



Producing top-flight fleece

A farming couple are bringing a little slice of South America to the Vale of York, as Agricultural Correspondent Mark Casd found out.

FARM OF THE WEEK

It was a visit to friends in the North West of Scotland that set the MacIarg family on the path towards farming alpacas.

The animals enchanted the couple and they ultimately decided to take them on full time.

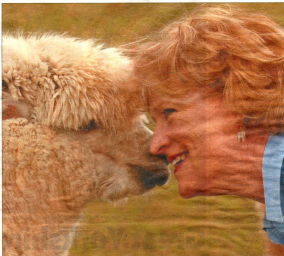
Today they own a herd of 70, with about 20 births due this year, breeding them to a high standard and using the high-quality fleeces to produce clothing.

They even ran courses educating farmers and prospective breeders on the benefits of alpaca farming and the merits they bring to a specially dedicated section of their North Yorkshire farm.

While indigenous to the South American Andes, the handy creatures are now being farmed the world over for their well-textured and fine-quality fleeces.

Graham and Jenny MacIarg have been farming the distinctive animals for eight years and have never looked back.

"They just captivated us, they are such clever and interesting animals," said Mrs MacIarg.



AFFECTION: Jenny, wearing alpaca ear rings, with Uis. Right, Graham and Jenny MacIarg with alpacas.

Pictures: Mike Cowling

Despite being among the most herb-orientated animals around, alpacas are also incredibly inquisitive.

"They just love anything new. If anything new is happening outside of the fence they are straight over to look at it. If one walks out of the paddock then it walks straight back in after a few seconds, but it just hates to be separated from the herd," she said.

Mr and Mrs MacIarg have become very devoted

to their flock since getting involved with alpacas and can identify and name each animal by sight. The alpacas have an impressive vocabulary of sounds, which the MacIargs can recognise and interpret to establish the animals' moods and wellbeing.

The pair recently moved from their family home in North Northumberland to Cranbe Grange Farm at Barton-le-Willows, between York and Malton.

The 110-acre holding in Yorkshire has made it far simpler to increase and improve their business.

Mr MacIarg said: "We had a bigger house with a smaller acreage and needed a smaller house with many more acres. There is more of an alpaca community in the south so with the move to Yorkshire we are better placed. The location is perfect for us and the herd."

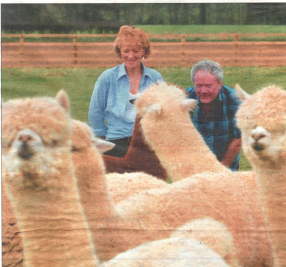
Before their arrival he

had to organise the construction of more than six kilometres of fencing, creating several paddocks to rotate the alpacas between them to give the grass time to recover, and to prevent them eating too much and putting on body fat that can harm fleece quality.

The alpacas feed chiefly on grass but do have access to good quality hay on an ad lib basis. They are also fed a specifically formulated supplement,



without a sheep in sight



Camelina, which provides extra minerals and vitamins which are vital to their welfare.

The flock comes in a variety of more than 20 colours and Mrs MacLarg often has to explain to people at the farmers' markets where she sells the alpaca wool garments that there is no dye in them, and that it is the actual colour of the fleece. The animals live for up to 25 years and the females

will produce a youngster, or cria as they are known, once a year under middle age.

The mothers almost automatically want to become pregnant again after giving birth and with the gestation period at around 11 and a half months they exist in an almost perpetual state of pregnancy.

The animals seldom give birth at any time other than late morning to mid

afternoon—a genetic predisposition caused by the sub-zero night-time temperatures in South America. Giving birth then at night would lead the cria in die from the bitter cold and results in a straightforward and structured birthing process for the alpaca farmer.

Despite the Yorkshire climate being very different to that of the Andes, the alpacas cope very well. The only problems come dur-

ing during the winter to find his flock with snow still lying untrampled on their backs because of the high levels of insulation the fleece provides.

The fleeces produce wooden garments and lend themselves to many other products. A typical adult alpaca will produce up to six kilos of fleece a year, which can be sold to small scale mills for anywhere between £7 and £14 a kilo, depending on their fineness. Mrs MacLarg also employs hand knitters and weavers to produce scarves, hats and other items of clothing.

The family also run courses for people thinking of getting into alpaca farming, or those involved in the wool industry.

Their herd runs off more than 50 acres of grassland and is cared for in a natural way, with females placed together to learn from others. The herd came from breeders across the world to ensure a wide genetic base.

Mrs MacLarg said: "We take it very seriously. When we started I did not think we would end up running courses on alpacas and breeding them."

Like any branch of farming, the alpacas present their challenges. While the fleeces are good quality the domestic supply is low, and Mr MacLarg estimates that the national UK alpaca herd would have to triple before large scale exports would look at providing a fully commercial market to sell them into.

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