

How to Find the Dog of Your Dreams

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Finding the dog of your dreams isn't easy. What worthwhile endeavor is? If you have done your homework and have found a breed that may be right for you, it's time to get serious about finding the right dog from the right source.

Dogs are social animals and should be part of the family, and the family should be prepared to meet the needs of their new companion. Dogs running loose are at risk, so before you purchase a puppy, be prepared to provide a safe, fenced-in yard for exercise or to take your dog for several walks daily. Regularly grooming is essential to your dog's health, so be prepared to learn to groom your dog or to take it to a professional groomer on a regular basis. If you're ready to make a commitment to a dog, the best possible source for a healthy, happy puppy is a responsible breeder.

Responsible Breeders versus the Other Guys

Responsible dog breeders are passionately committed to the welfare of their dogs and improvement of their breeds. They work hard to produce healthy animals, raise the puppies carefully, and place each one in an appropriate home.

Responsible breeders also show their commitment by participating in at least one activity designed to test their dogs' abilities and testify to their quality. Some breeders compete in dog shows, some in obedience and agility, still others in sports to test the abilities for which the breed was developed (herding, pointing, retrieving, or whatever). Some breeders are active in non-competitive activities such as search and rescue, dog-assisted therapy, or hunting. Many breeders engage in multiple activities.

A responsible breeder breeds a litter only after careful planning. She gives her pregnant bitch good prenatal care, a clean whelping environment, and close monitoring before and during the birth. She keeps the puppies in clean surroundings and sees that they are socialized and given proper health care. She places each puppy with great care, and she asks potential buyers many questions and checks their references.

Unfortunately, not everyone who offers puppies for sale is responsible. Some puppy producers, often called "backyard breeders," act out of ignorance. Such people rarely educate themselves about genetics. They use the nearest available male with no thought to whether the two animals suit one another and are likely to produce sound puppies. Sometimes a batch of perfectly acceptable pets is produced. More often, the puppies develop into dogs with problems ranging from life-threatening or crippling to chronically annoying to dangerous.

Worse yet are those who mass produce dogs for profit. These puppy millers ignore the physical and emotional health of their stock, who often live in deplorable conditions. They don't screen for genetic disease. Their breeding animals are fed on the cheap, so nutrition is often severely lacking during pregnancy and nursing. Improper early nutrition in dogs, as in humans, causes physical and mental damage. Puppy-mill dogs lack for medical care, and puppies from such places are often ill and infested with parasites. Puppy-mill puppies are also undersocialized. What about pet stores? First, regardless of what some stores claim, no responsible breeder ever sells puppies through a pet store. The puppies you find in pet stores come from puppy mills or from

backyard breeders. In order to get the puppies into the store at the "cute" age, they are usually removed from their mothers and siblings at four to five weeks of age. Puppies need to stay with their mother's and littermates until they are at least seven weeks old for proper social development.

Unfortunately, many buyers fall prey to the first puppy they see. But remember, this little bundle of fluff is going to grow into a dog, and that dog will - hopefully - be with you for a long time. To paraphrase an old bit of wisdom, it's as easy to fall in love with a responsibly bred, healthy puppy as with an irresponsibly bred, poorly raised genetic mess! Besides, everyone who buys an irresponsibly bred puppy supports irresponsible breeding.

Where to Look for a Responsible Breeder

Where do we find one of these responsible breeders? Start with your local kennel club or breed club. The American Kennel Club (AKC) can direct you to the club or clubs nearest to you. National breed clubs and, in the case of some breeds individual breed registries, often maintain a breeder referral services, and can also put you in touch with the local club. (See addresses and links below for more information.)

The newspaper may lead you to a well-bred puppy, but most responsible breeders do not advertise in the newspaper. If you respond to newspaper ads, be cautious, ask questions, and be prepared to walk away without a puppy if the breeder and dogs don't measure up. Dog magazines also list breeders, but keep in mind that some very appealing ads are placed by puppy mill operations.

