

FINDING THE RIGHT BREEDER FOR YOU

This is an informative article designed to assist the person looking for an dog in finding an ethical breeder with quality breeding stock. Included here are questions that are constructed to help you make the most informed choice.

When in search of a new home to buy, most of us would probably spend weeks or even months touring open houses, browsing through the paper and reviewing listings with real estate agents who have practically become a part of the family. When in the market for a car, you sort through copies of Consumer Reports, stroll through car lots under the predatory gaze of a salesman, and venture a test drive or two. You give it a lot of thought. A lot. But will you spend that much time and effort before buying a puppy or dog that you may very well spend ten to fifteen years with? Even if you know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that a certain breed is the right breed for you, where do you begin to look? And once you have found the names of breeders to contact, how do you know that a breeder is responsible, ethical, and concerned with quality?

Breeders run the gamut, from innocently naive people who gush over their dear sweet 'Rover' tending to the dandelions in the backyard, to the operator of a puppy mill who fills up the pet shop cages, to the professional, conscientious breeder who devotes an enormous part of their lives to improving the breed. By asking some earnest questions, you can sort out the good from the bad. An ethical breeder should be very willing to answer your queries about their breeding stock and their breeding practices, because they take pride in what they are doing. And in all likelihood, they will also be asking you your fair share of questions, because it matters to them where their charges end up.

Yet even if all you want is a pet, does it really matter? It does if you want a healthy, mentally sound family companion. Because not all dogs are created equal. They are a product of both genetics and environment. The breeder controls the genetics end by studying pedigrees, educating themselves about potential health and temperament problems, formulating goals and having appropriate health tests done. Ethical breeders also handle young pups and continue socializing and training older pups and adults. They are involved with their breed, whether through conformation shows, performance events such as obedience and agility, or working their dogs in actual useful situations such as herding livestock. They know about their dogs' ancestors. They know their dogs' strengths and are also aware of their weaknesses. They are there for you as a source of information long after you have taken your pup home, kind of like a built-in trouble-shooting line. Conscientious breeders are mentors, friends, and guardians of their breed. They care.

Knowing where to look

Finding the right breeder may be a matter of luck or the product of a long and laborious search. In order to begin, you have to know where to look. In this age of computers and cell phones, there are a myriad of avenues to explore. National and local breed clubs can be contacted for a list of breeders. Also, there are sites on the Internet that maintain lists of breeders. Don't forget about attending shows. You can see a number of breeders all in one place, but don't be put off if they don't seem to have a lot of time to talk to you right then and there. They are trying to get their dog ready and sometimes they are even a little nervous. So by all means approach them, but ask for a name and phone number and if you aren't able to talk when the show is over you can call them at home.

It may be enormously tempting to contact only breeders within a couple hours drive of your home. After all, it is natural to want to be able to see the dogs you are inquiring about in person. By no means, however, should you limit yourself to such a small locale. A day spent driving to a far away kennel can be a very worthwhile investment. It may be a hard fact of life that there just aren't any desirable breeders or dogs right for you in your immediate area. If you do contact a breeder long distance, they should send you ample information on the breed and their dogs, as well as pictures, pedigrees, and health documentation on any individuals you request to know more about. And, wonder of wonders, there are video tapes - which are the next best thing to being there. Ask for a sample copy of a guarantee or contract and what the procedures are for payment and shipping. Many a whimpering pup or curious adult dog has been loaded onto a plane to fly through the friendly skies to find a warm, happy home at the other end.

Know what you want in a dog.

It is of utmost importance to know what kind of dog you are looking for. Do you want a dog that will be solely a companion for you and your kids, an obedience/agility/herding dog, a show prospect? Don't dribble stale promises of showing your future pup if you have little or no intention of doing so in hopes that you will get the better end of the deal. The most important things about a companion are health and character. There are countless numbers of puppies who have slight imperfections such as mismarkings or front toes that don't go precisely straight forward who are packed to the brim with love and devotion in their tiny hearts, plus some young adults who didn't quite develop into the stunning showstoppers that their breeders had hoped for.

What kind of energy level are you looking for? Do you need a dog with great athletic potential or is a professional couch potato more your speed? If you're in search of a performance dog that can sprint through an agility course in thirty seconds flat without dropping a bar or a frisbee dog that can sky, then you probably want a dog of, say, a slightly more energetic vein than the young family with limited time on their hands and an already demanding schedule.

