

INTEGRATING MALES

PRACTICES AND METHODS FROM MEMBER FARMS

Whether you are a new Suri owner, or you've been in the business for many years, whether you have a large acreage for your Suris, or you reserve only a few acres for them, everyone has to tackle a similar issue - how to manage and integrate males as they grow from crias to adults. To address this question, the Suri Network spoke with a few of its members, with a variety of backgrounds and farm set-ups, to see how they manage their males.

Alpacas of El Dorado - California

Owner: Scott and Laurie Findlay

Acreage Reserved for Alpacas: 3

Number of Alpacas Owned: 20 males 33 females

Years in Alpaca Industry: 18

Dakini Suri Alpacas - Oregon

Owner: Michelle Alexander

Acreage Reserved for Alpacas: 11

Number of Alpacas Owned: 12 males 30 females

Years in Alpaca Industry: 14

Hasselbrings Harmony Ranch - Missouri

Owners: Patty and Britt Hasselbring

Acreage Reserved for Alpacas: 30

Number of Alpacas Owned: 57 males 103 females

Years in Alpaca Industry: 10

RayNay Alpaca Farm - North Carolina

Owners: Ray and Candy McMahan

Acreage Reserved for Alpacas: 17

Number of Alpacas Owned: 32 males 49 females

Years in Alpaca Industry: 11

Wild Rose Suri Alpacas - Maryland

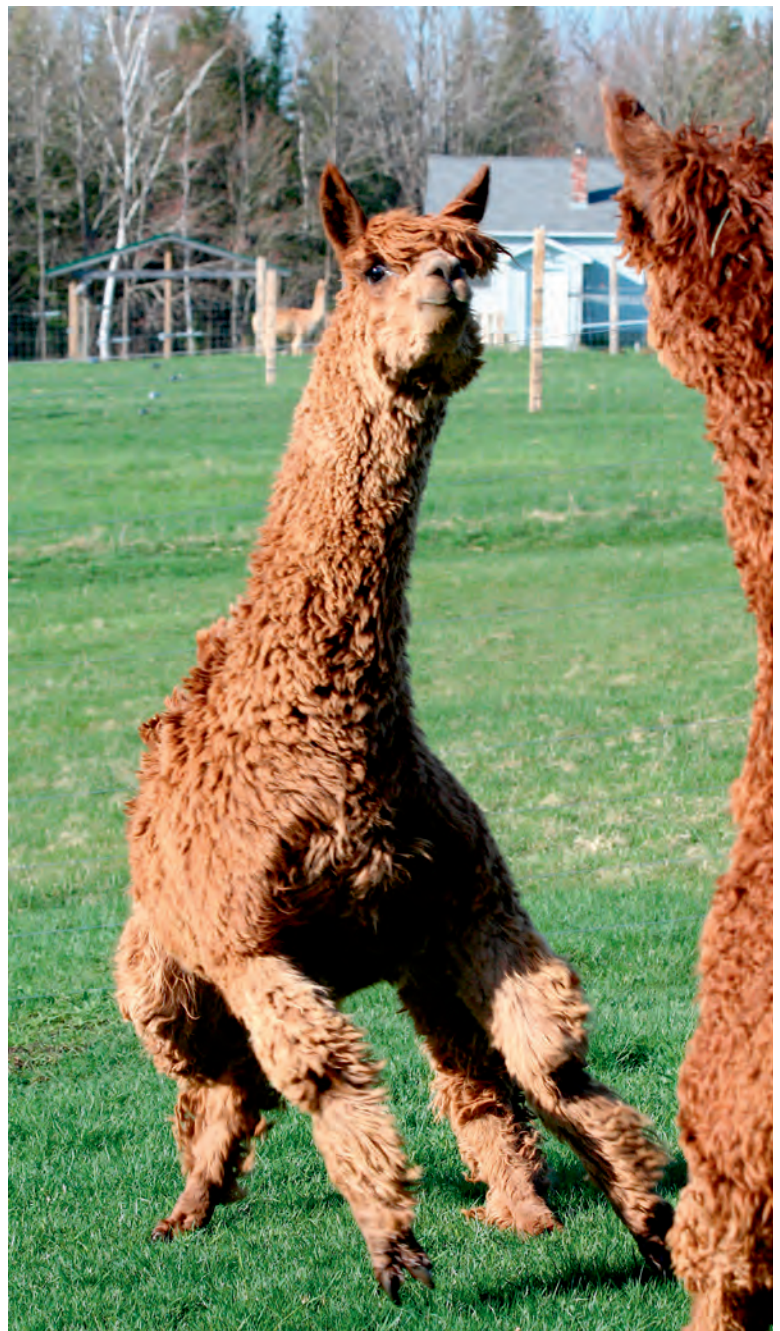
Owner: Patti and Alan Anderson

Acreage Reserved for Alpacas: 17

Number of Alpacas Owned: 25 males 45 females

Years in Alpaca Industry: 23

*Male fighting can be minimized by proper management.
(photograph courtesy of Bag End Suri Alpacas, ©2019)*



INTO YOUR HERD

Compiled by Liz Vahlkamp

At what age do you introduce young males into the adult herd?

Scott and Laurie Findlay: Usually by eight months, or when they start to show interest in females. Then they are put in a suitable group based on age and temperament.

Michelle Alexander: I wait until they have reached their full adult weight and emotional maturity, typically two years old. I keep weaned males less than 2 years old together.

Britt and Patty Hasselbring: We integrate young males into adult male groups when 1) they are the same size, and 2) when the younger ones are able to hold their own with the adult males. This is usually when the young ones are between two and three years old. We generally have three groups of boys: weanlings (from weaning until age one or so), yearlings (age one to “adult”) and the “big boys”.

Ray and Candy McMahan: It really depends on how they behave with others their own age. I have had to move up yearling males to three-year-old groups because they were dominating the males closer to their age. They quickly got moved up to the herdsire groups and a pecking order was worked out. I do not tolerate males that are too aggressive and don't play well with others after several attempts of letting them work it out. I recently re-homed a male and he has settled in well as a PR alpaca, he loves attention and they have farm tours practically every day of the week. It was a good fit for all involved.

