

Finding the 'Fun' in Fundamentals

By Marj Brady

Big secret here, you can't tell anyone...I am not a naturally gleeful person. I don't have one of those sunny, everything-is-wonderful personalities. I worry about a lot of things and I don't make friends easily. I have a wicked bad sense of humour and I'm a bit of a cynic. However...my alpacas don't care.

My needs, wants and desires have changed dramatically since moving to the country. I don't remember the lead up to seasonal changes being such a big deal in the city. We planted flowers in the spring, raked the leaves and winterized the cars in the fall, got out the winter boots and changed from warm to cold weather wardrobes and then back again in the spring but that was about it. Country life is quite different – seasonal preparation goes on all year round. Winter prep starts in June with the first cut of hay and continues through the summer with firewood to be stacked, more hay, cistern refills and a full hayloft.

I had no idea how stressful this lazy country lifestyle would be. I start to fret about shearing right after Christmas. I start to worry about the annual hay harvest about two days after I stop worrying about shearing. I start to worry about hay quality some time in April unless we don't have enough snow cover, then I worry about winterkill all winter. I worry about having enough water for the animals and I worry about having too much water...in the basement of the house. I worry about having enough firewood to last the winter. I think about

my alpacas all the time whether I'm planning breedings, watching for deliveries, deciding on fibre processing or when to wean - they are always at the top of my list.



Hay: Although we grow our own alpaca-specific hay, we don't harvest it ourselves. We have a tenant farmer who cuts, bales and stacks it for us in our barns. The first few years here our hay quality wasn't great. We had to struggle to get it cut and stored and the farmer we had at the time complained constantly – nothing was good in his life. Nothing worked, his equipment was always breaking down and, while he was nice enough, he wasn't a happy guy. I hesitated to call him for anything and then after three years of limping along he up and quit, in April, after telling me in February about all the things we were going to accomplish that year, including putting in new hay fields and restoring old ones. Needless to say I freaked – we don't have many local people who do small square bales and those that do aren't interested in small holdings like ours so we'd be way down on their priority list and then...we found a man.

A wonderful farmer who lives around the corner from us. He put in new hay fields and he comes and cuts our hay before it gets too stemmy and before I have to get myself all worked up in a lather to call. The hay has been wonderful, the barns are full, we aren't wasting as much, the alpacas are healthy and I am content.

Wood: As I've said before, I'm a city kid. I had never started a fire and we didn't have a fire place. Now we have a wood stove which means I buy firewood and lots of it. The first winter I didn't know green from seasoned but I did know that my stove held a maximum length of 16". The "gentleman" we purchased that first load of wood from assured me that he didn't sell crap wood (actually he didn't say crap, he used another term) and that it was all 16" or less. Turns out that he may have been numerically challenged and what he actually meant was that 16" was an estimate. Some pieces were 6" long and others were 22" while some were massive burls that were probably 22 inches square. We wound up donating about a third of that first year's wood supply to a neighbour; it was worth it in terms of good will.



The next year we found a good, reliable wood source who actually could measure 16 inches and all his wood was perfect, stacked beautifully, fit in the stove, was the right length, dry and then, after three years, he stopped selling. Now we have our hay guy spreading manure and selling us firewood. Pretty soon I might have to ask him to move in.

Water: Water has been a constant challenge here; too much, too little and frequently not in the right places. The first month we were here there was a huge storm and the basement flooded. This was an amazing trick of nature as the house is on a hill and, while the basement had a pit for a sump pump, we had been assured by the previous owner that they had never experienced any flooding. They also denied that the well had ever gone dry, but it has gone dry on us every year in late summer for the last seven years – go figure.

The pipes in the house froze on and off for over thirty days the first winter. That problem took us several years and multiple attempts to resolve. On a happy note the pipes did not burst and we did manage to find a relatively inexpensive solution by the third winter.

We have a very large cistern that holds water for the alpacas. It is rain fed from the roof of one of our outbuildings and has never gone dry until very recently. Can you imagine? One day it's full and the next, 5000 gallons gone! Poof! No flood, no puddles, just gone. I'm not sure what to think, there's obviously a crack in it but why does it hold water for a while and then not. Whatever the problem is, there is a fix in the works, but I'd like to be able to wait until spring. In the meantime, the water truck guy is my new best friend.

The yard hydrant freezes every winter – it's not supposed to but it does. The automatic waterbowl in the barnyard is almost automatic except when it's frozen. I'm pretty sure there's going to be some digging up going on in the spring. I was wondering what I'd do with all that extra money.

Beans: You didn't honestly think I wouldn't find a way to get some "fibre" content into this article did you? Last year I was introduced to someone as,



“the person who writes about poop for CQ.” High praise indeed! I don't know about you but I love to see my mountain of manure steaming. It means the beans are percolating away in there, breaking down, getting ready to be spread on the fields. My hay guy comes back every fall, just before winter arrives, and spreads that year's collection so we have room to start a new accumulation. See there's my hay guy again.

Sometimes I need to remind myself about the things that make me happy. I'm happy when the woodshed, hayloft, cisterns, well and feed bins are full before winter hits. I'm happy when my crias are born without fanfare and my dams are great moms which makes my job easy. I'm happy when my boys hit the

target and my girls catch on the first breeding. I'm happy when my animals are shorn and the fleece is at the mill being processed. As our herd grows it's getting more difficult to finish one year's clip before the next is coming up, but so far I've managed to beat that deadline.

We have wonderful views from the house and almost all the way around the property and we have the most awesome sky. My daughter laughs at me, and I'm sure she thinks I'm a little loopy, but my sky makes me happy inside. I can stand behind the boys' barn and see for miles. The colours are breathtaking, the clouds are intriguing, the horizon is captivating and the textures sublime. I know it sounds dorky but I love my sky.

As I look back on what I've written it sounds as if the first few years were tough and I guess they were. I expect that going forward there will always be ruts in the road and storms I can't predict. Hopefully when that happens, and it will happen, someone will remind me to get out of the house and look up!

CQ

About the Author

Marj. Brady has been breeding entertaining huacaya alpacas since 2003 and lives with her family on a small farm north of Stirling, Ontario, Canada. You can reach Marj at amazinggraze@sympatico.ca or phone 613-395-6406. Feel free to visit her web site at www.amazinggrazealpacos.ca

