drink less), and the individual. Scrub water containers often. Algae and slime put animals off drinking, and an animal that drinks too little is at risk of impaction, heat stress, and kidney trouble. In winter, offer water that is not frozen and not painfully cold.

Number 3: Body condition score

The thick fleece hides everything. An animal can look fluffy and healthy from across the pasture and be skin and bone underneath. The only reliable way to check is by **hands-on body condition scoring**, which means feeling the animal's backbone, ribs, and hips through the fleece.

- **Score 1:** extremely thin. Bones are sharp and prominent.
- **Score 2:** thin. Spine and ribs are easily felt, with little fat cover.
- **Score 3:** ideal. The backbone is felt with light pressure, ribs are easily felt but not sharp, and there is a smooth contour over the topline.
- **Score 4:** overweight. Fat cover is noticeable and the spine is difficult to feel.
- **Score 5:** obese. The spine and ribs cannot be felt without deep pressure.

Run your hands down the backbone just behind the shoulders, along the ribs, and across the loin, every month, and write down the score for each animal. Weigh them, too. Ask your vet or mentor to show you in person the first time, since feeling a score is much

easier to learn than to read about.

Minerals

Camelids need a **camelid-specific loose mineral** with selenium and vitamins A and D. Which minerals your animals need depends on your region's soils and hay, so ask your vet what your area needs. Do not assume that a mineral made for another species is fine. We cover this in more detail in the next section.

SECTION 6

Diet & Nutrition



Grass hay and pasture, camelid-specific minerals, and clean water. Camelids put on weight easily, so extras stay small.

The foundation: grass hay and pasture

Llamas and alpacas are efficient grazers. They evolved on sparse, high-altitude Andean range, so they extract a lot from a little. That is wonderful for your wallet and a trap for your animals' waistlines. **Grass hay and good pasture should make up nearly all of the diet.** Compared with sheep or goats, camelids need a **lower-protein, lower-energy diet**, and they gain weight easily on rich feed. A typical adult maintenance diet is mature grass hay in the range of roughly 8 to 12% crude protein (a hay analysis from a lab will tell you what you actually have). Rich, lush spring pasture can be too much of a good thing, especially for easy keepers and animals prone to weight gain, so introduce them to it gradually and watch body condition.

Choose hay that is:

- Leafy, green to golden, and sweet-smelling.
- Free of mold, dust, mildew, and musty odors.
- Free of weeds and toxic plants (check the bales by hand).
- Free of foreign objects such as wire, plastic, and dead animals.

- Cut at a mature but not overly stemmy stage.

If you can, have the hay tested. Ask your local extension office or hay supplier how.

Minerals and vitamins

Offer a **camelid-specific loose mineral** free-choice in a covered feeder. Look for one that contains selenium and vitamins A and D. **Regional needs vary**, since selenium levels in soil differ widely across the country, so ask your vet what is right for your area. Too little and too much of some minerals can both cause problems, and some regions are selenium-poor while others have levels that can become toxic with over-supplementation. Do not guess, and do not add extra supplements unless your vet advises it.

Vitamin D, winter, and crias

Camelids make vitamin D from sunlight, and in the northern United States, short winter days and heavy fleece can limit that. **Vitamin D deficiency is commonly a concern in northern states in winter**, particularly in **crias (young animals)**, where it can **cause rickets** (soft, weak, bowed bones). Signs of trouble include a hunched or stiff gait, reluctance to rise, bowed legs, and slow growth. Talk with your vet about a vitamin D plan for your herd, which may include a vitamin D-containing mineral and, for some animals, supplementation at certain times of year. Do not give vitamin D on your own, because too much can be harmful.

WARNING: never feed ionophores

Never feed any product containing an ionophore, such as monensin or lasalocid. These additives are common in feeds and mineral mixes for cattle, goats, sheep, and poultry because they control coccidia and improve feed efficiency. **They can be fatal to camelids**, even at low doses. Always read the label of every feed, mineral, and treat before it goes near your animals. If you see "monensin," "lasalocid," or any ionophore on the label, put it back. If you suspect your animals have eaten a product with an ionophore, call your veterinarian immediately; you can also call the ASPCA Animal Poison Control at (888) 426-4435 or the Pet Poison Helpline at (855) 764-7661.

