



The Finest Fleece of All

Story and Images Marilyn Collins.

**"Oh, it is so soft and light."
A pure alpaca crafted shawl,
scarf or garment is undoubtedly
an elegant piece fit for
royalty. One Laguna couple
is participating in a breeding
program to produce quality
fleeces from the Suri alpaca.**

These days, on almost every Australian country drive you are likely to see Alpacas - which is hardly surprising, as more than 150,000 of the curious livestock are now well settled into our landscape.

The recent annual Australian Alpaca Week provided an opportunity to visit a nearby herd of these beautiful stock animals and run your hands through the silky-soft fleece weaving a fine and strong future in our agriculture industry.

On a visit out to Laguna, some 37 kilometres south-west of Cessnock, travelling through historic Wollombi, I met two breeders who are working to produce the finest quality fleece.

Judy Linder (pictured) and her husband Michael Walsh own a 50-hectare property in the quiet back blocks; a tree-studded, peaceful hideaway in the company of their small flock of Suri (soo'ree) alpacas. >



Suris are characterised by their silky-looking fleece and strongly defined “dreadlocks” which shimmer curtain-like directly down on their bodies.

Judy purchased the overgrown property in 1975 and lived in a caravan for a year until her home could be built.

Tirelessly she worked culling the block’s mulberry bushes and obnoxious weeds by hand until a rustic cottage became a reality. The home’s exterior is covered with clay applied by hand after being dug from the property.

Nothing Judy has done appears to have been easy – the reason why she is committed to breeding high-quality Suri alpaca fleece and spinning the fibre into yarn to produce unique garments.

Initially, from the early 70s to the 1990s the couple bred Angora goats always using sustainable agricultural practices on the property, until they were introduced to the Suri alpaca at the annual Tocal Field Days held at Tocal Agricultural College, Paterson.

This decision to swap from goats to Suri alpacas created a new goal and that was to produce the best fibre and to find new techniques to spin Suri alpaca fleece for garments. Twelve years on, Judy and Michael are proving their expertise in doing both.

By speaking to those in the industry and reading a lot of books, they set about developing a breeding plan comprising ten females and a stud male. Successive generations of animals are producing top-quality fleece, which is both

exciting and rewarding.

The couple does everything by hand and they manage the property in a holistic manner, therefore shearing is done in a methodical way. First Judy cuts various sections of the fleece, sorting and bagging as she goes, separating the best quality down from the saddle, neck and underskirt.

“Every part of the fleece is used and nothing wasted, as it is either taken by my sister, who makes incredible felt, or recycled onto the garden,” Judy said.

After shearing, each animal’s fleece is professionally graded so when the report comes back Judy knows the exact microns each animal’s fleece was awarded. The majority this season were under the low 21 microns high grade rating, which is exceptional quality known as Royal, Baby Alpaca and Super Fine.

Judy said, “My mother taught me to knit when I was four and by the time I went to school I could design a striped jumper, so I guess I was born a natural and today I never follow a pattern, always creating my own.

“When I was 20-years-old I purchased my first spinning wheel, which is a sentimental treasure although not used today, as I have upgraded my spinning wheel.”

Judy enthusiastically displays the various qualities of fleeces, which have to be hand washed numerous times in a mix of dysan, eucalyptus and hair shampoo, then combed and recombined numerous times to remove knots and imperfections in the fleece, then hand spun into yarn. >





"See how soft it is and how silver glimmers through the skeins," Judy says as she holds the latest spun yarn up to the sunlight.

Suri fleece is made up of tiny, tight ringlets and is extremely difficult to spin, as it doesn't have the memory or elasticity wool has, and that is why Judy is trying a mix of fibres that will compliment Suri fleeces.

Three years ago, she began creating garments to be sold at artisan markets under the name of Cooks Arm Alpacas, depicting their valley.

Each garment takes upwards of 100-150 hours to spin and knit – all are custom designed and many are produced on commission.

Alpaca shawls and scarves are so soft, light and warm as well as being extremely elegant. The most popular style is a shawl that doubles as a scarf, giving all-year-round adaptability.

Due to the fact Suri fleece is difficult to spin and work with, Judy is one of a small number of spinners who concentrate on working with the Suri fibre. In fact, two of the others are men living in two different states.

"There is no way I could charge for the time spent creating a garment which will last a lifetime and so easy to wash and care for," said Judy.

"I can't make a living entirely out of these creations because it is so labour intensive but we feel we are making a contribution to the awareness of the Suri alpaca. Besides, it is something we are both passionate about and love."

Michael and Judy are working closely with other Suri breeders to improve genetics using an advanced breeding register.

