

What is the value of a gelding alpaca?

By Christine Perala Gardiner

Another name for a gelded alpaca is a "fiber male", a non-breeding animal. What value are these boys to an alpaca industry busy breeding for a future textile market? Fiber males have values sometimes overlooked in the rush to produce breeding livestock. First and foremost, the alpaca is a fiber production industry. Gelded males have lower levels of testosterone, so they keep their fleece fineness years longer than intact breeding males. The primary measure of a gelding's value is the fineness, uniformity and quantity of his fleece.

Is that it? We don't think so. There are many other qualities that make gelding alpacas valuable animals. Perhaps their next greatest quality is their looks; they are just beautiful creatures, in a world where there is never enough beauty. They're always photogenic, and their soulful eyes speak to the human heart. They're by nature gentle creatures without much defense, always alert, cautious and shy. By virtue of their size, alpacas are naturally good with human children, as they are with their own. Geldings make the best companions for children, since boys don't have to look after crias of their own. Well-trained geldings have greater value than those who run when humans come near.

Geldings can do the work of interacting with people better than breeding girls. Interacting with humans is hard work for alpacas – we are so much clumsier and louder than they are. It's stressful for girls and can impact their growing babies, but boys can take the stress better. Geldings are the best candidates for animal therapy; going into hospitals to let patients touch them, meeting with groups of school children, visiting retirement homes, greeting the public in public places. Lots more people would love to see and touch them, and there is great potential for the niche market small business to train and present alpacas, to assist with healing people who have suffered emotional or physical damage. Gelded males can be gentler, and for this purpose gentle alpacas have greater value than fierce ones.

Some geldings are naturally more fierce by nature, and will challenge a predator when a threat comes near his herd. These "guard alpacas" have greater courage in the face of danger. In Australia, gelded guard alpacas have helped the sheep ranchers reduce their losses to predators, and have saved ranchers many times more than their cost.

But don't neglect one of the alpacas' most enduring farm products; manure. Alpaca manure is fantastic fertilizer, either raw for trees and shrubs or as compost for vegetable crops. A local source of wholesome farm nutrients is, or soon will be, a great asset to small-scale sustainable agriculture. Alpacas and llamas could help to revitalize fresh food production near our cities, where people live, reducing our vulnerability to terrorist attack against the food transportation system. Healthy soils are living soils, and alpaca manure can be a key ingredient in recovering soils capable of growing the best medicine for people, healthy food.

Put together, what is the value of a gelding? The answer depends on how creative folks are at putting together these many values into an integrated, healthy farm system that includes farmers, children, the infirm and the healthy, with fiber and food production. This could paint a beautiful picture for the future of our society.

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