

Practical Alpaca Breeding

By Mike Safley

To a person who has never bred animals, let alone alpacas, the technical aspects of genetics and animal breeding theory can be intimidating. It is important to step back and realize that common sense is the common denominator for success. People, who succeed at animal breeding use good information, are deliberate, patient, and consistent and they keep their breeding program simple.

These attributes would make anyone successful at any endeavor. Alpaca breeding can be mastered by anyone that is willing to learn the science of inheritance and apply it systematically. There are no short cuts. If you breed an outstanding male to an inferior female you will see improvement. The cria will most likely not be the equal of the sire but it will be better than the dam. Breed the same dam to an inferior male and the poor result is predictable. It's common sense.

KNOWLEDGE

The science of animal breeding has been established for more than 100 years. The concepts that a breeder needs to master are simple. I do not discuss the technical aspects of animal breeding in this book but you can find full explanations of them in any number of books including two that I have written: *Alpacas: Synthesis of a Miracle* and *Ideal Alpacas: From Myth to Reality*. You need to understand: genotype, phenotype, environmental forces affecting animal characteristics, dominant and recessive traits, progeny testing, selection, the random nature of inheritance, the importance of sire selection, breed type, breed standards, the principle of genetic change and hybrid vigor.

These are important subjects and you will need to do a fair bit of reading to become conversant with them but the rewards are there for the diligent breeder. Reading alone will not complete your education. You will need to become familiar with alpaca history and lore. Talking with fellow breeders is helpful and there will be no substitute for your practical experience.

GOOD INFORMATION

Good decisions require good information. In alpaca breeding that means good information about production traits such as fleece weight, fiber fineness, fleece architecture, and breed type. You will need good pedigree information and production statistics on individual animals. Good records take time to collect. There are no short cuts.

BE DELIBERATE

As our life passes before us everything seems to accelerate. The pace quickens. But in animal breeding, life proceeds on a much slower schedule. Genes segregate on a random basis and at times that gives inheritance an unpredictable quality. Breeders need to be patient and play the odds. You can be secure in the belief that if you follow the rules that each generation will improve. Your success will accrue and compound. The randomness of the process can also be your friend. It creates opportunity. Occasionally the stars align and the genetic slot machine lines up on the jackpot. These events are gifts from nature. You should treasure and exploit the opportunities that they present. Use the gift of a prepotent herdsire often. Make sure to fill your herd with his genes. The best alpaca breeders are patient opportunists.

BE CONSISTENT

If you move forward without an ideal in mind your path could end where you began. If you change your ideal with the wind you will be the victim of whim. Once you decide on the ideal for the alpaca that you want to breed stay the course. Be diligent. If you alter your selection program too often you will end up back tracking.

That is not to say that there are not legitimate reasons to change your breeding goals, but the more consistent your program the more definable your outcomes and the more marketable your product. Breeds are like aircraft carriers; they cannot turn on a dime.

THINK

How is the best alpaca characterized? What is the least expensive, fastest way to obtain that ideal? Look at the big picture, understand alpaca type and breed standards. Understand the animal improvement process. Be analytical.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Successful breeding programs are generally fairly simple. By that I mean they are simple in concept. They use only the best males. They have well established goals and they do not take short cuts to beat the Mendelian odds.

A sound breeding program has a clearly designed goal. The breeder clearly understands the purpose of his animals. They do not select for too many traits at one time. Successful breeders avoid breeding for traits that are purely aesthetic or ones that are not heritable. Every alpaca breeder thinks his animals are beautiful but the best breeders focus their affection on commercially productive traits. There should not be a conflict between function and looks

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