



The Gift of Pachamama

Alpacas and Llamas in Western Maryland

Written by: Sara Mullins

Photography by: Lance C. Bell



Barbara Buehl rubs noses with one of her favorite alpacas, born at her farm near Oldtown.

According to Quechua legend, Pachamama (Mother Earth) loans alpacas to the people of the Andes to help them survive the rigors of harsh Andean winters. Pachamama asks only that her alpacas be well fed and treated kindly, or she will call them back.

Pachamama has extended her generosity to several residents of Western Maryland, who have discovered the rewards of raising alpacas. With their huge eyes, moppet hair and gentle manner, these appealing and adaptable members of the Camelid family require little acreage, are relatively easy to keep and produce wool highly prized for its lightweight warmth and silky texture. A glance through the popular Peruvian Connection catalog offers an idea of how stylish — and expensive — alpaca garments can be.

For Barbara Buehl, who currently serves as the executive director of the Allegany County Chamber of Commerce, raising alpacas makes good business sense and allows her to combine her lifelong love of animals with her extensive professional experience. Her goal is to establish a full-time business breeding alpacas at River's Edge Farm near Oldtown.

About 10 years ago, Barbara traded life in Washington, D.C. and a 31-year marketing career with AT&T for 35 wooded acres adjoining the North Fork of the Potomac River. She built a road, a home, several outbuildings and a consulting business to sustain her new lifestyle.

Then, while visiting her native Ohio several years ago, Barbara spotted Magical Farms, the largest breeder of alpacas in the United States, and decided to stop.

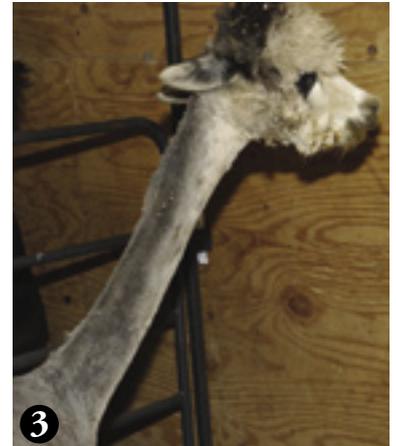
1) Barbara Buehl and professional shearer, Teri Phipps, begin shearing. The Alpaca is gently laid on the floor with much petting and reassuring extended to help keep the animal calm for its "new do."

2) After shearing, the animals are petted and soothed for reassurance. The wool from the back is referred to as "the blanket," or the first choice. The wool from the belly, legs, and neck are called "seconds."

3) "After shearing they are pretty funny looking," says Barbara. The wool is thick and shears off almost in one piece, leaving the animal appearing greatly reduced in size.

4) Barbara holds bags full of the wool. Each animal's wool is kept in a separate bag in order to keep the colors separated. The wools are usually not dyed* and proceed to carding and spinning. There is no need for washing because the wool contains no lanolin. This is a blessing for people allergic to sheep wool—usually they can wear the Alpaca wool without any irritation. At the market, the first choice wool from a baby Alpaca will bring as much as \$4.50 per ounce, while the adult first choice will fetch up to \$3.00 per ounce. Seconds go for \$1.00 per ounce, (of course these are today's market prices).

* Most Alpaca wool harvested in South America is dyed.



“I came face-to-face with an alpaca. That was my downfall,” she says. The farm’s owner convinced her that raising alpacas was good business, and “I was sold,” she says. She is now developing a web site and preparing her alpacas for a national show next year.

“If I’d known 10 years ago that I’d be doing this, I’d have never believed it,” she says.

Barbara began her alpaca business four years ago with three animals and now has 14 Huacaya alpacas, along with five horses (including one miniature), four goats, three ducks, one lamb, two dogs and assorted cats. Her neighbor, Martha Butrim, comes by to help every day. A former resident of Baltimore and fellow animal-lover, Martha clearly enjoys her new role as Barbara’s assistant. “We’re like Lucy and Ethel,” says Barbara, recalling some of the duo’s adventures with their eclectic menagerie.

Barbara has formed what she calls “a loose partnership” with another breeder, Jo Gilman, who processes wool from Barbara’s and her own herd of 13 alpacas at BlueBell Farm, her home near Grantsville.

