



FEATURED FARM

SPINNING DYEING & WEAVING

# Loop Head Alpaca Farm

Loop Head Alpacas was a whimsical notion which became a reality in 2015 when we bought a small 22 acre farm. We started off with Mummy and her cria, Cosimo and an unproven male, Macho. Nina (formerly Avatar) joined us later and shortly gave birth to Bella. We have been growing our herd slowly and now stand at 4 females, 4 males and 3 male cria born last year.

Valerie first became interested in spinning the fleece in 2016 and it has developed to natural dyeing with plants on the farm, art yarn spinning and weaving and is an active member of the local Mid West Spinners Weavers & Dyers as well as a member of the Irish Guild for Spinners Weavers & Dyers. We renovated an old cowshed into a ceardlann, which opened the doors for craftspeople requesting visits to see the alpacas and take part in the spinning etc.

A very successful Open Day 2018 along with requests for visits resulted in Loop Head Alpaca Experiences in May 2019. This has proven very successful and we look forward to developing it further. We can now offer courses in addition to the alpaca visit experience... so watch this space!



Our House



Sunny days on Loop Head



## Article on personal experiences

*We moved to Loop Head from Co. Derry after our 6 boys grew up and moved out. We had 2 horses and we were paying livery as we did not have our own land. So it made every sense to trade the bigger house for some grass ☺.*

*We have a number of years experience in managing a livery yard and caring for equines and land management so taking on a few alpacas didn't worry us at all. In any case the previous owner gave us loads of information and advice and we could ask him anything any time. The Alpaca Association of Ireland also deserve some merit as we have found members to be friendly & helpful.*

*Owning alpacas has opened up so many doors for us as we have met lots of interesting people and made new friends. We particularly love to sit in the ceardlann in the evenings, looking out at our animals, spinning away or weaving on the smaller loom.*

*Spring and winter have their challenges keeping the animals with the adverse weather, summer is lovely with the shearing, new cria, watching them enjoy the warm lazy days and autumn is fun collecting plants and etc for dyeing experiments*

# What Alpacas mean to us

Valerie & Billy Leonard

## 1. Why did you decide to get into Alpacas?

We were very lucky to have a few more acres than we needed for the horses and alpacas seemed the perfect choice for a 'no kill' grazing animal. It was Billy's idea really.

## 2. How Many Alpacas do you have/intend to have?

Currently 11. No firm decision yet but probably no more than 20.

## 3. What is it about Alpacas that appeals to you?

We love their nature; they are quirky, different and with the practicality of quality fleece.

## 4. Do you have a favorite Alpaca?

Billy has a favourite; our first female we lovingly nickname Mammy. As a mother myself I can't have any favourites 😊 but each and every one of them has lovable characteristics.

## 5. What do you do with your Alpacas?

We enjoy them first and foremost. We love working with their fleece, and it gives us great satisfaction when we see so many people appreciate what we have here through booking our 2 hour experience.

## 6. What have been the challenges ?

Mammy got sick in 2019 and we finally discovered it was a reaction to the hot summer of 2018. Vets are generally in the dark due to lack of experience with alpacas.

## 7. What has surprised you about having Alpaca?

Negative; scary watching males 'fighting' even without their fighting teeth. Thankfully it is rare and easy to intervene if necessary. Positive: Their sociability/behavior; the way Nina invites her own selected visitors to pet her.

## 8. What's your vision for the Alpaca future

Personally we will continue on this journey and see where it brings us. Nationally I think we should be regulated in the interests of animal welfare but feel that will happen as numbers increase.

## 9. Do you have one piece of advice for new alpaca owners?

Ask for help and advice if in doubt from a range of people with experience. AAI members are always glad to do this. Animal welfare is paramount.

**Finish this sentence: If we knew what we know now we would have done this years ago!**



We have been growing wild flowers and we like to use our own plants etc for natural dyeing some of our white fibre.

We love working with alpaca fibre and particularly in the knowledge that it is home grown! Each fleece is so beautiful, each natural colour so distinct. Blending colours on the drum carder gives some lovely results, each one for a unique garment.

Has also been fun with the dyeing experiments and have had amazing results with a wide range of plants with both white alpaca and sheep fibre; herb robert, wild chamomile (pineapple weed) dahlias, fennel, avacado skin and stones gave a dusky pink, pomegranate skin a lovely lemon. Turmeric, black rice water, solar dyeing, onion skins, blackberries, even an out of date pineapple!, the possibilities are endless. This has resulted in special commissions for a niche market as and when time allows.

