

Grasses for Alpacas



Alpacas have become increasingly familiar animals in the British countryside in recent years. One farmer explained that this is because: 'They are pets, grass cutters, companion and guard animals, quality fibre producers and profitable breeders. They can be a side-line, or a highly rewarding full-time business.'

These are all reasons why we are increasingly being asked to provide palatable grazing mixtures which suit the specific needs of these appealing animals.

The British Alpaca Society states that alpacas, part of the camel family, have adapted very well to life in Britain and are generally hardy, healthy animals that are relatively easy to keep. However the Society also stresses the importance of 'always ensuring that there is enough grazing,' all year round, or hay or haylage in winter months if grazing is in short supply.

Provision of good forage is therefore absolutely vital, and it's not just a case of putting your alpacas out to graze on whatever grassland is available.

Due to their physiology and grazing habits Alpacas are better off grazing lower growing, softer and leafier plants which are high in nutrition and fibre, but low in sugars. Ryegrasses, which are used in many standard grazing mixtures, can be too rich in sugars causing dietary issues and unnecessary fattening.

The special Llama and Alpaca Mixture we have created contains a wide variety of palatable and nutritious grasses and also a selection of herbs to provide a healthy and balanced diet, drawing up minerals from deep in the soil profile, without being too rich.

Lasting for up to ten years, it contains:

Meadow fescue: This is a valuable, low sugar grazing grass with wide leaves. It is also useful for making hay.

Tall fescue: A deep rooting and drought resistant grass, its robust leaves helps to provide resilience to a grazing sward

Cocksfoot: A deep rooting and early growing species. It can be a strong plant but is very drought tolerant and is kept under control by regular grazing. It is most popular for grazing and making hay and will recover quickly when defoliated creating new leafy growth.

Creeping red fescue: This common grass and, as its name implies, has a creeping growth habit. This helps it to bind the turf together to create a resilient grazing surface.

Sheeps fescue: Hardy and drought resistant, sheep's fescue will withstand heavy grazing and is a fine leaved species, which grows slowly in the base of the sward.

Timothy: Possibly the most important and flexible grass species, it is a very common species found in pasture throughout the UK. Used for hay and late season grazing, it is very persistent and provides a good source of fibre for alpacas, especially useful to balance forage at times of the year that promote lush leafy growth in the pasture

Smaller catstail: Palatable for livestock, it is valued as a forage plant, being similar to timothy but being a smaller plant overall, it provides forage and helps to create a dense sward.

Smooth stalked meadow grass: Found throughout the UK in meadows and traditional pastures; it is said to be one of the greenest grasses found growing in the early spring, and is an indicator of land that is well drained and in good heart. The species itself is palatable and nutritional to livestock, often called one of the traditional 'sweet grasses'. This is one of the most nutritious meadow grasses, with early spring growth and persisting on thinner, dry land.

Rough stalked meadow grass: Rough stalked meadow grass is a very common species throughout the UK and Europe. It can be found in lowland pastures, river meadows and long term pasture.

Common Bentgrass: This delicately flowered grass is suited to hard grazing and will establish especially well on heavier soils.

Meadow foxtail: It can provide very early spring grazing and a useful contribution to meadow hay crops, growing strongly on heavier, wetter soils.

Sweet vernal grass: An early flowering grass, strongly scented with coumarin, when cut as part of a hay crop it is this plant that gives hay its sweet smell. It is an adaptable plant, found growing in a wide range of habitats.

Crested dogstail: Traditionally a grazing grass, which helps to fill out the base of the sward, this compact tufted perennial often forms part of the sward in an old traditional pasture.

Burnet forage herb: Burnet is a forage herb, known to contain robust levels of Cobalt, as well as other minerals. It is noted for having deep tap roots, which helps it remain green on thin, dry soils. It is also early to grow in the spring, contributing to forage in late March to April. Generally it's used as a constituent of diverse grazing swards to improve drought tolerance and mineral content of forage. Burnet is commonly mixed with sheep's parsley, yarrow

and ribgrass to increase diversity and lift trace elements from deep within the soil profile.

Ribgrass: Ribgrass (also known as plantain) is a very popular perennial forage herb which increases grazing quality in a sward. Ribgrass is a mineral rich plant, with deep drought tolerant, soil conditioning roots, it has been shown to contain twice the amount of selenium and other minerals than a typical ryegrass species. It has a useful protein content of around 17-18% .

Yarrow forage herb: Yarrow is a small seeded forage herb which has been noted to improve circulation and blood flow in livestock. It has been recognized for many years as beneficial to livestock health, being particularly high in Manganese and also has a deep root system which helps it stay green in drought conditions.

Sheeps parsley forage herb: Sheep's parsley is known to be high in iron and vitamins A & C. It is also noted that it enhances fertility in breeding stock.

It may be beneficial to add a small quantity of low growing, non aggressive White Clover and/or Lucerne to improve the protein levels available to the animal within the sward, especially for lactating females.

Establishment & Management

The Llama and Alpaca Mixture is sown at a rate of 14.0kg/acre (35.0kg/ha.) and should be shallow sown onto a fine and consolidated seed bed. Once sown it should be well rolled, ideally twice to ensure it has a firm finish.

The diversity of traditional grass and herbs species suits being sown in warm conditions, which is normally from mid April to the beginning of September. Late sowings into cold, poorly prepared seed-beds should be avoided.

Generally these animals prefer grazing short, leafy grass. If the sward gets away from the animal and becomes stemmy, it is beneficial to cut the pasture for hay or simply top it to reset the grazing height and encourage new growth.

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Date Posted: 8th July 2019