



FLOWERDALE ESTATE ALPACAS

Health & Husbandry

Weaning - Whose Baby Is This, Anyway?

Alpaca and Llama Training

Weaning... a subject full of controversy, confusion and complicating factors. To wean means, "to withhold mother's milk from the young of a mammal and substitute other nourishment". The definition also includes "to detach from that to which he is accustomed or devoted". The weaning process is an issue every llama and alpaca breeder must face, often causing a good bit of angst to both the llamas and/or alpacas and their humans. As with most anything, there are a number of things to consider regarding the weaning process. How are your pastures arranged and what sort of fencing exits? How many animals do you have, what age and sex, any babies relatively close in age and are they of the same sex? In addition, there are important things to consider with each mom and baby each year.



I would guess most everyone experiencing the gift of a newborn cria on their farm has tried their hand in the weaning process. We always weaned "our" babies at about the six-month mark. It was traumatic for both the four and two leggeds and not something we looked forward to doing. However, in trying to do the best by our animals as "herds keeper", it was our necessary responsibility. We tried a variety of methods including different fields, out of sight from one another, within sight, removing baby from the main group and leaving mom, removing mom and leaving baby, separated by merely a fence, separated by several fences, with a gelding, with other babies, with a group... for one month, two months, three months or more. Some weaned easier than others but without exception, there were those first long days of crying and pacing. Sometimes just the baby would cry, sometimes the mom cried too. We had cases of urine burn, sore teats, mothers and babies trying to nurse through gates and fencing. We had one little fellow jump a five foot fence. Through it all we continually reminded them, as well as ourselves, that this was for their own good.

We began to wonder if there could be another way to handle this. We talked with a number of other breeders about letting the moms wean their own babies. Many had been breeding alpacas and llamas much longer than us and had experienced many more births and ultimate weanings. Almost all concurred that it just did not work. We decided to see for ourselves. One of our most important discoveries was timing. Our mentors were absolutely correct - moms weaning their own babies did not work if WE chose a particular date by which they should have that baby weaned. Timing - that date - seems to be where we get stuck. Our concerns around this subject most directly relates to length of time - the age of the baby.



FLOWERDALE ESTATE ALPACAS

We returned the responsibility of weaning back to our llamas nearly 12 years ago with nary a regret. That is NOT to say there are never occasions when we find it necessary to intervene. That IS to say that with few exceptions, most all of our moms (15 on average) wean their babies every year in which they have them, all by themselves. In the process, we have discovered some remarkable things. On average, most moms on our farm wean their babies sometime during the age of nine months. Occasionally some are weaned around seven months and some not until the end of ten months. Given the nine month average we have witnessed here, is it possible that the age of six months is way too early? I have often wondered how the six month mark was decided...

We have drawn some interesting conclusions based on our "observational data". Those babies weaned earlier than the nine month average are usually males (though some are female) who are very independent and quite precocious. Often times they are larger, as well. Those weaned later than the nine-month average appear to fall into three categories:

1. Babies who are quiet, shy, clingy - a "momma's kid".
2. Babies of first time moms or of older moms who have had a number of offspring but have never had the experience of weaning their own baby. In the second instance, usually about the time we decide to intervene we discover the mom has decided the same thing. The second year of weaning by these moms is much more "to schedule".
3. Some moms, if not rebred, do not seem to ever wean their last baby even if they normally have done so. Naturally, it is simply responsible as "herds keeper" to intervene if this last baby is male. If mom is not rebred, in good condition and there are no known compromising factors, we have left female offspring with their moms and noted occasional nursing for up to two years.

The same mom does not necessarily wean each baby each year at the same time. For example, a mom who has weaned six babies may have weaned four around the nine month average and one earlier and one later. It seems to depend on the specific personality and growth (mental/emotional and physical) of that particular baby. We truly feel the weaning process is much more involved than the simple matter of nourishment. What other lessons about "life as an alpaca or llama" occur during those few extra months which we, as humans, do not readily "see"?

In our experience, young males are typically weaned earlier depending on their personality. Those who are precocious, have larger testicles, are independent and "aggressively" playful are weaned earlier than those who are more of a "mamma's boy" - quiet and shy. Young females are often weaned around the nine month average or later. We have noticed those babies who have been weaned exclusively by their moms appear more independent and confident after weaning. They tend to "stand on their own two feet", rarely run to mom with their tails up over their back, are less fearful in new situations and training, and have already established their distinct place within the herd. When mom says they are finished - no further nursing - they are indeed finished. They are not allowed to nurse again. Perhaps these are some of the lessons we, as humans, do not readily "see".

