



Willow Glen Alpacas

Growing up in 4-H I took on a few sewing and textile projects. My grandma would help me make a sundress and a matching one for my doll from a pattern we found at Jo-Ann's. However, I had no idea how profound the clothing industry was until I visited an alpaca farm. Alpaca produce fiber much like sheep produce wool. Their fiber is processed into yarn and sold to knitters everywhere. I knew very little about this process before I met Mary Ianni and Tim Kamholz of Capron, IL.

Tim and Mary owned the property that is now their alpaca farm for 15 years before they decided to use it for that purpose. Mary owned horses and wanted a place to keep them herself. After clearing the property, she realized she would not have the opportunity to ride horses with her friends if she moved to this new location. Tim then began researching alpacas.

“He talked about them for 18 months,” said Ianni, “I thought if I ignored it, it would go away. It never did.”

While on vacation in 2003, they visited an alpaca farm and three months later they bought their first two. After that, they had to clear land, build a barn, and build a house. It was one year and eight months before those animals came home. However, once that happened, the farm grew exponentially into what is now Willow Glen Alpacas. Now, there are 40 animals on the farm and Tim and Mary own 32 of them. In 12 years, the farm has grown from two to 32 and at one point they were up to 66 head of alpaca.



The harvesting of the fiber is called shearing. Ianni has her animals sheared once a year. This process is like a whole body hair cut for the animal. The fiber is sheared off with clippers. This is a painless process. It can be said that it is enjoyable for the animal to be able to shed off all of that hair. Alpacas are fairly clean animals if they are kept in clean conditions. This is beneficial because grooming it during the year can damage the fiber. They also get their nails and teeth trimmed at this time.

The fiber is then processed and sold in many forms. The younger the animal is, the softer the fiber tends to be. Ianni sends what is processed to a co-op. They purchase the raw fiber, dye it, and spin it into yarn. She then is able to buy their product at wholesale. All of the products sold there are grown and processed in the United States. Willow Glen Alpacas fills custom orders of raw fiber, rovings (fiber spun by hand), and spun yarn depending on what the customer prefers.

The fiber on the animal is formed by primary hair follicles and the secondary follicles that surround them. The strong primary follicles produce hair that is longer and higher in microns than the others. The difference in fiber produces a lower quality yarn. A de-hairing machine pulls out the hairs that are too long after the fiber is sheared and leaves you with a better yarn.

While Ianni claims she is not that good at knitting, I was impressed. The hats she makes require about one to one and a half spools of yarn.

Besides harvesting fiber, Tim and Mary show their animals. Just like you would see cattle or sheep shown at a county fair, they participate in state and nation wide alpaca shows.

“We have met so many knowledgeable producers,” Ianni said about alpaca shows.

Although learning about the fiber industry was very interesting, my favorite part of visiting the farm was getting inside the barn to see the animals. The 40 head of alpacas Tim and Mary house were very clean, well fed, and extremely friendly.

We think about the food farmers provide us every time we sit down at the table or walk down the aisle at the grocery store. However, how often do we think about farmers while we are getting dressed in the morning or shopping at the mall? I guess we all owe farmers a big thank you, because without them, we would be naked and hungry. (Published March 24, 2017)