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## John & Mary Cooksey raise adorable animals at Almara Alpacas

Alpacas are definitely not horses, but Valley Center is home to quite a few of the llama's wooly cousins.

One place to find alpacas is at Almara Alpacas, owned and operated by John & Mary Cooksey.



"This is our sixth year with the alpacas," says Mrs. Cooksey. "I like to knit, and when you're around fabrics a lot, you gain an appreciation for the feeling and texture of the materials you're working with. That led to desire to find out more about the yarn and the wool it comes from, and that led to alpacas. After we got our first animals from Blue Ribbon Alpacas here in Valley Center, we bought this ranch, which used to be a llama ranch, so it was pretty easy to convert it for the alpacas."

The alpaca is a member of the camelid family, which includes camels and llamas, and comes from the high-altitude plateaus near the Andes Mountains along the west coast of South America. While early civilizations domesticated camels and llamas for use as beasts of burden, the smaller alpaca was highly prized for its wool.

"Both alpacas and llamas were domesticated from wild animals in South America," Mrs. Cooksey says. "The llama was domesticated from the guanaco, while the alpaca was domesticated from the vicuña. There are two kinds of alpacas; the more common huacaya, which has the shorter, woollier coat, and the less common suri, which has longer, silkier hair."

Along with their enjoyment of owning the alpacas, the Cookseys also appreciate how relatively easy it is to own them.

"For a livestock animal, they really are easy to maintain," Mrs. Cooksey says. "They're fairly hardy, they don't require a lot of space, and they're pretty easy to manage. They're very mellow, you don't have to groom them other than shearing in the spring, and for someone who wants to raise livestock animals that aren't going to get eaten, they're ideal."

Alpacas aren't as friendly as llamas can be, but both animals are naturally inquisitive, especially when a curious reporter shows up to take photos. And with an animal that is so undeniably adorable, it's hard to get lonely as an alpaca rancher.

"We call it 'alpaca therapy' around here," Mrs. Cooksey says. "Sometimes when you're feeling just a little down or like you need a hug, you can come out to the alpaca pen, sit down with them and feel like one of the herd."

In fact, alpacas are so ingrained with the herd mentality, that owners can't keep just one by itself.

"They have to have other animals around, either more alpacas, or a llama, or even some goats," says Mr. Cooksey. "If they don't have that, they'll literally stress themselves out and die."

Along with its fine quality, one of the big advantages of alpaca wool is that it won't upset those

who suffer from allergies.

“For people who are allergic to lanolin, alpaca wool is perfect because you can feel all through it and you don’t get that greasy feeling you get from sheep’s wool,” Mrs. Cooksey says.

The Cookseys also really appreciate raising alpacas in Valley Center because of the connection to a veterinarian who has a special knowledge of the animals.

“One of the best things about raising alpacas in Valley Center is our veterinarian, Dr. Linda Byer,” Mrs. Cooksey says. “She works on horses, but she specializes in camelids, so we know our animals are receiving the best care. It’s especially nice when a new mother is having trouble giving birth or if there’s ever anything we’re concerned about, because Dr. Byer is so close by.”

Some of the Cookseys’ alpacas have been to shows, and one of the young alpacas was just purchased by a ranch near Hollywood. Almara Alpacas also offers breeding services, but the main focus of the ranch is the production of wool. In fact, the wool from one of the alpacas, named Navarro, has won a number of awards for its high quality.

“You can tell if a young alpaca, or a cria, is going to have that desirable wool just by the feel,” Mrs. Cooksey explains. “Wool that has high fineness and density is the best, and you look in the wool for the crimping effect. The more crimping, the better fiber it is for spinning into yarn.”

The wool from Almara Alpacas gets sent to a mill in Jamul to be spun into yarn. The finished product comes back to the Cookseys ready to be turned into a sweater or another soft, warm article.

“I’m making a baby blanket for one of my daughter’s girlfriends,” Mrs. Cooksey says with a smile.

Alpacas are also helping clean up one of the biggest ecological disasters in our country’s history. The Cookseys are sending around 150 pounds of alpaca wool down to the Gulf of Mexico to help clean up the ongoing oil spill affecting that region. Alpaca wool is ideal for helping to absorb the oil because the crimping allows for spaces between the hairs for the oil to get caught.

The Cookseys are used to having visitors come see their alpacas, from school classes to senior citizen tours. They only ask that you call ahead if you plan on stopping by.

For more information about Almara Alpacas, visit their Web site at [www.almaraalpacas.com](http://www.almaraalpacas.com) or contact them by e-mail at [AlmaraAlpacas@aol.com](mailto:AlmaraAlpacas@aol.com) or by phone at 760-749-1087.

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