Out in the paddocks, Michael had corralled the herd and filled their feed buckets with pellets so I could get up close and personal with the animals.

With their big brown eyes and long eyelashes, these animals are so appealing and are known by individual names. Nestling up to Michael and Judy for a pat it was explained they are friendly if approached the right way but dislike their head being patted, so only pat their neck.

The soft humming noise heard was their way of communicating with one another. Contrary to common belief, they only spit when telling off another alpaca or at a person if they feel threatened.

As you part the fleece on the hairline on the body of each animal, you can see and feel the softness of their potential fleece and see the ringlets hanging in their coats like a curtain. The couple makes a practice of halter training from a young age, which makes it easier to manage the animal.

A recent surprise was the birth of a black cria to a white mother whose fleece will hopefully be super fine. This is quite rare, Judy explained. The female alpaca knows within ten days if she is pregnant and between 11-12 months will deliver. It is very rare to have a multiple birth. "We had to bottle feed this little cria for weeks and after researching on the internet we discovered we had to hold the bottle at the right angle, not as you would a lamb, as the alpaca has multiple stomachs like a cow and chews its cud. This fellow knew the right angle the bottle had to be held so the milk fell right into his third stomach, where it was digested," said Judy. >



A cria is weaned when about five months old and is always under the watchful eye of its mum, aunts and cousins, although there always is a matriarch of the herd who leads the way and pulls the young into line.

After each annual shearing, the couple decides the future of their flock, as they are purely concentrating on producing the best fleece.

An alpaca can have a long and productive life. They have been known to live to 25-years-old and to produce numerous crias in their lifetime. Through careful breeding they have developed stock which will produce fine fleece.

Cooks Arm Alpacas exhibit and sell at "Sobels Handmade in the Hunter" market day held at Broke Road, Pokolbin every fourth Saturday. The next is 26th April, 2014. Judy's finest collectable artisan garments will be part of the stock displayed at The Timeless Textile Gallery, 7 Beaumont Street, Islington, later this year. 📍

For details contact Judy or Michael on (02) 4998 8298; email cksarm@bigpond.com or visit www.cooksarmalpacas.com.au.

Things To Love About Australian Alpacas

- Alpacas are an ancient animal first domesticated around 7,000 years ago in South America. Alpacas are descended from the vicuna in the camelid family, and their burden-bearing cousin is the llama. They are clever, tough living, mountain-dwellers by nature, and their fleece, meat and leather made them the backbone of Inca civilisation.
- Australia has one of the largest registered alpaca herds in the world outside of the animal's native Peru. Our national herd totals more than 150,000 animals.
- Australia's modern alpaca industry has been established in the last two decades, and was founded with high quality imported animals.
- Australia is known for the highest quality alpaca herds and our stud stock is selling strongly around the world.
- Alpacas with Australian bloodlines have been sold throughout Europe, the UK and New Zealand. These alpacas and their progeny are frequent show champions and have been credited with improving international herd quality.
- Alpaca fibre is known for luxury and strength, and demand in the textile and fashion industries around the world far outweighs supply.
- Australia produces alpaca fleece carpets and rugs prized for their natural, dye-free colours, durability, and lush softness; doonas, blankets, bedding and throws known for softness, warmth and what is believed to be a very low allergy risk; knitwear and an increasing involvement in fashion.
- Alpacas are particularly suited to the Australian environment and have 'green' credentials.
- Alpacas have padded feet, not hooves, which are kinder on the land. They mow rather than tug at vegetation and have a preference for rougher graze therefore reducing inputs on pasture maintenance.
- Alpacas most often use a communal dung pile, so manure management is more efficient, pastures are cleaner and a great garden fertilizer is easy to collect. What other animal queues for toilet time?
- Alpacas have smart instincts. Alpacas guard sheep, goats and chickens very effectively with their ability to ward off a fox without fear, and their protective herding instincts.
- Australian farmers have reported increases in lambing percentages of up to 30% where foxes have previously been a serious problem.
- Alpacas almost always give birth to their cria during the day and usually around midday.
- A daytime birth is one of the curious ways of the alpaca that evolved in the harsh conditions of the Andes Mountains. The cria had to be walking and feeding before the onset of cold, harsh nights so birthing anytime before 3pm became intrinsic.
- Alpacas come in two varieties and many colours:
Huacaya (pr. Wua'ki'ya) are most common, with their crimped fleece growing directly outward from their bodies.
Suri (soo'ree) are popular for their silky-looking fleece and strongly defined lock. "Dreadlocks" shimmer curtain-like directly down on their bodies.