Jo recently opened a small store in a 3-story structure, where she sells cleaned alpaca fleece and fiber for spinning, dyed and undyed yarn, sweaters, ponchos, shawls, blankets, hats, gloves, teddy bears and stuffed llamas.

“It’s an easy fiber to work with,” she says of alpaca fleece, which requires little processing because it contains no lanolin or dander, like sheep’s wool. She runs the fleece through a crank-turned hand carding machine that removes dirt, dust and straw. The carded fleece comes in one of 22 natural colors in varying shades of white, beige, brown, rose and charcoal.

The inspiration for her work comes from living in Peru, where, according to Jo, production of alpaca textiles is the top industry. A native of England and nurse with training in international health, she raised her four children in Peru with her husband Bob, a physician and faculty member at Johns Hopkins University, whom she met while working in Bangladesh. After the couple returned to their Garrett County farm three years ago, she began building her alpaca herd for wool. Her goal is 80 alpacas. Bob and Jo are currently renovating old buildings on the property for use by the alpacas.

“Each animal has distinctive wool,” she says, noting that the type of animal determines the type of wool. She gently squeezes some fleece to show the amount of “crimp” or waviness it retains after being squeezed. Fleece can also have “crinkle” much like a wad of paper. Another aspect is the fleece’s “loft,” or airiness. “It gets to be a feel factor,” she says.



Top photo: Jo Gillman works in her store, carding the Alpaca wool to prepare it for spinning. Above: Jo begins spinning the wool into a continuous thread spooled for knitting.

Jo is now working on a web site to sell her products, many of which are made in Peru. Her farm will be listed in the Garrett County Chamber of Commerce Farm Visit Brochure. Recent visitors included a group of homeschool students and elementary school children, whose drawings and comments are displayed in the store's entrance.

In nearby Swanton, Sarah Franklin and her family keep five llamas, also members of the Camelid family, as pets on their 10 acres, along with two pygmy goats and 20 chickens. She bought a llama three years ago after deciding her horses were "too much work."

Her herd grew after her llama jumped the fence in search of company and became pregnant. Now she has two males and three females. She sedates her llamas for the annual shearing and has found a buyer for her wool. Eventually, she hopes to spin their wool herself.

Her llamas are halter trained and enjoy going on walks. "They're kind of like our big dogs," "They're just a magical kind of animal," she says of the llamas. "We hope to get them into fairs." Sarah says. Visitors and children are welcome to the Franklin farm on the Sky Valley Road at the entrance to Thousand Acres.

Another Garrett County couple, Charles and Laurie Cornett, have spent the last several years breeding, selling and showing llamas from Lonesome Pines Farm near Oakland.

It all started around 1997 when Charles asked Laurie what she wanted for Christmas. She told him, "llamas," which she'd admired while passing a llama farm enroute to and from her job in Carroll County. Her gift of two female llamas grew to a herd of 30 by the time they moved to Garrett County in 1999. By 2001, the couple began showing their animals and winning awards.

"Everything we have on the farm is show quality," Laurie says with pride of her llamas. "Our goal is to get as many animals qualified for the regional show in Delaware and for the Grand Nationals." The regional championship takes place this October.

The llama shows include Halter Classes and Performance Classes. During Halter Classes, llamas are strictly judged on their "conformation" and showmanship. A llama with good conformation will have straight legs, a level top line, high tail position and good overall balance. Showmanship involves the manner in which a person handles the llama, with movement patterns similar to those used in dog shows. Performance Classes include obstacle classes, public relations (obstacles typically encountered in public places), pack classes, cart classes (pleasure driving and obstacle driving) and costume or other "fun" classes.



*Above: Jo's store is a cozy three story building, very rustic but has been re-done inside — a perfect place for spinning and knitting.
Right: A view of BlueBell Farm Alpacas in Grantsville, Maryland.*





Above: Sarah Franklin with Abby; tame and gentle, these creatures will come up to the fence to greet you. Sarah says "as a rule llamas won't spit at you, but at each other, when they are fighting over food." Llamas and Alpacas don't like being touched on the face or head, but the neck or back are fine.

