

A New Farm

by Karine Raiz from Surilox Alpacas

Buying the right farm is a difficult thing. How do you choose? What do you need to consider? While not experts, Peter and I are on our 3rd farm now, and each place we chose, we chose for different reasons. Which set of criteria were best?

The answer to that is quite complex. Especially when the decision to buy a farm for most city people is tinged with a romantic wash. There it is, can you see it? The perfect little farmhouse, smoke from the wood-burning stove wafting from the chimney, surrounded by the orchard and veggie patch, a chestnut horse grazing gently on the soft rolling hills. It's a perfect vision, isn't it? But it is sooo far from what you really get.

Here's what we think you should do.

Decide on the immutable features, you know, those features that you just must have. For us they were

- a north facing hill
- water in addition to dams. For us this had to be the minimum of a spring, but creek or even a river meandering past the property would be nice
- somewhere to live. A house would be also nice, but a shed would be fine
- power to the property
- phone to the property
- high rainfall – so not in deep drought

Actually in all our property searches these 6 points have remained the same. They are the best place to start. If you know that these are things that you definitely want, you can say “No” to that really enticing ad; that just doesn't pass muster.

Our Farm number 1

We had just decided that alpacas were a great idea [and they are!]. We would buy a farm to spend our weekends on. Buy some alpacas & agist those. Breed our foundation herd, and then sometime in the fairly nebulous future, move onto the farm, build a house and move our alpacas in. It was all part of the 5 year plan. The addition to the 5 year plan was a tourist facility, perhaps in the form of a couple of cabins.

Well Peter's employer, a large bank, decided that our 5 year plan was only good for a year and a half, and we ended up moving to our farm 4 years earlier than we intended.

As we knew nothing about farming, other than the information we had gained from some excellent courses we had done, the criteria that we used to choose our first farm, while valid, are not all criteria we would even consider now.

We wanted and bought a farm within 3 hrs drive of Sydney, on a tourist route, with a nice view. What we chose had all the above. It was exactly what we specified.

What didn't it have... Good fencing, good soil, other alpaca people nearby, a town where you could get a good meal or a decent cup of coffee, or even a decent set of shops.

Out of these the most important is a good soil.

Most areas in Australia have a very low profile of top soil, which lies over clay, which in turn often lies over granite, sandstone or shales. Our soil is also extremely low in humus. Humus is the broken down organic matter that feeds the microbes in the soil, who in turn feed the plants growing in that soil. Humus also retains water in soil.

Australia, being a very old continent, also has very old and depleted soil, which is from mildly to extremely acidic. It is not unusual to do a soil report and have soil testing at around a pH of 4, [battery acid is around 1 - 2.5] with very little mineral content. Current thinking is that this is because the humus is low, there are few good microbes in the little soil that we have & therefore minerals can't be attached by the plants attempting to grow in the soil.

You can increase your soil fertility by mulching, and adding the good microbes. For this you need to turn to organics and biodynamics. True biodynamic principles are actually based on good science. We both have a science background. There are excellent descriptions of the microbial processes on www.soilfoodweb.com.au

A word of caution here - there are the people who believe that biodynamics is equated with spraying 2 drops of special preparations into the wind, on a full moon, while chanting but this is not true biodynamics. Take the scientific approach. Elements of biodynamics certainly work for us.

The problem of the non-organic approach is that it is a vicious cycle. To solve the fertility problem you add superphosphate to the property, which places only a few minerals into the soil, turns the soil more acidic, so the minerals are unavailable to the grass, so then you need to add lime 6 months later to counter the acidity, but by this time most of the minerals in the super have leached into making the acid that caused the infertility in the first place.

OK so Farm no 1 was lovely, but after 4 years we could see that we would run out of alpaca room within a reasonably short space of time. I still marvel that a property that we both thought was so large 5 years ago, seems so small now.

Farm No 2

Criteria – top soil, water in the form of bore or river, large land area, house + the immutable 6. Oops well actually we slipped up on that. We didn't buy a north facing hill. We bought beautiful river flats, 63 hectares of some of the best dairy land in the Manning Valley. Frontage to 3 km of flowing creek & grass up to your knees.

What we didn't consider...river flats can flood, and although we spent a very long time searching Council records, many Councils do not keep flood records in outlying areas. Even if the land doesn't flood, flat land can stay very wet after rain, and take a long time to drain.

While flat land isn't really a problem for cattle, it can be for alpacas. When the heavens open, and the Alpacas can't get to shelter they tend to put their backs to the wind and cush down where they are standing, or they might even find a little gully, and then do the same. The problem here is that they will sit, not moving, & if that rain is coupled with a huge drop in temperature, a big wind chill factor, while cold water sluices past them, the combination can be fatal.

While we haven't lost any of our alpacas like this, we know of several people who have. The first big rain at the new farm brought water covered paddocks, and soggy ground. We discovered that the higher ground was not actually high enough. Oh well, farm No 2 is now relegated to be a cattle property for all time.

Onto Farm no 3.

Choices start with the immutable 6 + a nice liveable house, if no house then land that lends itself to having that dream farm house built on it. Good soil, good perimeter fencing. Nice aspect.

How do you know if your soil is good? First the soil should smell like a deep, warm fruit cake. Don't bother tasting it, it probably is full of cow poo. Get it tested. Take 10 cm deep cores, place them in a bag & take them straight down to the local Country Store. Ask for an organic test, as this gives you a better mineral profile than the non-organic test, and makes suggestions on how to remediate certain issues discovered in the test.

If you forget to ask for an organic test, the Country Store will send the soil to one of the chemical companies that make fertilisers, so your suggestions of remedial action could be skewed towards a chemical based solution.

We will be moving to that perfect farm soon. My next story will hopefully be written from there. In the meantime before we move we have animal shelters to build, some laneways to put in, and some storage sheds to build. So next story is going to be about laneways, shelters and fencing.

Our shelters are always built on higher ground. We build 3 sided, roofed shelters. We build metal roofs with either metal or 90% UV shade cloth walls. We gravity feed water from each roof to a drinker. I have plans available, if anyone would like a copy.

In April we will be expecting our new agistees.

Yes, I guess the perfect farm is achievable.

PS Thanks you to everyone who contacted me after my last story. I am so pleased that our experiences can help. Since I wrote that story we've had 1 more difficult birth. This one resulted in an episiotomy, pulling the cria and stitching, all done by us as the vet was 70 km away & there was no time for him to drive that distance.

Result - a live, beautiful cria; a live and somewhat sore mum, general relief all around.

I am happy to say that the vet was on the phone with us the whole time & that this procedure, while confronting at the time, is do-able, and while not exactly enjoyable, did give the results we wanted. I am happy to share the story with anyone who emails me.