Referrals are an excellent way to find a puppy. If you see a dog you like, find out where it came from. Ask about health problems and temperament, and ask how the breeder was to work with. If that breeder doesn't have a puppy for you, she may be able to refer you to someone with similar lines.

Dog shows can also be a good place to meet breeders, and they are certainly a terrific place to see lots of dogs. However, showing requires concentration and hard work, so don't expect breeders to stop their grooming and other preparations to talk to you. Buy a catalog, watch the dogs, and enjoy the show! Don't forget the obedience and agility competitions if they are offered -- lots of Dogs compete in those sports. Later you can contact some of the breeders, whose names are published after the dogs' names.

What Should You Look for in a Breeder?

Breeders tend to be busy people. Most have several dogs in residence, which means that many dogs to clean up after, groom, train, exercise, and play with. Most breeders also have a human family and other obligations. So use common sense about the time at which you call, and be understanding if the breeder asks you to call again later.

It's a good idea to have a list of questions, but try not to sound like a police interrogator. Besides, you can often learn as much by letting someone simply talk. If you feel uncomfortable talking to a particular breeder, my advice is to thank him for his time and go to the next name on your list.

Start with general information. Ask how long the breeder has been in this breed, and how many litters she has bred. Don't automatically write someone off if she's breeding her first litter - some beginners have gone to great lengths to inform themselves and produce excellent puppies.

But if the breeder has bred several other breeds, jumped from breed to breed, or otherwise demonstrated lack of commitment to developing a quality line of dogs, then you're better off going elsewhere.

The responsible breeder sees breeding as an art. Find out what the breeder's goals are: does he want to produce top-winning show Dogs, or serious athletes that will excel in obedience and agility? Does he want to breed Dogs who can perform as topnotch field retrievers? Is he interested in producing an all-around, versatile Dog that will perform well in all arenas? Any of these are worthy goals. If the answer is "to make money," run the other way. Although most breeders try to at least break even, responsible dog breeding is an expensive proposition, and most reputable breeders clear little if any profit.

Ask about the dogs' bloodlines. Even if it all sounds Chinese to you, the answer will tell you something. Serious breeders know their dogs' bloodlines well and can rattle off pedigrees from memory. If the breeder doesn't seem to know the canine family tree, chances are she's not serious about producing high-quality dogs.

But wait! You're looking for an old-fashioned pet and all you expect is a happy disposition and reasonable behavior - why should you care about show titles or the breeder's goals? Consider this: even in a carefully planned litter from champion parents and grandparents, there will be puppies who will not have what it takes to be competitive. Often the "fault" is very minor, and most people won't see it even if the breeder points it out. The least puppy from a quality litter will be better in terms of genetic and individual health, temperament, intelligence, and beauty than the best puppy from an irresponsibly bred, poor quality breeding.

Genetic Disease and the Dog

Responsible breeders screen for hereditary problems and do lots of research to learn what diseases have occurred in which relatives. They use that knowledge to increase the chances for superb health in the puppies they produce. A responsible breeder will gladly show you the genetic clearances on her dogs.

If eye diseases are a problem in your chosen breed, ask whether the parents' eyes have tested clear hereditary eye diseases within the past year. If so, find out whether the grandparents of the puppy passed yearly eye examinations.

Find out whether orthopedic problems such as canine hip dysplasia (CHD), luxating patellas, elbow dysplasia, spinal disk disease, and others are a problem in the breed. If so, ask whether the parents' and grandparents' have been certified free of the relevant disease. Request a copy of the OFA and/or PennHIP certificates for each parent. If the parents and grandparents were not evaluated according to OFA or OennHIP protocols, go elsewhere for a puppy.

The potential hereditary problems vary from breed to breed, so do your homework! Learn as much as you can about the breed so that you know the right questions to ask.

Puppy-buying Paperwork

If you're happy so far, ask about the terms of sale. Responsible breeders sell all their puppies on contracts designed to protect the breeder, the buyer, and especially the puppy. Here are some points that should be included in the purchase contract for any dog.