Bottom left to right: Abby and Coco.

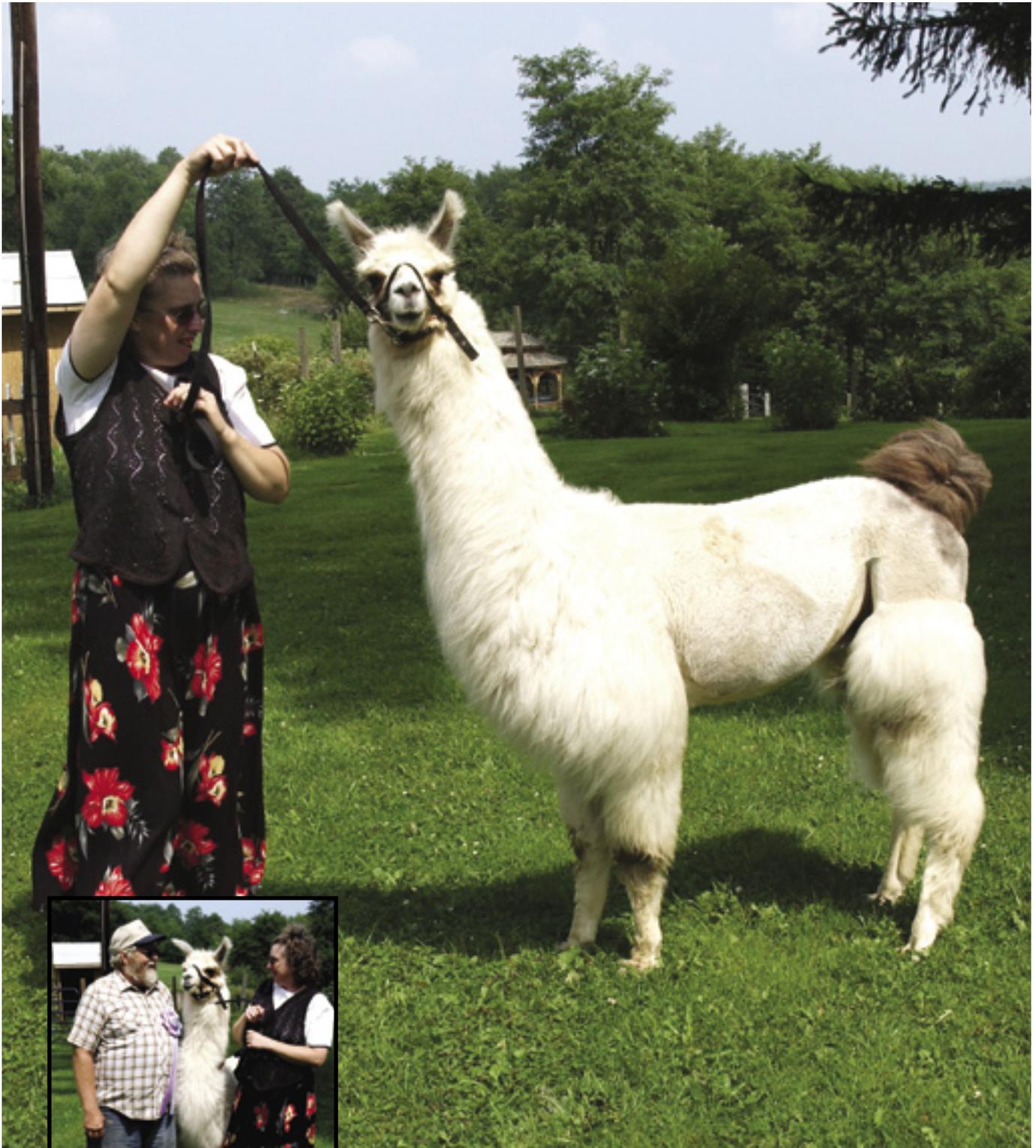
Yesterday and Today

Lamas (single "l"), which include the llamas ("ll"), alpaca, and guanaco and the endangered vicuna are members of the camel (cam lid) family. Origin in the Central Plains of North America about 40 million years ago, the lama predecessors migrated to South America around 2.5 million years ago. Its cousin the camel, relocated to the Middle East and other regions of the world. The end of the Ice Age, 10,000 to 12,000 years ago marked the extinction of the cam lid in North America.