Patti Anderson: I keep two groups of males, the first group is my adult males, and the second group is a combination of my weanlings and/or yearlings. I normally introduce yearlings from the previous year with the adult males after I wean my new batch of weanlings that are 4-6 months old, making space for the weanlings in that group. The group size for weanlings is generally five to eight animals. This gives the weanlings time to grow up and mature in their own group before having to establish their hierarchy in the older herd sire group. There is a lot of wrestling and playing that can be misconstrued by the older animals as an attempt to move up the hierarchy. They need to play and develop their skills in a safe group before moving into the larger group.

Do you prefer to introduce them into a large group or small group?

Scott and Laurie Findlay: We prefer to introduce our males into small groups when possible. We have a few older males who will live their lives out at our farm, and for certain situations, we may choose to put those males with really young males to teach and guide them.

Britt and Patty Hasselbring: We will introduce them into any size group. Our methods are the same. Integration of new boys into an existing group is done carefully. The existing group is moved into a neutral section of our boys' barn, and then the new male/s are brought in. All are herded into a small corner and we keep them squeezed together for about 20 minutes. When I say squeezed, I mean they are corralled so tight

by humans that they cannot move. If we have a new pasture to release them into when we are ready to release them, that is great, and we do that. But usually we don't. So after about 20 minutes of very close quarters in the neutral section of the barn, we release them together into the field. Then we put out fresh hay or, if the weather is warm enough, we water bellies. By this time, they seem to have forgotten that there are new guys in the pen with them. (If any fighting erupts we can also shower heads of fighters.)

Michelle Alexander: In order to begin the transition I put two of the lower ranking adult males in with the young males first for a few months to let them get used to adapting to other adult males. Then I put the entire group in with the adult male herd together and monitor behavior to make sure none of them are being picked on by dominant males. If there are at least two or more they do better transitioning into the adult herd together because they have friends for protection.

