

Sorting Your Fleeces

By Cathy Merkle

Alpacas must be completely sheared annually, usually in spring. This is done for two reasons. The health and well-being of the alpaca depends on removal of the fleece. Alpacas do not shed their fleece and unless it is sheared, many varied and serious health problems can result. The second reason is to harvest the very valuable product that is their fleece. Alpaca is recognized as being a rare luxury fibre for good reason. The fleece that our beautiful alpacas produce every year is golden and we owe it to them and our industry to do the best we can with it. We begin with annual shearing, using methods that will enhance the value of the fleece. Once the alpacas are shorn, the fleece must then be sorted.

Sorting is as essential to producing a valuable product as breeding for fineness, uniformity and density. You can have the best fleece in the world, but unless it is properly sorted, it will lose value. Conversely, you can have a substandard fleece that will have value added by sorting.

Sorting is the practise of separating the fleece as it comes off the alpaca by body area and skirting the blanket or prime fleece according to fineness, length and colour to produce a blanket fleece that is uniform and therefore, more valuable to the producer, the processor, the retailer and ultimately, the consumer. If one were to simply bung all of the fleece into one bag and send it off to the processor with mixed grades and lengths, the end product will be itchy, will pill, will shed and not have the soft, beautiful handle that alpaca products should have. By sorting, we add value to all of the grades of fibre, from ultrafine through to coarse. The second aspect to sorting is removal of tender fleeces, very coarse fibre, second cuts and vegetable matter.

There are two basic methods for sorting: the Do – It – Yourself method,

and the Hire – A – Professional method. Both are much more effective than not sorting the fleece at all. Excellent references are available on the CanCam Fibre Harvest Code of Practice page found at www.cancamco-op.com and at www.alpacafarm.ca/productsandservices/fibreinformation/seminar.ca. Excellent opportunities to learn exist at the CanCam sorts, at workshops, and neighbouring farms' shearing days. The Natural Fibre Centre in Olds, AB offers a certified sorter and classer program that is unique in North America. Fleece handling is not for everyone. Those that show an aptitude for it are often willing to sort and class on a custom basis, much the same as hiring a shearer, and equally important to the increased return on investment. With that in mind, remember that it is not a difficult thing to learn with some guidance and a little practise. Following are some guidelines that will help get the job done.

Have all of your supplies at hand. The most important thing is a sorting table. These are not commercially available and you will have to make one. The easiest is plastic gardening mesh stretched over a wood frame. The mesh allows dust, vegetation and second cuts to fall through as you sort the fleece. Have it at a comfortable height to prevent backache.

Once shearing commences the fibre will be collected by one of the helpers and placed in the appropriate containers. The blanket fleece should come directly from the alpaca on the shearing table to the sorting table. This is the majority and most valuable part of the fleece. If all of the blankets can be sorted on shearing day, that will be a big job well done. If the remaining bags of fleece can also be sorted, that is a bonus but depends on the number of head and the number of helpers. It may be a job for the days following shearing.

Blanket

The blanket fleece should be thrown out on the sorting table cut side down. Fine, dense, crimped fleeces will hold together and allow quite a bit of handling. Loose fleeces, even if they are fine, don't hold together and are more difficult to sort. If the fleece is in one piece, cut side down, you should be able to identify the belly edge, the midline edge and the shoulder and britch. Remove any very

course fibre that may have gotten involved in the blanket. There are often small pieces in the inner leg area. These can go to compost. The guide here is that if the fibre makes you think "bristle brush", it is too coarse for processing.

Pull a lock from somewhere in the middle to use as a guide. Work your way around the edge of the fleece, removing anything that doesn't match the sample lock in fineness or length. Pay close attention to the midline edge, as there is often short fibre there. The angle of the backbone sometimes produces a strip of over shearing that needs to be removed. Remember, the purpose is to remove everything that differs from the sample lock, so everything that remains should be the same. This results in a uniform blanket fleece that will produce a much better quality end product than a fleece that is not skirted.

The skirtings from the blanket fleece are usually the next grade in fineness and should not be thrown out, but kept separate and sent for processing. Repeat the above procedure for the second half of the blanket fleece. Line it up on the sorting table, midline edges together, and skirt it the same way as the first. Remove any vegetation and give the fleece a shake to dislodge dust and second cuts. These will fall through the mesh of the sorting table to the floor. If a fleece is heavily vegetated, it is difficult to process and can contaminate an entire run of yarn at the mill. My rule of thumb is that if you grab a handful of fleece and it crunches, that's too much vegetation. Toss it in the compost. Sometimes, the fleece can be salvaged by removing the heavily vegetated areas,



usually the topline and belly. But refer to the rule.

When the skirting is complete, fold the fleece in half. One cut side will now be facing up. This is an excellent opportunity to remove any second cuts that still remain. Roll the two halves together from the britch to the shoulder. As you roll, the other cut side will be facing out and second cuts can easily be spotted and removed.

Place the fleece in the appropriately labelled bag.

Clean your work area before the next fleece comes to you, being particularly careful when changing colours.

The neck fleece is often comparable in quality to the blanket, but is separated because of the difference in length. The cut off for short fibre sent to CanCam is 35mm or 1 1/2 inches.

Huacaya fleece lengths accepted by CanCam are short – 1 1/2” to 3 1/2” (35 mm to 85mm) and long – 3 1/2” to 6”(85 mm to 150 mm). Anything shorter than 35 mm or longer than 150 mm is considered unprocessable. Suri fleeces are sorted using the same method as huacaya. It is usually a much more simplified process because, generally speaking, suri fleece is very uniform. The main thing to watch for is overlong fleeces, coting and second cuts. Suri fleece lengths accepted by CanCam are 2 to 3 inches (50 – 85 mm), 3 to 6 inches (85 – 150 mm), and 6 to 9 inches (151 – 225 mm).

Leg and belly fibre varies greatly with the quality and age of alpacas. Some remains quite fine and is very useful. Some is coarse early in an alpaca's life. If it feels bristly, it is too coarse and should not be sent to the co-op.

Once you have experience and confidence in sorting, feel free to combine fleeces of similar fineness, length and colour. If you are not sure, it is better to bag everything separately and leave it to the classers at the collection to decide. Mixed grades in a bag will downgrade the fibre and undo all of the good work you have done by properly sorting.

Sorting is not difficult; it takes a little time and practise, but provides large payoffs. First, you are adding value to your fleece and that carries forward to a higher quality end product. Secondly, handling the fleece with a practical purpose teaches you a usable skill, as well as telling you a lot about your herd, your husbandry practices and your breeding program. This is very valuable information that can give you an edge in a competitive industry while advancing the industry as a whole.



About the Author

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