Llamas were domesticated from the guanacos of the Andean highlands of Peru 5,000 to 6,000 years ago and are among the worlds oldest domestic animals. While primarily a beast of burden for the native herdsmen, llamas also provided them with meat, wool, hides for shelter, manure pellets for fuel, and became sacrificial offerings to their gods.

Today there are an estimated 7 million llamas and alpacas in South America. Based on information provided by the International Lama Register, in the United States and Canada there's an estimated 86,000 to 89,000 llamas, 6,500 to 7,000 alpacas, and 300 to 350 guanacos.

Llamas have international appeal with countries such as New Zealand augmenting their fiber industry with llama and alpaca wool. As in ancient times, the llama today is important to agricultural economy of the highlands of Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, and Peru. In North America the llama and alpaca industry is recognized as a viable agricultural entity.



Above: Laurie and Tico pose.

Left: Charles and Laurie Cornett with Tico, a contender for Grand Nationals FFF Senior title.

Note: While Mountain Discoveries attempted to include all of the Alpaca and Llama farms in Garrett and Allegany Counties, there may be some we missed and for that we apologize. If you have one of these farms and welcome visitors, please let us know and we will try to list you in the next Mountain Discoveries and on the web site. – Editor

Several of the Cornetts' llamas have won prizes at such shows. Lover Boy has qualified for Grand Nationals for three consecutive years. He was third of five Heavy Wool Males at the 2001 Eastern Regional and Reserve Grand Champion at the 2002 Eastern Regional and 2003 Virginia Classics. Big Breeze was the Grand Champion of the 2002 Old Dominion Gold Cup Medium Wool Male. Both males are available for stud service.

The Cornetts have entered several of their llamas, including Lover Boy, into the Llama Futurity Association for its September auction and show. Prices are determined by an animal's bloodlines and how many ribbons it has won at shows. According to Laurie, the top price paid for a male sold in the U.S. was \$220,000. Prices usually start around \$500.

One favorite now eligible for Grand Nationals is FFF Senior Tico, a super Suri animal and "a very pretty boy," Laurie says. As a Suri, he has wool described as "ropey."

Laurie sends his and her other llamas' wool to a woman in Oakland who processes the wool in stages. After carding it, she will spin the wool for weaving or felt it for needle felting or other crafts.

The Cornetts welcome visitors to Lonesome Pines by appointment. They publicize their farm and llamas through a brochure, a newsletter and their web site, www.lonesomepinesllamas.net.

While only a small percentage of the world's alpacas and llamas can now be found in the United States, that number is sure to grow as more Americans discover the benefits of owning these adaptable and intelligent natives of the Andean Mountains that have served mankind for more than 5,000 years. And they're good company, too.

"Alpacas give you great balance," says Barbara. "They encourage you to slow down and appreciate the natural beauty that surrounds us."



*Location and contact information on the farms in this story.
All of the owners welcome visitors and their families.*

River's Edge Alpaca Farm

*Near the Potomac River and Green Ridge State Forest,
Allegany County*

Barbara Buehl

20020 Potomac Overlook
Oldtown, MD 21555
(301) 478-5424
Reba1@hereintown.net

BlueBell Farm Alpacas

*Close to Lower New Germany State Forest,
Garrett County*

Bob and Jo Gilman

1285 Hare Hollow Road
Grantsville, MD 21536
(301) 895-3476
www.bluebellfarmalpacas.com

Snaggy Valley Farm

At Thousand Acres on Deep Creek Lake, Garrett County

Sarah Franklin

P.O. Box 3024
Swanton, MD 21561
(301) 616-9867

Lonesome Pines

*Near Oakland and Garrett State Forest,
Garrett County*

Charles and Laurie Cornett

2862 Fingerboard Road
Oakland, MD 21550
(301) 533-0481
www.lonesomepinesllamas.net

