

tips for raising suris in cold climates

By Cheryl Tillman, D.V.M.

Suri alpacas have been successfully raised as far north as Saskatchewan, Canada and throughout the mountainous areas of Colorado and Montana. A normal body temperature of an adult alpaca is about 101°F. It may be somewhat lower in the early morning. An alpaca with a body temperature below 99°F will exhibit shivering and should be brought inside to warm up. Warm water, high energy hay or grain, and an insulated blanket will revive most cold animals. With a little bit of preparation, it is possible to safely raise suri alpacas with winter temperatures of below zero Fahrenheit.

1. Shelter

Ventilation and waste disposal is critical to the health of your alpacas in the winter months when they will be inside barns longer than at other times of the year. Feeding at dusk rather than in the morning will bring your suris into the barn at night. They will bed down where they eat. On days when snow does not cover your pastures, you can maintain this feeding schedule and lock them out of the barn during the day.

If you have three sided shelters, layering straw over their manure will create some warmth and still maintain a reasonably healthy environment. If you have enclosed barns, it may be necessary to strip the barns daily to avoid a build up of nitrogen and humidity in the air. Many alpaca owners are reluctant to use straw for bedding since it contaminates the fleece, but in cold climates the use of straw or grass hay is essential insulation. An enclosed barn with sand flooring and infrared heaters may be adequate.

2. Heated Water

To avoid colic, rumen shut down and impaction, it is essential that your suris have access to warm water during severe winter months. Automatic infrared heated water tanks are available from several manufacturers. Floating water tank heaters are less energy efficient but useful. An insulated cover can be placed over the center section of a typical oval 150 gallon tank. For animals kept in a box stall, a warm one gallon bucket of water filled several times a day should be used.

3. Winter Nutritional Requirements

Not all alpacas require the same amount or kind of nutrition. Lactating mothers in winter may need up to 2% of their body weight a day in high quality grass hay, plus a small amount of supplemental feed such as alfalfa, pellets or grain. High quality grass hay will be 14% protein and 55–58% Total Digestible Nutrients (TDN). An alfalfa/grass mix might be 17% protein and 60% TDN. If you are not currently testing your forage, ask your veterinarian to analyze samples of your feed. Females who are not lactating may require as little as 1% of their body weight a day in high quality grass hay. Vitamins and micronutrients can be fed in a granulated salt based supplement or in pelleted feed.

Segregating your herd of females into separate pastures based on their nutritional requirements makes feeding your suri alpacas in the winter much easier. This will avoid a lactating female losing weight and a non-lactating female from getting fat.



Babies by the foot of their dam should be offered a “creep feed” so they can get away from the competition of older animals and eat free choice grass hay or a supplement of alfalfa hay or grain.

4. Transportation

Extra care must be taken in the winter when transporting suris. Thick rubber mats should be used in the back of your van, truck or trailer, and very heavy bedding with straw, grass hay, or shredded paper is necessary. Roof vents or side window vents may still be necessary to avoid excessive condensation.

5. Control of Parasites

It is especially important when entering winter that alpacas be free from intestinal parasites. This will help them maintain their Body Condition Score (BCS) throughout the winter months. Consult your veterinarian about your parasite control program. Alternating Ivermectin with Fenbendazole (Panacur) is recommended to control nematodes and whipworms. The therapeutic dose for alpacas is greater than for sheep and goats. Consult with your veterinarian about the correct dose for alpacas.

6. Birthing Interval

Since alpacas are a copulation induced ovulators, owners can completely control the time of year they give birth. Winter births should be avoided in severe climates. ❖

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