Feed made for other species

The same caution applies more broadly. **Feeds made for goats, sheep, horses, or cattle are not automatically safe for camelids**, and the mineral balance, protein level, and additives can be wrong. Choose products labeled for camelids (llamas and alpacas) from reputable makers, and ask your vet before using anything else. Our approach at the store is the same as for all our animal lines: **no mystery ingredients**. If you cannot say what is in it, do not feed it.

Grain and pellets: only when needed

Most healthy adult camelids on good hay or pasture do not need grain. Pellets can help in specific situations: growing crias, pregnant and nursing females, animals that are thin, older animals that struggle to keep weight on, and animals in a very cold winter. When you do feed pellets or a grain-based supplement:

- Use a feed **made for camelids**, with ionophore-free labeling.
- Feed small, measured amounts, often **a fraction of a pound to a pound or so per animal per day, depending on the animal**, and only as directed by your vet.
- Feed in a **wide, shallow trough** where the animals cannot bolt it. Camelids can choke on pellets (see Common Challenges).
- Feed separately if needed so that shy animals get their share.

Alfalfa: a rich supplement

Alfalfa is high in protein and calcium. It is not a daily staple for most camelids, but it is a useful supplement for **lactating (nursing) females**, growing crias, and thin animals. For easy keepers, too much alfalfa leads to weight gain. Offer it in measured amounts and ask your vet how much.

Toxic plants

Many common plants are poisonous to livestock. This table covers several important ones in our region and is **not a complete list**. Walk your pasture and fence line, learn what is growing there, and call your vet or local extension office to identify unknowns.

Plant	Where you may find it	Concern
Rhododendron and azalea	Landscaping, fence lines, woodland edges	Can cause severe illness, even in small amounts
Yew	Hedges and ornamental plantings	Highly toxic, can cause sudden death
Wilted wild cherry leaves	Fence lines and wood edges, especially after storms or pruning	Wilted leaves are dangerous; fallen branches are a common cause
Oleander	Ornamental plantings and potted plants	Highly toxic, even dried
Bracken fern	Pastures, woodland edges	Toxic if eaten in quantity
Black walnut (especially shavings)	Trees, wood shavings used as bedding	Shavings used as bedding can cause serious problems; do not use

Remove, fence off, or avoid any suspect plant, and never toss lawn clippings or hedge trimmings over the fence. Animals that are hungry and bored are more likely to sample things they should not.

Changing feed gradually

Any change in feed, such as a new hay lot, a new pellet, or a switch to lush spring pasture, should be **gradual, over about 7 to 14 days**. Sudden changes can upset the gut. Move new animals onto lush grass slowly, a short time each day, and watch manure.

Clean water

Everything above depends on it. Offer clean water in clean containers at all times (see the 3 Numbers section above).

SECTION 7

Shearing, Toenails & Grooming

Annual shearing

Camelids grown for fiber are usually shorn **once a year, in spring**, before the heat arrives. A full fleece is a heavy coat, and an unshorn alpaca in a hot, humid summer is at real risk of heat stress. Even llamas kept as pets or guard animals benefit from shearing or at least a summer trim in hot climates. Shearing can be done by a professional shearer, which most new keepers should hire, or learned from an experienced mentor. A yearly shearing day is also a convenient time to do toenails, check teeth, weigh animals, vaccinate if directed, and score body condition.

- **Fleece weight varies widely** by species, type, age, and individual, from a few pounds to considerably more.
- **Fiber quality** depends on genetics, nutrition, health, and the care you take of the fleece. Animals that roll in hay chaff and dirt will have fleece that is harder to use.
- **Handle shearing day gently.** Shearing is stressful and the animal is restrained, either lying on a table or stretched on the ground. Choose an experienced shearer, keep the herd calm and quiet, and keep the area cool.
- **Watch for cuts and skin damage** after shearing. Fresh-shorn animals are sensitive to sunburn and cold, so give shade and shelter.

Toenail trims

Camelids have two toes on each foot, each with a toenail and a soft pad. Nails that grow too long curl, twist, and put the animal's feet and legs under strain. Most animals need a **trim every few months**, with the interval depending on the animal, the footing, and the season (animals on hard, abrasive ground wear nails down faster). Have your mentor or vet show you how to trim, because cutting into the quick is painful and bleeds. If you aren't comfortable, hire someone, because it is a skill worth learning from a person.