Ray and Candy McMahan: Usually they run in small groups based on age, size and behavior. Currently I have 4 groups of males. Two are breeding groups, separated by behavior. One group of breeders has five and the other group has six. Each group is rotated on ½ acre paddocks. They share a barn that has a divider, and they can see each other but do not have contact. I have a group of boys that are similar in size that range from 10 months to 3.5 years - seven males are in this group. All of these boys did show in halter at some point which has made them easy to handle and accustomed to other animals around - they run in a ½ acre paddock. The last group is six males approaching two years of age, all six have been together since birth and just finished showing in halter yearling this past show season. They, too, are on a ½ acre paddock. My crias, whether male or female, are weaned around the six month time frame. I will keep male and female weanlings together until I notice males having interest in the females.

Patti Anderson: I only have two groups of males: one small group with 5 to 8 weanling/yearling males and a larger group of adult males with 15 to 20 animals. I always introduce the new younger males into the larger group. This is done slowly over a time of one to two hours. The first thing I do is to make sure that the smaller group is in a paddock next to the larger group so that they have some time to get used to each other. This is done from the time they are weanlings until I put them together the following year.



A babysitter gelding (white male to left) with a group of weanling males.

(photograph courtesy of Patti Anderson, ©2019)

When introducing the yearlings into the adult group, I start by moving the yearlings into the older males physical area, i.e. territory, by themselves and make sure there is plenty of new interesting hay in the feeders. While it also works to introduce them into two neutral areas not established by either group, we sometimes don't have that available. The older males are previously moved into a pen area next to the new yearlings being introduced, allowing them to smell the yearlings and see who they are. I slowly start to introduce one adult male at a time into the smaller yearling group, using a gate panel between the two pen areas. I monitor it and make sure that the introduced male is not picking on the young boys. Sometimes it can take 10 to 15 minutes before everything settles down.

If the older male is overly aggressive and does not settle down, then he goes into "time out" whereby he is haltered and tied short in the same pen with the yearling boys. You have to make sure that wherever he is tied is very secure, as he may pull very hard on it. It is imperative that you use a quick release knot when tying him so that you can released him quickly if needed. Learn the knot – it is a lifesaver, not just a performance show requirement! Tying up the aggressive male gives the yearling boys time to sniff him and acquaint themselves without being attacked. During this time, you must be in attendance. Don't make the mistake of walking away and not watching what is happening, as it can be very dangerous for the tied male.

When all is calm and settled, then I release the tied male and monitor the group. If he acts up again, then he goes back on "time out". When he is calm and has gotten acquainted with the yearling boys, usually witnessed as him no longer chasing them or going over to just eat hay and accepting them as part of the "herd," then I will introduce the next male. I repeat the process until all 15 to 20 males are good with the new yearling males being introduced and accept them as members of the "herd." Over the next few days you may have a few instances of some aggression, but the herd will step up and help stop it. "Time outs" a few more times will reduce it. I rarely have any more problems after the first two days.



An aggressive male tied short with a quick release knot during a "time out."

(photograph courtesy of Patti Anderson, ©2019)



A herdsire visits with a cria at Bag End (where sires were noticed to be more interested in their own offspring than in those sired by other males).

Do you notice that herdsires tend to treat their own offspring better than others when introduced into the herd?

Scott and Laurie Findlay: No, we have not noticed that.

Michelle Alexander: No, I haven't noticed that they recognize their own offspring.

Britt and Patty Hasselbring: We have not noticed this.

Ray and Candy McMahan: I haven't noticed this behavior but I honestly haven't had any male offspring of age that I have brought up to the herdsire group that would include his sire.

Patti Anderson: I have noticed in some cases that the herd sires are more tolerant of some of their offspring. Unfortunately, I cannot tell if that is due to the fact that herd sire is in general more tolerant, or that he is demonstrating familial preference. When it comes to food and breeding, none of the herd sires shows tolerance for their offspring. Food and breeding beats out family!

Do you find gelding the males helps in managing a group of males together? If so, at what age do you geld?

