

# What you need to know about owning a llama.

By Carol Reigh of Buck Hollow Llamas

Llamas are not dogs or cats; they are livestock. Since llamas are so cute and cuddly when they are young, that is a difficult concept for some people to grasp. Now I will grant you that they are not your typical livestock, but they still have certain livestock needs. As responsible owners we need to make sure that we are meeting those needs. With respect to other livestock, they are relatively easy keepers but if your only experience with animal care is dogs or cats then you may want to think twice about owning llamas or do your homework as to their care. Hopefully, this article will assist you. Notice that I said assist. I will try to hit upon as many areas as possible but will not be able to cover everything in as much detail as needed so please do gather more information.

## **Companionship--Llamas need to have another llama as a buddy.**

Unless the animal is being utilized as a guard animal for sheep, it should not be left to live alone. These animals are very much herd animals and they need to have that llama companionship. Nasty habits may creep up and the animal may not be the nice guy you thought that you bought. Yes, we would all like to think that we as humans are all the llama could ever possibly want but it just isn't so. There are no exceptions to this situation, so play it safe and invest in TWO not one llama. I have heard of people owning llamas and donkeys or llamas and horses but I would still suggest that you have two. Afterall, to whom is he going to talk?

## **Shelter--Llamas do need somewhere to get in from the elements.**

A barn or three-sided shed will do. Even though llamas do not require much, it is necessary for them to have a place to get out of the sun and/or rain. The most difficult management problem with llamas is keeping them cool in the summer. If you are building a shed, then by all means have ridge vents put in so the hot air can escape. I would also suggest that you have electric installed in the shed, so you can run a fan when necessary. The flooring of the shed or barn can be dirt, concrete, sand, or wood. The most important thing to consider is dryness for them. You also need to consider the size of the shed. Llamas do like their own space so it is important not to crowd them. Ohio State University just did a study on shelter and camelids which has some very significant information in it.

If you are using an existing structure, then just be sure that the animals can roam in and out at their own free will. They will spend most of their time outside except when it is hot and humid and when it is rainy. Winter and cold temperatures do not bother them. Of course extreme cold for extended periods of time may require that you feed them cracked corn to help them tolerate the cold.

## **Heat Management**

Probably the #1 management problem with these animals is keeping them cool in the summer months. They can easily die of heat stress if they are not kept cool. Some people may observe that their animal just lays in the sun and will not move. That could be the start of heat stress. What happens is that the muscles cramp and they cannot get up, and they will actually cook themselves to death. It is a very sad thing to watch. So if you see your animal panting and open mouth breathing then take action right away to cool him off. Hose down the animal's belly and legs. **DO NOT HOSE THEM DOWN FROM THE TOP.** That simply works to keep the heat in. Another good preventative measure is to always offer them a pail of water with electrolytes in it. But the Best preventative measure is to be sure that they are sheared. If you cannot do it yourself then have someone in the industry do it for you. There are plenty of people who will travel to your location and do your animals and it is not that expensive. And of course, as I said before, fans and shade are paramount. Fans should be placed at ground level or low enough to blow across at floor level to cool the animals thermal window which is the belly area.

Contrary to what some people think llamas do need water. They drink about a gallon of water a day. I was disturbed to read in the Encyclopedia Britannica that camelids do not need much water. Yes, they can get moisture from grazing but that is not enough. So be sure that they have fresh water daily. It should be placed in the shade and cool, not cold water.

## **Food**

People feel differently about nutrition and feeding. I prefer to spend a little more to keep my animals healthy. Feeding costs are pretty inexpensive. Two animals cost about \$300.00 a year to feed. That figure includes pellets and hay (six months of feeding hay). The different feed mills do make a llama specific feed. It is important that these animals do not get too much protein. Ten to twelve per cent protein is more than adequate. A fat llama is an unhealthy llama. Orchard grass and other low protein hay are fine. Unlike other ruminants llama should not be given moldy hay. They may eat it but eventually it will make them sick. When putting hay out, pull it a part and check for mold and/or debris. It is amazing what can be found in a bale of hay. I also give them free choice of minerals mixed with salt.

## **Medical Needs**

Most of the time llamas do not require much medical attention. They spit as their defense so they really are not harming each other. The exception to that would be males with fighting teeth. Males in the wild will castrate each other when fighting. Consequently, at the age of 2 1/2 to 3 we cut off their fighting teeth so they can not do much damage to each other.

Every month we check their toenails to see if they need to be trimmed. Depending on the terrain, they may need to be done as much as once a month or once every 3 months. Rocky terrain and concrete help to keep their toenails trimmed. If their nails are not trimmed, they can eventually go lame. I make it a practice on my farm to Periodically pick up an animal's feet every day from birth until 6 months of age, so they are used to having their legs handled for toenail trimming.

Deworming, as with all livestock, must be done. Where you live and how clean your fields are will determine your worming program. It is best to consult your local veterinarian to set up a deworming schedule. These animals must be dewormed against menigial worm and stomach parasites. Since there are no llama specific medicines, we need to use sheep and cattle medicines. Monthly, I use injectible Dectomax because we live in a highly populated whitetail deer area. People in other parts of the country only need to deworm every other or every third month. Other dewormers utilized in the llama industry are ivomectin, panacur, and safeguard. Once a year I give CD&T and rabies. Overall, these animals are fairly disease resistant.

## **Fencing**

Last of all, fencing needs to be safe and secure. Overall, these animals are respectful of fencing. Many people use spilt rail, board, electric and high tensil. I would avoid barbwire because it is not necessary and they may get their fiber caught in it and more of a problem could occur. If you do use split rail or board fencing be sure that it is not pressure treated. Pressure treated wood is poisonous to animals.

## **For More information**

The following books I highly recommend for more in-depth information:

[A Guide to Raising Llamas](#) by Gale Birutta

[Caring for llamas: a health and management guide](#) by Clare Hoffman DVM and Ingrid Asmus

[Llamas: An introduction to care, training, and handling](#) by Sandi Burt