If you are in search of a show dog then your first step should be to study the breed standard and find source books on structure and movement to help you train your own eye for faults. Since conformation showing is a highly subjective area, be aware that numbers of wins do not necessarily equate with quality. Sometimes obtaining a championship means hauling a dog to many, many shows to finish it. Ask the breeder what both the faults and qualities are of the parents. Sometimes they may not volunteer information as to the shortcomings of their breeding stock. This doesn't mean they're being deceptive, just that they love their dogs as any parent does their children and have selected their dogs for the qualities they admire in them. One more thing, trying to pick a potential champion from a litter of eight week old pups is a little like trying to determine a future Kentucky Derby winner at a thoroughbred auction of yearlings. It's a crapshoot. If it were possible for breeders to tell which pups would end up being champions, then their prices would be a lot higher than what they already are.

What questions should you ask?

How dedicated and knowledgeable is the breeder that you are talking to? Are their dogs basically what you are looking for? Keep in mind as you ask questions that everything is relative. What might be slightly reserved to one person may seem freakishly shy to another. What might be fine-boned to one breeder is just right to another. Do not fall into the trap of scooping up a pup from the first litter that you look into. Take your time. If at all possible, go **visit a kennel without your checkbook**. That way if anything seems at all strange to you you won't be tempted. Be aware that a bitch in whelp may be more lethargic or moody than normal and it is not uncommon for a dam with young pups to be more protective than usual. In short, due to hormones and lack of sleep, mom may not quite be herself. If you feel pressured at all - make a polite exit. Be prepared to wait for the right puppy or dog from the right breeder. Many long-time breeders with good reputations have a waiting list or require a deposit to gauge just how serious you, as a prospective buyer, are. They don't sell their dogs to just anyone. They would probably rather hang on to them indefinitely than risk placing them in an inappropriate situation which may lead to future disappointments or problems.

So what kinds of questions should you ask? You may find that during the natural course of a conversation many of these questions are answered or will be addressed in the written information you receive :

What is the temperament, energy level, trainability, level of protectiveness of your dogs?

These are perhaps the most important questions to ask. Individuals and lines do vary, so you may get slightly different answers from different breeders. But it is the overall character of a dog will be the major factor in determining how it fits into your family and lifestyle. Physical traits are often the first things that attract people to a certain breed, but as the saying goes -"Beauty is only skin deep". Many buyers make the mistake of selecting their dog solely because of sex, color and markings. There is much, much more to a dog than that. This is one of the areas in which an experienced breeder can be helpful. They can guide you towards a pup better suited to your needs and often times even suggest or select it for you. Procedures for picking a pup vary, so understand this fully ahead of time.

If both you and your spouse work full time or you want a companion or a compliment to your own breeding program with no surprises - then consider an older pup or an adult. Older pups and adults are more likely to have their character well developed and should not be overlooked provided the breeder has socialized, trained and housebroken them. Given a little time, they bond well and the horrors of housebreaking and couch stuffings strewn over the living room can be altogether avoided. It is a common myth that puppies over ten or twelve weeks of age will be unable to "bond". Dogs devote themselves wholly to whoever feeds them, cares for them and loves them back. If considering an older prospect, drill the owner or breeder about the personality, quirks and virtues both, of the dog. Ask how much training, housetime and socialization the pup or dog has had. If possible, pay a visit.

How many dogs do you have?

A breeder may have one dog or thirty. Dogs are addictive! The important thing is that they have time for each and every one and are able to provide them with proper care, exercise and individual attention. A breeder who is actively showing, training or working a portion of a kennel of fifteen dogs is more involved than the breeder who owns only two dogs and doesn't have the time for any of that. If you can visit the kennel personally, your eyes and nose will tell you if the dogs are well cared for.

How many litters do you have per year? How often do you breed your females?

A breeder who has no more than four litters a year (and that is quite a bit even for someone at home full-time with the dogs) will be able to better pair you to the right dog or puppy. Generally, females should never be bred more often than once a year, if even that much. You, as a buyer, should be more concerned with quality than quantity and immediate availability. If you find a breeder who has a limited number of litters, but you feel most comfortable and trusting of that breeder, you are far better off to wait for the right puppy than to hope you get a decent one out of a litter that you are settling for from a questionable breeder.

What are the personalities of the parents?