Teeth

Camelids have unusual teeth. Males (and sometimes females) develop **fighting teeth**, sharp, curved canines that can cut other animals badly during squabbles. Males commonly need these trimmed by a **veterinarian** around adulthood, and again if they regrow. Do not trim them yourself. Also look for **dental issues**: overgrown front teeth (incisors), crooked bites, and tooth root abscesses, which can cause dropping feed, weight loss, or swollen jaws.

Handling and restraint

Calm, safe handling is a skill, and it matters for everything above. A few principles:

- Teach animals to accept a **halter and lead** from a young age, calmly and gently.
- Approach from the side, not head-on from above, and avoid grabbing the neck.
- Use a small, safe handling pen so you can catch animals without chasing.
- Many camelids dislike having their **feet, belly, or head touched**, so go slowly, and reward calm behavior.
- Avoid fast chasing, which stresses the herd and can lead to injuries and overheating.
- Never wrap ropes around your hand, and remember that adult llamas can move a person.
- Keep your face away from the animal's head when working close, in case of a spit or a sudden head movement.

Grooming

Camelids do not need baths in general. Brushing is rarely necessary, but **blowing out or picking** dirt and vegetable matter from the fleece before shearing improves your fiber quality. Keep the fleece dry, and keep animals out of mud.

Fiber uses, therapy, and the garden

Alpaca fiber is soft, light, and warm, and it is wonderful for **knitting, spinning, weaving, and felting**. Craft-minded keepers keep fleece for themselves, and selling fiber, roving, or yarn at local markets or fiber festivals is a pleasant side income. **Llama fiber** is coarser and used for rugs and sturdy goods. Many calm, well-socialized camelids make excellent visitors for **therapy and educational programs**, like nursing homes, schools, and community events, but this takes training, careful selection of calm animals, and the right insurance and approvals. Finally, camelid manure is a favorite among gardeners, as covered in the bedding section.

SECTION 8

Health, Parasites & Cria Care

A herd health plan

Work with a camelid-experienced veterinarian to write a simple **herd health plan**: vaccines, parasite control, nail and tooth care, weights, body condition checks, and what to do in an emergency. Camelids are prey animals and they hide illness, so a plan and a baseline matter. Know your animals' normal temperature, behavior, appetite, and manure so you can spot a change early. Your vet can tell you the normal ranges.

Vaccines

Vaccination programs are set by your vet, based on your region and herd. A common core vaccine is the **clostridial CD&T** (covering *Clostridium perfringens* types C and D and tetanus). Some vets add others, such as rabies, depending on local risk. Do not vaccinate by guesswork or use a product from another species without your vet's direction.

Parasites: test, don't guess

Internal parasites are a constant fact of life in pastured animals. The modern approach is **targeted deworming based on fecal egg counts (FEC)**, in which your vet counts parasite eggs in a fresh manure sample and treats only the animals that need it. Blanket dewormers on a calendar lead to resistant worms. Bring in fecal samples several times a year, and more often for crias and in wet seasons. Remember the dung pile: keep it cleaned, avoid overgrazing, and rest pastures.

- **Barber pole worm** (*Haemonchus contortus*) sucks blood and can cause anemia, bottle jaw (a swelling under the chin), weakness, and death. It thrives in warm, wet weather. Your vet can teach you to check the color of the inner eyelid and gums as a warning sign, together with fecal testing.
- **Coccidia** can affect crias in particular and causes diarrhea and poor growth.

Meningeal worm (deer worm)

This is a regional risk that every Pennsylvania and eastern US keeper should know. **Meningeal worm** (*Parelaphostrongylus tenuis*) is a parasite carried by **white-tailed deer** without harm to them. Deer shed larvae in manure, **snails and slugs** pick them up, and a camelid that accidentally eats an infected snail or slug while grazing can become infected. In the camelid, the larvae wander into the spinal cord and brain, causing nerve damage.