First, there should be health guarantees. You should have at least 48 hours to have the puppy examined by a veterinarian and to return the puppy for a refund if it is not in good health. The contract should also cover genetic health. No one can guarantee that a puppy will not inherit a

genetic problem. What a responsible breeder can and will do is offer compensation to the buyer in that event. Be sure that you are satisfied with the terms of the guarantee.

Responsible breeders require that all pets they sell be altered. Such a requirement demonstrates a commitment to high breeding standards for the breed, and also shows concern for keeping puppies out of the hands of irresponsible breeders. Be suspicious of any breeder who shows no interest in whether her puppies will be used for breeding. If you are interested in breeding, then do it right -- buy a high-quality animal and educate yourself!

A responsible breeder will take the puppy back at any time in its life, and many require that you give them the opportunity to do so before placing the puppy anywhere else. Of course, the responsible breeder prefers to place each puppy in a lifelong home, and therefore will have lots of questions for you. If the breeder does not ask you for any information except your credit card number, go somewhere else.

When you purchase the puppy you should get an individual registration application, or a photocopy of the litter registration if the individual forms aren't back from AKC, ASCA, or other bona fide registry yet. The breeder should also give you a copy of the litter's pedigree showing four or five generations. Initials denoting titles should appear before and behind lots of the names. At least half the dogs in the first two generations (the puppies' parents and grandparents) should have titles. Serious breeders are active in competition, and their dog's pedigrees will demonstrate some degree of success. Many puppy mill and pet puppies have champions back several generations - but the most important ancestors in terms of inheritance are the parents and grandparents.

Finally, it's time to find out how much the

puppy will cost. Price is important, but it shouldn't be the main consideration. In the long run you are better off paying more for a puppy that has been carefully bred and raised, and that is backed by a good contract, than you are paying less for a lesser quality pup. Prices vary around the country and with the individual breed, but keep in mind that if the breeder is selling the puppies very cheap, chances are the parents have not been checked for genetic problems and the puppies and parents have not been given optimum care.

Visiting Breeders

Now it's time to meet one or two breeders and their dogs. If the breeder has young puppies, she may not allow you to visit for a few weeks for their safety. Whether she has puppies when you visit or not, never go from one kennel to another without going home, showering, and changing clothes, including your shoes (or clean them thoroughly and spray the bottoms and sides with a ten percent bleach solution). It is extremely easy to transmit deadly infectious disease and parasites from one kennel to another, even if everything looks clean!

Meet as many of your potential puppy's relatives as possible. You should be able to meet the mother unless the puppies are very young. Don't expect her to look her best while she's nursing - puppy care is a big job for canine moms. Pay attention to her temperament, keeping in mind that it is normal for a bitch to be protective of her babies. If the sire is on the property, ask to meet him. Often he will not be present, as serious breeders often send their females away to stud dogs. You should be able to see pictures of him, though. If you don't like the parents, don't buy the puppy!

Take a look around. Are the facilities clean? Do all the dogs appear to be healthy, with clear

eyes, trimmed toenails, and reasonably groomed coats? Do they have fresh water to drink and room to move and play? Are they friendly? Does the breeder know every dog by name, and know each puppy as an individual? If the answer to any one of these questions is no, look elsewhere. But if the answers are yes, and you feel comfortable with this breeder and like her dogs, and she feels comfortable with you, you may soon be owned by a puppy!

Just the Beginning

Taking your new puppy home is the start of a wonderful adventure that should last for years. It should also be the start of a long relationship with the puppy's breeder. Remember that your breeder should be your best resource for puppy training and health information. She wants to hear how the puppy is settling into its new home. She wants to be informed of any health or temperament problems you encounter with your puppy, and she wants to hear about all the deliciously cute and wonderful things your puppy does. Send pictures, send reports - these are the best thanks you can give the responsible breeder who made it possible for you to find the dog of your dreams.

For a book to guide you for the life of your dog, *Complete Idiot's Guide to Getting and Owning a Dog* by Sheila Webster Boneham, Ph.D. (Alpha Books), Best General Reference Book 2002, DWAA Available from book and pet supply stores and on-line

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