



New England Alpaca Fiber Pool Inc.

Alpaca Fiber Harvesting Guide

*Get the most out of your **fiber harvest!***

GOAL

The goal at the end of shearing your herd is simple, to finish with the highest amount of usable alpaca fiber. We define usable alpaca fiber as: fiber with uniform staple length and micron, has been separated by color and grade, and is free of all types of contamination. Our guide will focus on how to avoid the most common mistakes in alpaca fiber harvesting to ensure you finish with the highest commercially usable clip.

CONTAMINATION

Over the last decade we have processed hundreds of thousands of pounds of alpaca and the number one cause of good fleece being downgraded or outright discarded is contamination. Contamination comes in many forms; here is a list of the most common culprits and how they can be avoided.

Vegetable Matter (VM) – Picking VM out of a fleece after it has been sheared can be time and labor intensive so it's best to be proactive. Maximizing the value of your fiber begins immediately after last year's shearing.



Low Hay Feeder

Golden Touch Farm – Westport, MA

- To help keep VM contamination down throughout the year, use low hay feeders that rest on the ground to prevent hay from building up in the nap of the neck, rendering the fleece unusable.
- You should also focus on keeping your pastures clear of Thistle and Burdocks. These culprits almost always find their

way into the fleece.

- As shearing season approaches, make sure your shearing area, barn yards and stalls are thoroughly cleaned. If you use bedding, shredded cardboard or straw (no seed heads) is preferred as they are easily removed from fiber.
- Tip Shearing your cria (season permitting) is recommended. Without it, Cria's fiber acts like a magnet to contamination and by shearing season the fleece will be unusable.
- After shearing lay out the blankets on your skirting table to remove loose VM by hand. The goal is to remove as much VM as possible while still saving the bulk of the fiber. Some farms also report success by using a vacuum on their animals while they are in queue to be sheared.

Second Cuts– Second cuts are the shorter pieces of fiber naturally produced when a shearer makes multiple passes over the animal. Speak with your shearer beforehand to help minimize this contamination. The short fibers that fall into your fleece are best removed when skirting on a mesh top table. Discard all second cuts right away or put them aside to be used for arts and crafts projects.

Various Farm Debris – Baling Twine, Insects, Rodents, Teeth, Nail Clippings, and other assorted debris should be removed from harvested fiber. You name it, we've seen it in the middle of a perfectly good fleece, so make the extra effort to ensure these items do not end up in this year's clip. The most efficient way is prevention so give your shearing and skirting area a thorough cleaning before and during shearing.

Color Contamination– Different colors should be separated to avoid contamination. The best way to avoid this is to shear in a specific order, lighter colored animals to darker-colored works best. In between color changes, give the shearing and skirting area a sweep to discard any loose fiber that might find it's way into the fiber yet to be harvested.

Guard Hair– Guard hair is the coarse primary fiber found most commonly through the apron, armpit, and belly; but can also be found distributed throughout the animals entire fleece. Apron, armpit, and belly guard hair should be removed from the rest of the fleece. Hairy blankets should be put aside so the guard hair can be skirted out by hand before being packaged up to sent off for manufacturing. This prevents otherwise nice fleece from being downgraded.

By taking proactive measures in preventing the various forms of contamination, you are well on your way to finishing with the highest possible yield.

Shearing Day

Shearing day is one of the, if not biggest days on the farm, and for good reason. The alpacas have been holding up their end of the bargain by growing their beautiful fleece over the last year and it is now time for you to harvest it. A successful shearing day starts months in advance with planning and preparation and finishes with a great feeling of accomplishment when the job is done.

Scheduling a Shearer

If you don't plan on shearing yourself you should actively seek out a professional alpaca shearer and book them months in advance. Alpaca shearers are highly sought after, so it is important you lock them in as soon as possible. Once you have a set date, it's time to rally the troops!