Scott and Laurie Findlay: No, we have never had to geld a male, as we keep them together based on temperament, size and age.

Michelle Alexander: If I have decided to geld a male I wait until they have reached their full adult growth, typically at two years old. At that age they will have achieved their full bone and frame development. However, I generally do not geld males in my herd.



Peace reigns again after a "time out" session on Patti Anderson's farm.

(photograph courtesy of Patti Anderson, ©2019)

Britt and Patty Hasselbring: We have never gelded nor have we seen any reason to geld. Occasionally fights break out among our boys and if they get serious we will break them up.

Ray and Candy McMahan: I have never had a male gelded.

Patti Anderson: We geld at 18 months old in general and have had mixed results. Once I have had a gelding in a female pen, I have found that my older males try to breed him and have not been able to reintroduce him into the adult male group successfully. I have seen a gelded male help manage more aggressive males, but more often I see the males at the top of the hierarchy stop fights and aggression among the rest of the group.

How do you handle situations when you have only one male weanling in a season that becomes old enough to be separated from his female counterparts, but too young to put in with adult males?

Scott and Laurie Findlay: We find a ranch in the same situation and house them there or bring their male to us.

Michelle Alexander: I keep them with the pregnant girls. By definition those girls can't be bred and I find the girls do a great job of teaching the males to be respectful because they won't tolerate aggressive behavior.

Britt and Patty Hasselbring: We have never had this situation. If we did, we would have to either find a new home for him with other males his age, or find a few more males his age to bring to our farm.

Ray and Candy McMahan: I always have a group of young male yearlings to put him with, hence the small groups based not only on age but size and demeanor. If the occasion did arise I would keep him in a smaller paddock sharing the fence line with my more docile smaller males and eventually incorporate him into the group as he aged.

Patti Anderson: Fortunately for me, I have kept a gelding male for several years now that acts as the weanling babysitter. Not only does he play with the weanlings, but he teaches them manners. This gelding is a small male weighing only about 115 lb, and not so big as to cause damage to the weanling males weighing 70-100 lbs. He performs a very special role on the farm and is equally good with the weanling females if needed. My weanling females are most often moved into an older female group away from their dams rather than using the gelding. Each year the weanling boys go into the small group with this gelding and remain with him until the next batch of weanling males come along the following year.

Can your males see your females from their pasture/barn area?

Scott and Laurie Findlay: All our males can see the females.

Michelle Alexander: Ideally the males would not be able to see the girls but on my small farm that is not always possible. If I have to house girls in sight of the males or on the same fence line I make sure it is my pregnant girl group and weanlings. The fence line is a 5 foot no-climb post and cap fence that the boys cannot jump on or over. For night-time penning I keep the adult males away from the girls.

Britt and Patty Hasselbring: Our males are housed on one side of the farm and the females on the other. The adult males can see a few of our younger girls, but there is a decent buffer between them and they do not share a fence.

Ray and Candy McMahan: Yes, our males can see the females. Our breeding males have a driveway that separates them from the females. Our younger males 1.5-3 years of age share a 5 foot high no-climb gate under the lean-to of our barn, this is an entirely different barn from where the breeding males are kept.

Patti Anderson: All my breeding males can see the females but are kept separate from them by a sacrifice area between the outside paddocks. I never put the herd sire directly next to the females in the paddocks as they tend to jump on the fence and the girls push next to the fence and drive them crazy. They look for the females at every chance and like to be able to see them even though they cannot access them. It appears that because they are not right next to them, they don't get into huge squabbles and shows of aggression.

Do you prefer fewer or more males to keep the peace in your herd?

Scott and Laurie Findlay: Our 20 males are kept in four barns and pastures, at the most five in each. We can open up two extra barns and pastures that we are not using depending on the need. Our males are largely breeding males, but we do have a few older males and we keep them in their own group or with the very young males.

Michelle Alexander: I find it is harder for dominant males to pick on lower ranking males if there is a larger group. They tend to form friendship groups that afford protection from the top males. I have some males that are the same age and raised together and they are life-long friends, always together.