Those we have weaned ourselves seemed to flounder and appear much less confident in themselves. They often struggle for their place in the herd receiving far more "spit lessons". During this struggle, they tend to run to mom more often with their tail thrown over their back. Should they try to nurse, mom often appears confused - a yes-no, maybe, I'm not quite sure - response. Sometimes, even after a long separation, mom will give in and nursing resumes. It seems to make sense. Those mothers have never made the personal decision nor established the boundaries of nursing with their baby, we did!



FLOWERDALE ESTATE ALPACAS

We have been astonished by the ramifications of the moms establishing time frames and boundaries with their babies versus us imposing our timing and boundaries.

In the first few years of our returning the weaning process to the mothers, we witnessed a birth situation here, which forever sealed our commitment to allowing our moms to do the weaning when at all possible. Corona had just given birth to her third baby. Baby #1, which WE had weaned and Baby #2, which SHE had weaned, were two of the first at the scene. As Corona stood over her struggling newborn, both Baby #1 and Baby #2 decided to check out the milk situation. Baby #2 (mother had weaned - now a yearling) was immediately and severely reprimanded and told in no uncertain terms that they were through with that. Surprisingly, Baby #1 (now a two year old which WE had weaned) was allowed to begin nursing until suddenly it was as if Corona thought "wait a minute", stood uncertain for a brief moment, sniffed her newborn and then simply moved away from Baby #2. This event lent great support to our supposition that the decisions and boundaries drawn by mom and baby are much more clear and definite than those drawn by humans between a mom and her baby. This would appear to be another significant reason for the low success rate in complete weaning even when we have separated them for three months or longer. Combine this with our attempt to wean at a significantly younger age than is done, on average, by the moms themselves, and it begins to make sense why it is that we humans have such a difficult time getting "our" weaning program to stick.



To the left are three generations. Diamond Lil is in the center. In this photo she was 20 years old! In the front is her 5 ½ month old son, Full Tilt Boogie, who Lil weaned shortly after this photo. Bringing up the rear is her 2 year old daughter, Chili Lilli. Photos reproduced with permission.

Though this arrangement has worked extremely well at our farm, we have a fiduciary responsibility to the health and welfare of our llamas and alpacas. It is important to keep ourselves from getting stuck in thinking, "ALL our moms wean ALL their babies EVERY year by themselves". Not true. Some years they all do, but not always. Circumstances such as health, sex of babies, pasture arrangement and so on can play a significant role and these situations can change from year to year. It is possible, although somewhat rare, for a precocious little 6 month old male to attempt to breed and even impregnate any open female in his pasture.



FLOWERDALE ESTATE ALPACAS

Though we have had moms wean as late as the beginning of the 11th month with no weak newborn crias and no low IgG levels, one must be prepared to intervene if necessary. In our particular case, we felt it necessary to intervene at the eleventh hour on one occasion and discovered on another, the mom had made the decision at nearly the same instant as we had. We did not have any problem with development of a fresh new bag of milk and good colostrum. The "late weaning" moms dried up completely within days (a process they all begin slowly over a period of time long before weaning is complete - it is, in fact, a natural part of the weaning process) and a healthy bag had developed before the arrival of the new baby.

The health of your llama or alpaca is important. We have not found "self weaning" to be an issue for moms who are in good condition. Those who are "down" in weight, have an abscess or elongated teeth, lack luster in their wool and/or any other malady may not fare well, physically. Not only is it possible that their physical condition may be further compromised by their self-imposed time frame of weaning, the overall pregnancy, welfare of the unborn cria, birth and milk production may be compromised as well. It would be prudent not to breed a female who is not in good condition. Should a female become "down" after she is bred, we assist in any way we can which may include weaning her current baby, ourselves. The same considerations are present for a mom and her baby REGARDLESS of any weaning practice we may employ. It is important to pay attention to your herd members. In working to understand the seemingly never-ending range of expression and behavior, one becomes better able to know when an intervention is necessary.

We, the two and four legged's at Gentle Spirit Llamas, enjoy the natural process of weaning. It has worked extremely well and has certainly reduced the stress level surrounding weaning for all of us. This has been a controversial topic for years and we have been criticized for not showing more responsibility towards the moms and "our" babies. But that is just it - they are not "our" babies! Looking in the mirror, I noticed I am neither an alpaca nor a llama. As such, is it possible that I may not really now how to teach one to be one, or when it is the right time to wean a particular baby? We have made the commitment that we shall do our best by our llamas with the things we do best, and try to allow them the opportunity to do those things at which they are best. The result has been a much more relaxed and confident herd... not to mention, us!



Cathy Spalding - alpaca & llama trainer, speaker author
Article printed with permission of Cathy Spalding www.gentlespiritllamas.com