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Alpacas

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Over the past twenty years, alpaca farming has developed into a thriving industry in the UK. What's more, UK alpacas lead the way in Europe, as CLA member **Jenny MacHarg** explains

We all saw these intriguing animals in zoos, we thought they were llamas and now twenty years later alpaca farming has developed into a thriving industry.

No flash in the pan, alpacas are here to stay and the UK is now the leading country in Europe for both the quality and quantity of its alpaca stock.

There is a great deal of confidence in

the current market place – in 2004, the highest ever auction price (£16,800) was paid for a young unproven stud male alpaca and as breeders continue to improve the fleece quality of their alpacas, elite genetics were imported from Peru and Australia to the tune of hundreds of thousands of pounds last year.

This year the largest Australian alpaca stud farm has expanded into the British market in a substantial way and last year the British Alpaca Society membership increased by 60 per cent.

There are around 15,000 alpacas in the UK at present, with the priority to increase herd sizes to commercial proportions as speedily as possible. Fibre processors selling on to the textile industry and previously working only with imported alpaca fibre are geared up to handle large intakes.

Alpacas have been bred for 5,000 years

in the South American Andes for a highly prized, super-soft fleece, that is in great demand in the fashion industry.

They are the most colour diverse fibre-producing animal in the world with 22 colours including shades of black, brown, grey, fawn and white and produce a fleece each year that uniquely shares the characteristics of both hair and wool with incomparable insulating qualities to protect them against the extremes of temperature found in the Andes.

Alpacas have a strong herding instinct, are gentle to work with, healthy and easy to look after with no specialist fencing or equipment required.

They live for between fifteen and twenty years and give birth once a year, early in the day, usually before lunch!

Alpacas' protecting skills are well recognized and in Australia they have been documented as giving their lives to

HERE TO STAY



protect their allocated sheep herd from predators. British farmers are also beginning to explore the advantages of herd protectors for their lambing fields, following news of shepherds reporting their best lambing percentages ever, after introducing alpacas.

In North Northumberland, at Fowberry, we are breeding pedigree alpacas and hoping for the same success as a previous occupant of our house in the eighteenth century – noted agriculturalist and progressive stock breeder George Culley, who with his brother Matthew introduced their Border Leicester sheep to the North and Southern Scotland.

A commitment to breeding the highest quality alpacas with sound conformation and superior fleece has led us to source world-class genetics from Peru, Australia and North America, to enhance and improve our growing herd of 40 plus alpacas.

This continues with the recent arrival at Fowberry of Bozedown Viscount, a multi prize-winning alpaca stud male - winner of Champion Adult Male at the biggest alpaca show in Europe.

Viscount has parents from the most famous alpaca farm in the world – Don Julio Barreda's Accoyo Estancia in Peru and his impressive lineage is coupled with a strong well-covered frame and most importantly, a dense, soft and lustrous fleece.

Another stud male with an impressive Australian pedigree, recently won Supreme Champion at the Scottish National Alpaca Show at the Border Union Show at Kelso in the Scottish Borders.

The Fowberry herd run over 35 acres of ancient parkland which offers them grazing amongst centuries old native trees, with varied terrain and interest for them. The herd is cared for as naturally

as possible with all the females together so maidens can learn from mothers, sisters and aunts.

The cria (babies) not only have the backing of years of quality breeding in their pedigrees, but are also halter-trained and given every care, attention and encouragement to fulfil their potential as healthy, happy and productive members of the herd.

In general, prices range from: geldings at around £700, pregnant maidens from £4,500, experienced older pregnant females from £3,000 and potential stud males from £5,000.

Revered by the Incas and still a vital source of income and sustenance in South America, it seems that there is now a growing following for these elegant, charming and intelligent animals in this country too and none more so than in North Northumberland. ●



MORE INFORMATION

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