

## Hydro Seeding With Alpaca Brown Gold

A number of years ago Olivia and I attended a seminar on Pasture Management at the National Alpaca Convention. The presenter kicked it off asking for a show of hands: How many of you raise alpacas? As new owners, we proudly raised our hands high in the air. The presenter gazed out at the audience and said, "Well none of you actually raise alpacas. You-all are simply raising grass, which your alpacas then eat and they're the ones who convert it into fleece and raise more alpacas."

Everyone laughed at the time, but I never forgot the point and find more truth in it each year. There are many facets to grass farming and alpaca forage, and there may be at least as many opinions as people in the business. This article will be focused on a simple method I devised to rejuvenate an exiting pasture or start a new one by hydro seeding with alpaca compost, using tools and materials you may already have.

Studies have shown that a single application of compost can benefit a pasture for at least eight years! In addition, by using your own alpaca compost, you are putting into you soils and grass much of the vitamins and minerals you purchased in the form of Alpaca Grains and Mineral Supplements. One of the reasons alpacas need these supplements in the first place is because the soil composition in North America is very different from South America, being deficient in the minerals (like selenium) alpacas need for good health. Anyone who has taken vitamins, knows first hand that much of it passes through the body, so there's a great opportunity to capture those alpaca vitamins and minerals and put them where they really belong, in your soil and your alpaca forage itself.

So, assuming you already have a healthy composting system, the only problem is how to apply it. I will note that it is important to use well-composted materials. A healthy compost pile is alive with microbes which have broken down most of the coarse straw and other materials and in the process, produced enough heat to have killed any parasites and unwanted weed seeds from straw, grain mix etc.

Commercial Hydro seeders are expensive contraptions that mix together a slurry of compacted bales of blue/green dyed finely shredded newspaper with water, seed, and fertilizer and then pump the slurry through a hose. If you already have a tractor and broadcast spreader, which most good grass farmers should, you might be closer than you think to having your own hydro seeder.

We simply dump a tractor bucket of compost into a 300-gallon stock tank; add water, seed and sometimes-small



amounts of hydrated lime (a whole nother subject). The next thing you need is some way of stirring the mix up into a slurry. In the above picture you can see me using a rotary de-thatcher attachment on an Echo powerhead. This works great since it can be submersed and there are wheels on the unit that keep the rotating tines just off the bottom of the tank. One of those tiny garden tillers might work well, an electric trolling motor work OK, or just a good old-fashioned rake will do. A slurry, the consistency of oatmeal, is what we are looking for.

I let the mixture sit overnight or up to two days to hydrate the seed, stir it up again and bucket it into the spreader. Tractor your mix to the desired location and let the "mix" hit the fan. The compost will work into the soil without smothering existing pasture and the hydrated seeds hit the ground ready to sprout.

I'm working on a method to transfer the slurry from the stock tank to the spreader, but still have a few bugs to work out. In the meantime any bucket brigade volunteers are welcome on the farm.

Happy Hydro seeding!

*Dave Sanderson*

*Parker River Alpacas*