Signs include weakness, stumbling, a wobbly or "drunk" gait, circling, dragging of the back feet, difficulty rising, and **hind-limb weakness or paralysis**. Early signs can be subtle. Treatment works best when started early, so **call the vet at the first sign**. Prevention is a real conversation to have with your vet, since strategies vary by region and exposure. They might include a vet-directed deworming schedule in the warm months, reducing snail and slug habitat (wet, weedy edges), keeping animals away from wooded fence lines and deer traffic, and fencing out deer where practical. Do not make up your own dosing plan.

Heat stress and heat stroke

Heat is the most common seasonal danger. Signs include open-mouth breathing, rapid or heavy breathing, drooling, stretching the neck out, lying flat, weakness, and a high body temperature. This is an emergency: move the animal to shade, soak it with cool (not ice) water, especially the belly and legs, use fans, offer water, and **call your vet right away**. Prevent it with spring shearing, shade, cooling, and avoiding handling during hot parts of the day.

Dental, lameness, and choke

- **Dental issues**: drooling, dropping feed, weight loss, or swelling along the jaw can mean tooth problems.

- **Lameness:** limping, favoring a leg, and reluctance to walk can mean overgrown nails, an abscess, a joint problem, or injury. Check the feet first and call the vet if it persists.
- **Choke:** food (often pellets or chunks of feed) blocks the esophagus. Signs include drooling, extending the neck, coughing, gagging, and repeated swallowing. **This is an emergency.** Keep the animal calm, remove feed, and call your vet.

Cria care

A baby camelid is called a **cria** (CREE-ah). Gestation is long, about **11.5 months (roughly 335 to 360 days, though ranges vary)**. Births usually happen during the **daytime**, often morning to early afternoon, and are usually uneventful. Plan with your vet and mentor for the delivery, since a first birth is not the time to improvise.

- A healthy cria is typically up on its feet and trying to nurse **within a couple of hours**, and nursing successfully within about **six hours**.
- **Colostrum**, the first milk, is essential because it carries antibodies from the mother. Ask your vet about checking the cria's antibody levels in the blood at about 24 to 48 hours.
- **Weigh the cria** at birth and daily for the first week or two, then regularly. Steady weight gain is the best sign of a healthy cria. Birth weights vary by species and individual, commonly in the neighborhood of 15 to 20 pounds for alpacas and about 20 to 35 pounds for llamas.
- Keep the dam and cria in a clean, dry, draft-free area, and watch the cria's energy, nursing, and manure.
- Discuss vitamin D, weaning timing (often around five to six months), and separating young males from females with your vet and mentor.

SECTION 9

Common Challenges & Solutions

Heat stress

What you see: open-mouth or rapid breathing, drooling, lying flat, reluctance to move, seeking shade or water. **Why it happens:** camelids wear a dense fleece and come from cool mountain climates, and humid summer heat overwhelms them. **What to do:** shear in spring, add shade, fans, sprinklers, and a kiddie pool; hose down the belly and legs; offer cool water; reduce activity. **When to call a vet:** immediately for heavy panting, weakness, collapse, or an animal that will not rise.

Weight loss hidden by fleece

What you see: an animal that looks fine but feels bony, or that seems slower and tires easily. **Why it happens:** thick fleece hides the body, and camelids mask illness. **What to do:** score body condition by hand monthly and weigh regularly; look into parasites, dental problems, and feed competition. **When to call a vet:** any drop of a full condition score, any rapid weight loss, or any animal below a score of 2.

Meningeal worm

What you see: weakness, stumbling, a wobbly back end, dragging hind feet, trouble rising. **Why it happens:** the animal eats a snail or slug carrying larvae passed by white-tailed deer. **What to do:** separate the animal gently, keep it comfortable, and call your vet. Prevention is a discussion for your vet. **When to call a vet:** at the first sign. Do not wait.

Parasites, including barber pole worm

What you see: weight loss, pale gums or inner eyelids, bottle jaw, loose manure, rough fleece, poor growth in crias. **Why it happens:** worms build up on wet or overgrazed pasture, and warm wet weather helps barber pole worm. **What to do:** collect fecal samples, use fecal egg counts, deworm only as directed, rotate pastures, clean dung piles. **When to call a vet:** for pale gums, bottle jaw, weakness, or any ill cria.