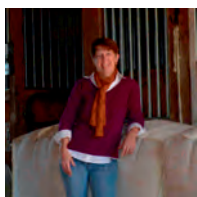
Britt and Patty Hasselbring: We find that more males get along better than just two or three. We see far fewer fights in larger groups of males than in small groups. We would not want only two big boys, particularly if they were within sight or smell of females.

Ray and Candy McMahan: Currently I am in the process of reducing my number of males between the ages of 3-4. Every birthing season it seems the males are outnumbering the females. I would prefer to have eight go-to herdsires.

Patti Anderson: It has been my experience that 2-3 males in the adult male herd is a bad number. There seems to be more aggression and vying for the top of the hierarchy, generally leaving one male shunned or constantly picked on. I have a client that had three males, with one of them becoming very aggressive toward the other males once he bred a female, to the point of tearing up ears and constantly fighting. I suggested that they get at least two more males to make the “herd effect”. It worked out well when three more males were added, and the fighting and aggressiveness of the one male decreased significantly. I have had as many as 25 breeding age males in one group and they all got along peacefully. I have even introduced solitary males that people have kept alone in pens because of their aggressiveness, using the method I described for introducing yearlings into the larger group in the 2nd question above. The power of the “herd” should be used and is not to be underestimated!

Integrating young males into the adult population can present challenges, but can also be easily managed with consideration for your own farm and pen set up. As Patti Anderson noted, “I do not believe that herd sires need to be kept alone in separate runs and pens. For us and most farms, we are not physically set up to be able to do that, nor do I want to do that. Setting them up by themselves increases the aggression towards the other males, instead of decreasing it.”

Temperament has also been found to be a heritable trait. If you have a male that just can’t get along with others – even in larger herd sizes – you may want to consider culling that animal. If you are a new alpaca owner, reach out to other alpaca breeders in your area for their tips and suggestions. Thinking about getting into the alpaca industry and still setting up your farm layout? Consider having an alpaca breeder in your area come over to walk the site with you and provide tips. Keeping you and your animals safe and living peacefully will give your best alpaca experience!



Liz Vahlkamp runs Salt River Alpacas in Paris, MO with her husband. They have been owners since 2004. They have participated in the show system for many years, and have pursued a breeding program designed for profitability in fiber production. Liz has served on the Suri Network Board.



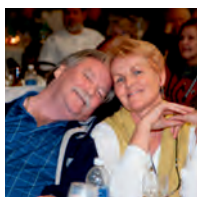
Patty and Britt Hasselbring own Hasselbring’s Harmony Ranch just outside of Concordia, Missouri. They purchased their first Suris in 2009. Before starting their alpaca venture, they visited alpaca farms, and early on, fell in love with the exquisite Suri. Patty has served on the Suri Network and AOA boards.



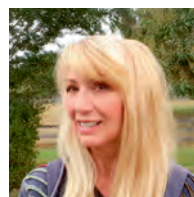
Michelle Alexander, owner of Dakini Suri Alpacas, has been breeding and raising alpacas since 2003 on a small ranch in central Oregon.



Laurie and Scott Findlay have been involved in the alpaca industry for 17+ years. Alpacas of El Dorado features over 50 suri and huacaya alpacas. Laurie formerly was President of CALPACA and has been involved with South County Large Animal Rescue. They have participated in every aspect of breeding, showing, fiber and agritourism with alpacas.



Candy McMahan retired in 2008 and manages the farm while Ray continues as owner of an automobile auction company. We love the lifestyle and can’t imagine life without these majestic creatures. We have 83 alpacas, along with 23 “pasture” chickens, three beehives and a farm store attached to our AirBNB overlooking the alpaca pastures.



Patti Anderson’s adventure with suris began 24 years ago with the purchase of two white Peruvian suris that grew to over 125. She established the Wild Rose Suri Ranch in 1995 with her husband, Alan. Patti has been an AOPA Show Committee member, VP of MAPACA, President of MABA, and received the MAPACA Lifetime Achievement Award.