





# Down On The Farm

Happiness can be measured in a myriad of ways. For Barry and Renee Prokop, local alpaca breeders, happiness is measured in miles — 57.3 of them, to be exact, from their former home in bustling Fairfax to their new life in Spotsylvania County.

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**T**here is a quaint alpaca farm sandwiched between sprawling Civil War battlefields and the falls of the Rappahannock River. Just a stone's throw from Plank Road in Spotsylvania County, it sits on five-and-a-half acres of land surrounded by thick woods. At the center of this farm is a red eight-stall barn, a gated parcel of land and an ancient oak tree in postcard repose.

This rural patch is called Black Meadow Farm, a renowned breeding and boarding center for Suri alpacas. To the Prokops, animal enthusiasts and devotees of the simple life, it's paradise. After living in Fairfax County for several years, the Prokops moved to Spotsylvania in 2005, among their luggage a dream to live in the thick of nature, see the stars and raise the finest alpacas the industry has ever known.

"We moved here because we had a plan and were looking for more space. We wanted a slower pace of life and a rural atmosphere. We were tired of the noise, the traffic and the overall busy atmosphere of city life," said Renee. "Everything we ever wanted is here, and we couldn't be happier."

The Prokops were inspired to raise alpaca after a trip out west. On a vacation to visit Barry's father, an experienced alpaca farmer, the Prokops were introduced to the growing alpaca market. After researching traditional livestock, land requirements and costly infrastructure, as well as making several trips to alpaca farms across the United States, the Prokops decided to be a part of this relatively new community. They set in motion their dream by developing a five-year business plan complete with cost projections, time frames and an anticipated break-even time.

"At that time, we had already decided on a farm location, but there were still a lot of things we needed to consider. For example,





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the farm layout, bio-security, expenses and alpaca-specific equipment like a scale, barn fans and cooling pools,” said Renee. “Back then, there was very little information about alpaca breeding, and we’re still learning new things every day.”

The goal was to build a non-traditional farm that catered specifically to Suri alpacas. Their approach was a steady growth plan that involved getting into the business, networking and learning from other alpaca owners before making major decisions. For the past four years, Barry and Renee have worked hard to establish themselves as Virginia’s preeminent alpaca breeders. As owners of one of the best Suri alpaca farms in Virginia— there are roughly 115 alpaca farms in the state— the duo have come to understand why these timid creatures are so beloved.

“Alpacas are gentle animals that are easy to manage and require less land than many traditional livestock. They all have their own personalities and tend to be shy around humans,” said Renee. “The Suri alpacas, in particular, are so graceful, especially as they ‘swish’ through the

fields when their fleece is long and flowing.”

Alpacas are native to mountainous regions in Bolivia, Chile and Peru, and they have trotted the earth for 6,000 years. Physiologically, the alpaca is cousin to the llama but is smaller and can live to be 20- to 23-years old. There are two distinctive breeds when it comes to these docile creatures, each offering a unique body type. The Huacaya alpaca is more prevalent in breeding circles and has a fluffy “teddy bear” appearance. The Suri alpaca is the rarest of breeds— they make up just 10 percent of the world’s alpacas— and has a flowing “dreadlock” quality to its fleece.

Unlike many farm animals, alpacas are easy to maintain and prefer to remain in the open and not kept in stalls. They are, in many respects, nature’s most economical animals. Alpacas are very disease-resistant, which ensures that veterinarian bills are low. And because they don’t have hooves, they don’t have to be shod on a regular basis. A routine toe-nail trim is all it takes. From a nutritional standpoint, alpacas are happy with plenty of pasture to graze, grain and mineral supplements to ensure optimal health, good fresh hay and plenty of fresh water. They’re so low-maintenance, in fact, that tending to all 16 of the Prokops’ alpacas requires one person and relatively little time.

“In general, adult alpacas reach about 150 pounds and 36 inches at the shoulder,” said Renee. “What’s more, they serve a number of purposes, including providing rich soil for our gardens and producing wonderful fiber.”

In alpaca terminology, “fiber” or “fleece” refers to the animal’s hair. Prime fleece is known as the animal’s blanket and is found from the base of the neck to the hips. A full grown alpaca’s blanket can produce between five and eight pounds of fiber a year, which can then be sold to fiber mills, hand-spinners, weavers and fiber artists. The fibers’ worth is measured by its luster, micron count and fiber health.

“Alpaca fiber is used in an assortment of items, such as sweaters, scarves, suits, gloves and hats. It’s even becoming very popular in top fashion









places like Paris and Milan. Designers are starting to use the fiber in inventive ways, like in jeans,” said Renee, who sells her fiber for about \$55 a pound. “The reason why fiber is so popular is because it’s lighter and warmer than wool, has a more significant sheen, is water repellent and is incredibly soft and durable.”

The production and selling of fiber is just one of the many facets of the Prokops’ growing business. When it comes to the overall operations, Barry handles the marketing and advertising when he’s not working in Alexandria for a human capital solution firm. Renee, a former special education teacher, manages the farm, which can take up to four hours a day. Her tasks include keeping the alpacas healthy, finding the best alpacas for breeding, and maintaining the general upkeep of the farm. She also finds creative ways to sell the fiber through their online store.

When they’re not nurturing their alpacas, the Prokops are showing their animals in competitions across the nation. At these events, the alpacas are placed in several categories based on age, gender and color. They are judged on their confirmation (straight legs, bite and back), as well as the quality and density of their fleece. Since they started raising alpacas four years ago, the Prokops have won ribbons against the biggest farms in the country. This year, the Prokops plan on showing four of their cria, or baby alpacas, in various contests.

“Competing is a lot of fun, and it’s definitely a competitive industry. There are several farms across the nation that have more than 150 alpacas. As a small farm we have to be very strategic in how we breed our alpacas. Producing healthy, elite-fleeced cria will keep us in the ribbons,” said Renee.

Outside of participating in competitions, the Prokops are savvy breeders. Because the gestation period for an alpaca is 345 days, it’s up to Renee to ensure the breeding process goes off without a hitch. Since breeding is a main business focus, Renee spends countless days studying the pedigrees of possible dams (females) and sires (males) to pair with one of their Suris. In many ways, it’s like Match.com for alpacas.

“When it comes to breeding Suri alpacas, it’s as much of an art as it is a science. You can plan and plan, but sometimes you don’t get what you want,” said Renee. “For the most part, we concentrate on dams because they offer more of a return on investment. The bloodline, quality of their fiber, the history of the animal— it’s all taken into account.”

After years of research and experience, they are still surprised by the results. “Not every alpaca will be of show and breeding quality. We evaluate our herd each year, selecting only the best animals for production. The other alpacas are sold for fiber production, non-breeding pets or donated to local 4-H groups as project animals. The goal is always to improve the Suri breed and the quality of the herd,” commented Renee. Breeding is a vital part of their profession, one that will help them position their business for greener pastures.

“Our goal is to maintain a herd of 30 top-quality Suris. After years of building our business, we’ve learned a lot about what we need to do to get there,” said Barry. “This whole experience has been amazing so far. If we had to do it all over again, we’d move here and start the farm in a heartbeat.” 

To learn more about Black Meadow Farm, visit [www.BlackMeadowFarm.com](http://www.BlackMeadowFarm.com) or call (540) 972-1171.