Spitting

What you see: flattened ears, raised chin, spitting at herd mates or at you. **Why it happens:** it is normal herd communication over food or space, and it is more likely in an overhandled animal. **What to do:** feed in multiple spots, give plenty of space, avoid standing between squabbling animals, do not hand-raise pets. **When to ask for help:** if an animal regularly targets people or becomes aggressive, talk to your vet and mentor early.

Fighting among males

What you see: chest-slammings, neck-wrestling, chasing, biting at the legs and testicles, cuts and bleeding. **Why it happens:** intact males, and sometimes wethers, compete for rank, especially near females. **What to do:** keep intact males separate from females and from each other, keep wethers in stable groups, and ask your vet about trimming fighting teeth. **When to call a vet:** for any wound, heavy bleeding, or limping.

Toenail overgrowth

What you see: long, curled, or twisted nails, an awkward gait, reluctance to walk. **Why it happens:** soft footing and fast growth. **What to do:** trim every few months, with training from a mentor. **When to call a vet:** if an animal is lame, a nail has split or bled, or you see swelling.

Cria not nursing

What you see: a cria that is weak, slow to stand, hunched, not following its mother, or with a tight belly or sunken flanks. **Why it happens:** weak or premature birth, a mother that will not let it nurse, an udder problem, or illness. **What to do:** keep the cria warm and dry, watch closely for nursing, and call your vet early. **When to call a vet:** if the cria has not stood and nursed within a few hours of birth; do not wait overnight.

Wet fleece and skin problems

What you see: matted, damp fleece, scabs, hair loss, crusty patches, itching or rubbing. **Why it happens:** mud, wet weather, mites, fungus, or poor hygiene. **What to do:** improve drainage and shelter, keep fleece dry, and shear on schedule. **When to call a vet:** for spreading patches, sores, or an itchy animal.

Escaped animals

What you see: a camelid out of the pen, running and calling. **Why it happens:** a gate left open, fence damage, or a fright. **What to do:** stay calm, avoid chasing, use a bucket of feed or a herd mate to draw them back, and fix the weak spot in the fence at once. **When to ask for help:** call a neighbor or mentor, and call your local authorities if animals are near a roadway.

Dog attacks

What you see: bite wounds, torn skin, panicked animals, an injured or missing cria. **Why it happens:** dogs, yours or strays, chase and bite prey animals. **What to do:** secure the fence, keep dogs away, and close animals in at night if needed. **When to call a vet:** immediately for any suspected attack, even if wounds look small, since shock and deep punctures are hidden under fleece.

Vitamin D deficiency

What you see: stiff or bowed legs, a hunched or reluctant gait, slow growth, especially in crias in late winter. **Why it happens:** short winter days, thick fleece, and low dietary vitamin D. **What to do:** talk with your vet about a vitamin D plan before winter. **When to call a vet:** at any sign of weak or bowed legs in a growing cria.

Choke

What you see: drooling, stretched neck, coughing, gagging. **Why it happens:** bolting pellets or chunky feed. **What to do:** remove feed, keep the animal calm and still, and call. **When to call a vet:** right away.

SECTION 10

Routine Care Calendar

How often	What to do
Daily	Look at every animal: eating, drinking, walking normally, passing manure, ears and posture relaxed
Daily	Refill hay, check mineral, scrub and refill water
Daily	Glance at the dung piles for changes
Weekly	Clean dung piles and shelter; check fences, gates, and shade
Monthly	Hands-on body condition score and weight check for every animal
Monthly	Review pasture condition, rotate grazing, and look for toxic plants
Every few months	Toenail trims; fecal egg counts as your vet directs
Spring	Shearing before the heat; vet visit and vaccines as directed
Summer	Cooling plan in place; watch for heat stress and barber pole worm
Fall	Check fences and shelter; talk with your vet about meningeal worm prevention
Winter	Unfrozen water; vitamin D plan; watch body condition under the fleece
Annually	Herd health visit and teeth check

SECTION 11

When to Call the Vet

Camelids are stoic and hide illness. By the time they look sick, they have usually been sick for a while. **When you are unsure, call.**

Call right away:

