

# Ideas on How to Set Up an Alpaca Ranch From Scratch!

By John Malkus  
*Alpaca de la Pacifica*

**S**o you're now an alpaca owner, and the next step is planning your farm layout. Assuming you don't have a three hundred acre farm that's been in the family for generations, you will be starting from scratch.

When Tina and I first became interested in alpacas we were living in the city, and our growing herd of alpacas was being boarded at a nearby farm. Having very little experience with the actual operation of an alpaca farm, we knew our work was cut out for us.

Our first step was deciding on location. For us, that was the easy part. Neither of us wanted to leave southern California, so that helped us narrow down the search. We looked at farms ranging from 2.5 to twenty acres. Some already had fencing and cross fencing in place, while others had nothing more than the main house with a mailbox. Some had barns already in place, horse riding arenas, wash racks, tack rooms, pretty much complete facilities. Now we were faced with the question, "Do we build it ourselves, or modify something pre-existing?" We opted to do it ourselves.

We were going to be in southern California where the temperatures range from the mid 30s during the winter to the very hot 100s in the summer. Our layout and overall design would, therefore, be somewhat different than those further east or north.

## Planning on Paper

Our first step was the layout. The property we purchased was on a five-acre tract with the existing home located at one end of the property. That left us



*The time we spent making plans on paper resulted in a versatile, functional system. It provided a variety of options for pasture rotation and for separating males and females, expectant moms and new crias.*

with a clean slate for our design.

One of the things that was very important to us was to be able to see the alpacas from the house. This was easily accomplished since the house was at one end of the property and almost every window faced the acreage below.

The acreage was flat - no trees, no pasture, no fencing, just five flat acres of dirt. We spent the first weeks writing down different layouts, hoping to find that perfect design. What we ended up with, after fifty sheets of paper, were eleven separate pastures, with four shade shelters. This layout came about largely because of the size of the herd we had already built.

We knew early on that our herd would grow, crias would be born, weaning females would become maidens, and the boys would begin their transition to studhood. All this meant that at some point, we knew separating the males and females would be necessary. We also knew that when the moms had their crias, it was important that they be close to the house. This would allow us to monitor their progress for several days before placing them back in the general population. There were also concerns about



separating alpacas due to diet perhaps, or maybe a behavior thing, or even a medical need. Finally, we needed to plan on a stud pasture.

Next we had to come up with a plan that would allow moving the herd from one pasture to another as easily as possible. Early in our research we had visited a ranch that had a well thought out plan for doing just that. They had set up the pastures with a main run at the top end of each pasture; ten feet wide, it ran the entire length of the property. Each pasture had a gate that led into that pasture from the main aisle. With that in mind, we found that if we kept all our gates the same size as the width of the aisle, and paid particular attention to placement, we could design the system to work like a set of locks. We could move an entire group from pasture one, and allow the group to run into the aisle. As they passed through the aisle, we would have the choice of either opening a gate to a particular pasture, or running them all the way down to the last pasture. This system also works very well as a catch pen if you keep a gate at either end.

We love this system for several reasons. One in particular is when we

need to separate an alpaca from the group for the vet, or toenail trimming, we can herd the group into the aisle, and then herd everyone not needed back into the pasture. This style has proven that one person can move as many alpacas as needed, single-handedly.

### **Do Fence Me In**

Fencing is very controversial. We chose the 2" x 4" no-climb fencing. We used 4' height in all the pastures except for the males, where we chose 5'. All have a top rail, and all are supported by chain link poles. We've seen the lodge pole style, and it looks great but, for durability and maintenance, we decided on galvanized poles instead. The gates are made of the same materials. We found that by purchasing in bulk our cost was cut considerably.



*Wide aisles connecting the pastures make it easy to move alpacas from one area to another. Gates are the same width as the aisles, allowing the aisles to function as catch pens. Using the gates, one person can move large groups of animals single-handedly.*

was install gates, gates, and more gates. "You can never have enough gates."

Two things determined the size of our gates. One was the width of the aisle, so when you opened one gate, it actually closed off the rest of the aisle. The second concern was for equipment. We had to figure how wide our tractor was, how sharply it turned, so it could be moved in and out of the pastures.

Three more pastures were designed opposite the aisle. One is used as a quarantine lot, the second is our breeding area, and the third, which is closest to the house, is our "cria watch" pasture. This is where the new moms are placed for the first three to four days with their crias. We took extra measures in this layout, making sure that the visiting alpacas did

There are several other options for fencing. We decided on the no-climb type because we did not want the crias to figure out how to escape into another pasture during the night, as might happen with horse fencing. The no-climb also allowed an unobstructed view from the highway (good marketing).

