Hidden Hill Farm Alpacas

Real Farm, Industrial – Strength Genetics

Pasture, Hay & Nutrition

It is important to know what alpacas eat in the Andes to fully understand their nutritional needs and thus the optimal pasture for their well being. They are never fed grain or supplements and rarely hay. They survive on the natural forage, which during the wet season are indigenous grasses and some succulent herb-like plants. During the dry season (which is six months long) and when forage is in short supply they eat sedges and rushes. In essence, they have adapted to a regimen of feast and famine that made them evolve into animals that are hardy, resilient and extremely efficient in extracting maximum nutritional value from marginal forage- something most U.S. breeders seem to forget.

As a result, the nutritional requirements of the alpaca are quite modest. They need to take in 1.25 to 1.5% of their body weight in dry matter. Adult alpacas should have a protein intake of 8-10%, pregnant and lactating females need 12-14% while cria may require between 14 and 18%. Grass hay is typically between 5 and 10% protein while alfalfa is typically 15-18%. The percentage depends upon the cutting- first cuttings are usually lowest in protein content. It is highly recommended that you have your hay analyzed for protein content which usually can be done through your County Extension office.

Overfeeding of protein is not recommended. Excess protein is converted into energy which if not burned is converted into fat. Excess fat is difficult to reduce in alpacas and may lead to serious health problems as a result of trying to change their diet. In addition, overweight females have difficulty conceiving and typically have poor milk production.

The right kind of pasture grasses is a question to be put to your County agricultural extension office, as pasture grasses that do well in one region of the country may be absolutely wrong for your region. Moreover, before you attempt to establish pasture, it is very important to have soil tests conducted. Again, your County agricultural extension office can supply you with bags for soil samples and directions to follow in taking the test. Upon receipt of test results, you will be provided with a soil enrichment program. For optimal results in establishing pasture, it is best to follow these to the letter.

Following below is a description of the most readily available pasture grasses (note that there are actually a number of varieties of each type of grass- the specific ones found in your local feed store are those that will thrive in your locale) and their suitability for alpacas:

Brome- Brome grasses are generally adapted to cool weather climates and therefore are typically used from the middle of the U.S. north. They are a good forage for alpacas.

Fescue- Although there are a few fescue varieties suitable for alpaca forage, most encourage the growth of endophytes (fungi) which are toxic to alpacas. In general, it is best to avoid them.

Orchardgrass- Orchardgrass is a perennial cool-season grass with varieties suitable throughout the U.S. It is one of the most popular grasses used by alpaca breeders because of its adaptability and the fact that alpacas like it.

Timothy- Another popular grass with alpaca breeders although it will not tolerate drought conditions. It is the most popular grass planted for hay in the Northeast.

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The following are the most popular legumes. Legumes are different than grasses in that they are nitrogen-fixing plants which means that they add nitrogen to the soil rather than consume it as grasses do.

Alfalfa- As noted above, most alfalfa alone is too rich in protein for even lactating females. Alone, it is suitable for weanling cria but since most breeders supplement with some type of grain mix, it is still too protein-rich. There is also some concern that although alfalfa is mineral rich, it may contain too much calcium. If you own a farm with extensive alfalfa pasture (typically dairy operations), it is entirely possible to rake the pastures and then overseed with a low protein content grass such as timothy or orchardgrass. The result, after several seasons, will be a suitable mix delivering a good balance of protein and the desirable soil nitrogen fixing ability of alfalfa (it is a legume).

Alsike (or Alsyke) Clover- This is a clover often put in pasture mixes for horses. It is toxic to alpacas at moderate levels so it is to be avoided.

Ladino Clover- Probably the most common clover planted in the east and particularly the Northeast. The most common variety found in pasture mixes is white clover. It is not as high in protein in alfalfa, has good mineral content (without excessive calcium). Alpacas seem to love it so it is a good choice in a mix.

Red Clover- Similar to white clover but not drought resistant. It is more acid tolerant and therefore suitable in high acidity areas. Usually not available in the Northeast.

Trefoil- Although adapted for use in the Northeast, it is quite frail and does not bear well under grazing conditions so it is rarely found in local feedstores.

In the end, the pasture grasses and legumes are those that will thrive in your particular pasture. Soil conditions may vary within a 2 or 3 acre area so you may find you may need to use different grasses in different pastures. Mixes of grasses and legumes suitable for your pastures are best. Alpacas are like people- their taste in grasses varies. In addition, having some legume mixed with grasses means that your nitrogen fertilizer costs are reduced due to their nitrogen-fixing ability. We strongly recommend that you consult with your local County Extension agent for both soil testing, forage testing and pasture mix selection. Note that while many Extension agents will not have knowledge of the nutritional needs of alpacas, they are the experts on soil and forage in your area. Their services are free (the soil and forage tests are not- but the costs are minimal)- it is a serious mistake not to take advantage of their expertise.

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