

My top training tips for 2015

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1. Understand your alpacas

Alpacas are descended from their wild ancestors, Vicuna. These are the little deer-like things that do an impressive line in panic. If you would like confirmation of this, have a look at a YouTube video of the annual Chaccu or round up of Vicuna for shearing. Once corralled, they often run, panic, leap and try to escape in any way they can, and injuries or even deaths occur. This behaviour is innate or hard wired into them as prey animals. They have a number of predators in the wild, and their first instinct when faced with danger is to run away first and ask questions later. The curious and calm ones probably got eaten and taken out of the gene pool thousands of years ago. Apparently the local people have a legend that Vicunas committed suicide rather than be taken into captivity!

The herders skill in bringing the animals into the corral is evident - with a very, very long herding tape! However, once they are in there with them to shear them, there is a lot of grabbing of panicking animals... Does this sound familiar in any way?

Humans unwittingly act like predators around camelids. Because we *can* - we have a tendency to corner them, grab them and struggle with them - just like a predator. Realising this gives us the ability to look for the consequences of our behaviour - from a subtle ear flick, or stress wrinkle under the eye right through to alpacas who try to 'tunnel out' from their enclosure or those who try to leap over it. In between these extremes we can also find the spitters, moaners, screamers, kickers, kushers and rearers. If we find ways to not act like predators we find we have much more co-operative and polite animals as they remember previous encounters with us, both pleasant and unpleasant...

2. *Improve your set up.* One of the keys to dialling down camelid panic behaviour is to work with them in small, contained areas. These should contain a number of alpacas as they are a social creature who needs company. I use 8ft by 8ft pens into which I have 3-5 alpacas. In this way I can reach them, but I don't need to corner them. I catch mine using my wand and my catch rope if they aren't used to me, or with the midline catch if they are. The pen size and the other animals taking up a lot of space helps me do this in a slow, controlled way that doesn't involve grabbing. Work out how to funnel your animals into your pens in a calm way. Herding tape is a wonderful way of doing this - however don't use the tape to corner the animals. Always appreciate that as prey animals they need to feel that they have an escape route and use this to your advantage.

3. *Stop struggling - find another way.* If working with your animals involves any form of grabbing, cornering, the use of excessive force or restraint, use your imagination, your creativity, a different set up or some of my suggestions (mostly published in the magazine articles section of my website www.carthveanalpacas.com) to find another way. I believe that we train our animals with every interaction we have with them. If we use force we are simply encouraging them to find ways to make themselves less cooperative, rather than more.

4. *Start having more fun.* When I realised in my early days of camelid owning that neither my alpacas or I were having any fun during our interaction I knew something had to change. Now, whilst I can't claim that I love toenail-a-thons, I don't see these or injections, drenching, shearing or any of the standard husbandry tasks as something to be endured, but as an opportunity to work with my herd in a positive way. I also like to take them occasionally for walks, use them on my Camelid Experience Days, run them round the agility course or test out new obstacles. Whilst we are having a toenail-a-thon I will take the opportunity to do some TTouch on each animal, something we both enjoy.

5. *Get good kit.* Correctly fitting halters, long lead ropes, and many of the tools we use make a huge difference to our animal's experience of interacting with us. At a recent clinic in Norway I stupidly opted to use a halter that was too large for the young llama I was using to demonstrate leading. The consequences were such that I think everyone there was firmly convinced to use a fully adjustable, correctly fitting halter.
6. *Get clicking.* Ever done any clicker (or marker based) training with your dog? I am in the fortunate situation of having two dogs under a year old, and I can compare the ones who are clicker trained with those in my household that aren't. The difference is astonishing as there is a clear enthusiasm to obey in the ones who are clicker trained compared to the others. Grab a clicker and some small pony nuts and mark and reward your alpacas for useful behaviours such as standing still, letting you touch their legs without lifting them or turning their heads away from you in the case of spitters!
7. *Raise easy babies.* Don't over handle your babies (I am getting far too many calls about difficult overhandled alpacas) but do work with them for 30 seconds at a time in their pens whilst they are standing next to their mothers. 2-3 times a week is perfectly adequate. Try not to pick them up or grab them when handling them. Read the article on my website and enjoy this lovely experience. You are setting your animals up for a lifetime of easy handling....
8. *Aim to let every interaction be a pleasant and positive learning experience for you and them.* Normally we don't do anything nice to our alpacas. This can be changed by using the correct set up, changing how we handle them and positive details such as the use of food, TTouch and clicker training.

For details about training courses, equipment, books and DVDs see www.carthveanalpacas.com or e-mail Julie at taylor.browne@clara.net.