Before we could decide how large each pasture should be, there were several things we needed to consider. Since we were going to irrigate the pastures, we had to determine the water pressure and how many sprinkler heads would be needed, and how far they would throw the water. Once this was calculated, we ended up with four pastures at 250' x 60', and two at 15,000 square feet. The two larger pastures were placed at the end of the aisle.

We placed gates at the top and bottom of each of these pastures, thinking that we would need access from either end. We also placed gates between each pasture, so we would not have to walk up to the aisle every time we wanted to get from one pasture to another. The one thing I was told early in my planning,

not have nose to nose contact with the existing herd. We did this by placing a small pasture between the two. Again, the size was determined by the distance the sprinkler head would throw water.

Our male pasture is at the opposite side of the ranch. Here we used the 5' no-climb fencing, along with a top rail, since we knew that boys would be boys, and might want to jump up on the fence from time to time. The male lot has a very limited view of any other pasture, for obvious reasons.

### **Gimme Shelter**

We then went back to the scratch pad to look at shelter locations. This was a bit more difficult than we had thought. First we had to decide which direction the worst winds would come from. In our case it was the Santa Ana winds that blow across from the high desert. This only happens in the fall, but had to be taken into consideration. We then looked at the direction the sun traveled. Since our property faced the south, the sun wasn't a big problem, as it would cross the pastures leaving the shelters in complete shade.

The shelters were designed with several things in mind. We made three of them 24' x 36', with gable-type roofing. We also wanted the shelters to somewhat match the décor of the main house, so they were built just like a house, only without the walls. We built 12' high ceilings to allow good air flow, and placed a composition shake roof to assist in reflecting the summer sun. The sides of the shelters we enclosed up only half way, permitting the alpacas easy visibility. The



*High, open shelters complement the style of the main house, and provide adequate shelter in the mild Southern California climate. Gates inside and outside the shelter provided a variety of options to keep animals together or apart.*

rear of the shelters were left open with more no-climb fencing, to accommodate the road that was in the future plans. We had planned on using the rear access road to deliver hay to each of the shelters. It would also enable us to have easy access for cleaning out the shelters.

Inside each shelter there was a dividing wall. This was designed so we could have two pastures feed directly into one shelter. A gate was placed in the center, for the times when a larger group might need the entire shelter. At the front of the shelter more gates were placed, which in turn made them catch pens.

We also placed auto-water systems in each side of these shelters. We opted for a partial concrete floor, which measured 12' x 24'. The thought here was to allow the alpacas to be able to get up off the ground during the rainy season. The rest of the shelter floor area was filled with decomposed granite. Inside the side walls we placed hay feeders. These were built at 24" high, and 18" deep. We then added plastic rain gutter for the pellets, minerals, sweet mix, etc. These gutters work great because they do not allow alpacas to gorge on the pellets, which we all know can cause choking. They really need to turn their heads sideways to get to the pellets, and need to work just a little to get a mouth full.

The next step was the planting of trees. Figuring that the alpacas would not always want to stay in the shelters during the heat of the day, and to add a little color to the pastures, we planted a dozen fruitless mulberry trees, and another half dozen fruitless plum trees. Besides the beautiful color these trees produce with their leaves, the alpacas love to eat the leaves as they drop.

### **Green, Green Grass of Home**

Once the actual layout for the pastures and shelters was complete, we started thinking of ground cover. Again, this is a very controversial subject, so one needs to keep in mind his or her geographic area; what might work for us may not work well in your specific region.

We decided on the "World Feeder," a Hybrid Bermuda grass. In order to plant the World Feeder we first needed topsoil. We contacted a local company who brought us organic topsoil, which was turned into the ground. Our next step was the irrigation. Plumbing was placed in the ground along with electrical conduit. This would supply electricity for the lights and electrical outlets we placed in each shelter. After the topsoil was in the ground we ordered the World Feeder. This came in the form of plugs, and needed to be placed in the ground with minimal cover.

Outside feeders were also built, and placed at different locations throughout each pasture. We have found that the alpacas really do enjoy the midnight buffet under the stars in southern California.

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### **About the Author:**

*John Malkus and his wife Tina own Alpaca de la Pacifica in Somis, California. After 15-plus years in the integrated circuit and semiconductor industry, enough was enough. For the past seven years, both have turned their full attention to the alpaca industry, and can be reached at (805) 553-0777 ranch; (805) 553-0780 evenings; or [www.alpacadelapacifica.com](http://www.alpacadelapacifica.com).*