Image courtesy of Steve and Karrie Myer of Abenaqui Alpacas in Sanford, ME – <http://www.abenaquialpacas.com>

Volunteers

Shearing is tedious and with many moving parts. It helps tremendously to spread the burden over several farm workers and volunteers. If you are low on staff and willing family, consider inviting people who have visited the farm over the last year to learn more about alpaca farming. This is a great opportunity for them to get firsthand experience and for you to build a strong relationship that might result in animal or service sales down the road.

A well run team can make shearing infinitely easier, resulting in less stress on you, the animals, and the shearer. Make sure everyone is educated on their tasks to ensure the operation runs smoothly throughout the day. Each volunteer should be assigned a specific task and station, staying out of each other's way and most importantly, the shearer. Shearers are hired to get as many alpacas done as possible without waiting in between animals, so make sure your volunteers are trained and organized prior to the start of the day.

If there are a large number of animals that need to get done, setting up a second shearing station can keep the queue moving quickly. While the shearer is working on one animal, having someone setting up the next animal station will speed up the process.

Communicate with your Shearer

It's important to speak openly with your shearer about your goals for this year's fiber harvest. Although speed is important, you also want to make sure your shearer is working with you to prevent second cuts, color, and other forms of contamination. Know in advance if your shearer does toe nails, teeth, and vaccines. If so, be prepared to take advantage of this service and have everything ready before shearing day. If you want fiber samples taken, band the sample prior to shearing and let your volunteers and shearers know in advance. You should also let the shearer know what fleeces will be going to shows and which will be going directly to processing. Open communication before, during, and after shearing will help guarantee you finish shearing season with as high a fiber yield as possible.

Skirting

If possible you should shoot to skirt your animal's fleece as they come off the animal. Using a wire mesh surface helps speed up the process, as dirt, debris, and second cuts fall through the mesh as you work through the fleece. Consider building a wire mesh top skirting table before hand or securely run a piece of chicken wire between two tables. Once on the skirting table, you want to remove the following:

- Excessive Guard Hair
- Armpit Hair
- Second Cuts
- Vegetable Matter
- Dirt, Dung and other Debris

Skirting Table Example



Table and Image courtesy of Ron & Terry Miller of Snow Shoe Farm in Peacham, Vermont
<http://www.snowshoefarm.com>

Skirted fiber should be discarded right away to avoid further contamination. Continue to keep each skirted fleece separate even if they are the same color and heading to the same processor. No two fleeces are the same and it should be left up to the processor how the fleece should be sorted and combined. Rolling individual fleeces up in newspaper or small plastic bags work well and can then later be combined into large bags to be shipped or dropped off for processing.

A Note on Tumbling: A tumbler is intended to help remove second cuts and other debris. However, in our experience over tumbling entangles the fleece, making it unusable in commercial manufacturing.

Classing

As your fiber comes off the animal it is important to keep the different sections separate from each other. Blankets should be removed in one piece, if possible, and sent straight to the skirting table, cut side down. Leg and neck fiber should be kept

together to prevent it from contaminating the blanket. Aprons, bellies, and other coarse fibers should be removed, ensuring they don't end back up in the mix with your other harvested fiber.

Grading fiber is technical and requires a lot of experience. This task is best left up to the processor you plan on submitting your fleece to.

Packaging

Now that your fiber is off the animal, free of contamination, separated by class and color, it's ready to be packaged. Before packaging, all fiber must be completely dry to prevent mold growth. Do not completely seal the plastic bags as alpaca fiber will sweat, producing condensation. Plastic bags are OK if you plan on shipping your fiber harvest quickly. Combine separate class bags into large clear plastic bags and vacuum pack them to save on Shipping and Handling costs.

If you plan on storing your fiber for a period of time, we recommend brown paper lawn and leaf bags from your local hardware store. This will allow excess moisture to escape. Use a black permanent marker to mark your bags with the fleece class and date. The fiber should be stored in a dry, light area, with dryer sheets to prevent moth infestation.

Take a deep breath; you have successfully harvested this year's alpaca clip!