- Weakness, stumbling, or hind-limb paralysis (possible meningeal worm)
- Heavy panting, drooling, or collapse in hot weather
- Drooling with a stretched neck (possible choke)
- A cria that has not stood and nursed within a few hours
- An animal that is down and will not rise
- Any suspected dog attack or deep wound
- Difficult labor, or a female straining without progress
- Any suspected ionophore or toxic plant exposure (you may also call ASPCA Animal Poison Control at (888) 426-4435)

Call within a day or two:

- Weight loss or a drop in body condition score
- Pale gums, bottle jaw, or loose manure
- Limping, overgrown or split nails
- Drooling, dropping feed, or a swollen jaw
- Skin sores, hair loss, or heavy itching

SECTION 12

FAQ

What is the difference between a llama and an alpaca?

Alpacas are smaller, typically about 100 to 200 pounds and around 3 feet at the withers, with short spear-shaped ears and very fine fleece. Llamas are larger, typically 250 to 450 pounds and about 4 feet tall, with longer banana-shaped ears and coarser fiber. Alpacas are kept mostly for fiber and companionship, while llamas are used for packing, guarding, and fiber.

Can I keep just one alpaca?

No. Alpacas and llamas are herd animals and a single animal is lonely and stressed, which can lead to pacing, constant humming, and poor health. Keep at least two of the same species. Many beginners start with two wethers (castrated males) because they are calm and need no breeding management.

How much land do alpacas need?

A common guideline is about 5 to 6 alpacas per acre of good pasture, and fewer llamas. The real number depends on your soil, rainfall, and pasture management, and many keepers stock lighter. Two or three animals on an acre of decent grass is a comfortable beginning. Check local zoning and ask a mentor what your land can carry.

Do llamas and alpacas spit?

Yes, but mostly at each other, usually over food or space. The spit is regurgitated stomach contents. People are rarely the target unless caught in the crossfire or dealing with an animal that was overhandled as a baby. Respect their space, watch the ears, and do not hand-raise bottle babies as pets.

What do alpacas eat?

Mostly grass hay and pasture, at about 1.5 to 2% of body weight in dry matter per day, plus clean water and a camelid-specific loose mineral with selenium and vitamins A and D. They need lower protein and energy than sheep or goats. Pellets are used only when needed, and never feed anything containing monensin or lasalocid, which can be fatal.

How often are alpacas sheared?

Once a year, usually in spring before the heat arrives. Annual shearing protects against heat stress and gives you the year's fleece. Most beginners hire an experienced shearer, and shearing day is a handy time for toenails, weights, and body condition checks.

How long do llamas live?

Roughly 15 to 25 years, and some live longer, with good care. Alpacas typically live about 15 to 20 years. That is a long commitment, so plan for the whole lifespan, including senior care.

Are llamas good guard animals?

Often, yes. Many farms use a single gelded adult llama to protect sheep and goats from dogs and coyotes. But a llama is not a guarantee, and it works best as one part of a plan with good fencing and secure night housing. Talk to a keeper in your area who uses one.

Is alpaca manure good for gardens?

Yes. It is a mild, "cold" manure that many gardeners apply directly, and the communal dung piles make it easy to collect. Composting is still recommended, especially for crops eaten raw, and organic growers use a 90-day and 120-day raw-manure timing before harvest. Watch for herbicide-treated hay.

What is meningeal worm in llamas and alpacas?

Meningeal worm is a parasite carried by white-tailed deer. Snails and slugs pick up the larvae, and camelids eat them while grazing. The larvae travel to the spinal cord and cause weakness, stumbling, and hind-limb paralysis. It is a real risk in the eastern United States, including Pennsylvania. Call the vet at the first sign, and talk to your vet about prevention.

Ready to shop? Start with Homestead Supplies. 10% of every purchase supports no-kill animal shelters.

SECTION 13

Every Purchase Gives Back

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We are a family farm and shop in Christiana, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and we grow our own food and keep our own animals. We want you to start with an honest picture of what llamas and alpacas need: a pair, a strong fence, good hay, a camelid-experienced vet, and a mentor down the road. We stock **clean-label goods with no mystery ingredients**, and we would rather talk through a question than sell you the wrong thing. Call us at **(717) 983-8069** any time.

Here's to many peaceful evenings at the gate, humming herd and all.

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