Some breeders do Puppy Aptitude Testing which may or may not be a reliable means of measuring a pup's potential. Pups have good days and bad ones. Knowing the personality of the parents and immediate relatives is a much better gauge of how a pup is likely to turn out. Keep in mind, though, that there may be a range of personalities even within a single litter, from submissive to dominant, from laid-back to wired. The breeder who observes the litter regularly will have some idea of the differences, however, eight week old pups have far from developed their complete personalities. Furthermore, the environment that you provide, complete with confidence building experiences such as training and socialization and the discipline that you do or don't enforce, will mold your dog into either a wild heathen or a proper citizen. Avoid parents that are overly protective, very shy, hyperkinetic or extreme in any way.

What physical/genetic defects is this breed prone to? Do you screen the parents or pups?

Some defects are genetic, which means they can be passed from parent to offspring. Genetic defects include eye problems, hip dysplasia, heart defects, blood disorders, epilepsy, reproductive problems, bad bites, missing teeth and poor temperament. Parents should at least have an OFA rating on their hips and have had their eyes examined (CERF) by a veterinary ophthalmologist who is board certified. Some breeders even have eye exams done on entire litters. If you are interested in breeding at some point in time, ask if there is any incidence of hereditary defects in the lines of the dog or pup you are interested in. A breeder who is ignorant of any problems within the breed or severely downplays their significance is definitely one to avoid.

What activities are you involved in with your dogs?

Titles do not necessarily make the dog, but they do give you some indication of what they are capable of and how dedicated the breeder is to spending time with their dogs. If you want a show dog, then find a breeder who actively shows and knows the structural faults of their dogs as well as their good points and will explain these to you. Remember that if you are searching for something more than just a companion, that it is not unreasonable for you to display your seriousness by attending many shows beforehand, becoming involved in a club and talking/visiting with the breeder numerous times before being taken seriously. Don't be turned off by a breeder who is not immediately willing to sell you the potentially best pup in the litter just because you think you want to show. Breeders realize the time and dedication it takes to achieve goals and titles. They have been disappointed by well-intentioned persons more than you realize. Gathering knowledge so you can talk with them intelligently and having the patience to wait for the right litter are just some of the ways that you can prove your worth to them.

Do you offer pets on a spay/neuter basis? How do you differentiate between show and pet quality?

Most major registries now provide the breeder with the opportunity to check a "Not for breeding" box. This gives them a means to urge you to have your pet spayed or neutered and prevent accidental litters. Some breeders will even hold papers until you have provided proof from your veterinarian of alteration. If this is the case, just be sure that in the written contract it states when you will receive your papers. Avoid the breeder who sells all their pups as breedable. This shows a lack of responsibility. Breeding should be left to those who are adamantly dedicated to the breed, are continuously learning about it, and have the time to devote to properly raising a litter and screening homes.

What kind of written guarantee do you provide?

Feel free to ask for a sample copy of a guarantee. These usually cover health defects, such as hip and eye problems, bites, dentition and reproductive problems on breeding quality animals. Temperament and working ability may or may not be included, as these may be affected by environment, training, and socialization. Some breeders may specify just what your responsibilities are. These usually include proper care, nutrition, socialization, training, etc. and for certain puppies that you will make a concerted effort to show them. Routinely, breeding quality dogs are sold with the stipulation that you will have the dog's hips and eyes checked before breeding. A portion of breeders only sell dogs on co-ownership terms. This just gives breeders a means of ensuring that you have taken all the proper steps before breeding, so don't let this scare you away. Just make sure that you understand all the terms of the contract. Besides, if you are a newcomer to the world of purebred dogs, it will give you some of the guidance and wisdom of experience that you need. Needless to say, don't even bother continuing with the conversation if the breeder doesn't have a written guarantee. Yes, every puppy is a gamble. Breeders, too, have had their share of disappointments. But if you're putting up a small nest egg, then you should have some kind of means of recouping your money if something goes awry. If your dog does end up with a genetic health problem (and these things sometimes happen despite great efforts to avoid them), then the guarantee should offer part or all of your money back or a replacement puppy.

How many years have you had this breed?

It should be pointed out that years of experience don't guarantee anything. There are plenty of unscrupulous breeders who have racked up a number of years in the game. Some people are quick learners and are very involved from the start. But the more years in the dog world, the more experiences they are likely to have had with the breed. They know what to expect and in which homes their dogs do best. Being highly opinionated doesn't mean knowledgeable, either. Use your own intuition to judge whether the breeder you are talking to is educated, accomplished and helpful.

What are the goals of your breeding program?

This is a question for which many aimless breeders may not have an answer. Breeders in it for the long run have a goal. Those without one will be inconsistent in the dogs they produce. Responses that address such things as structure, movement, working ability, intelligence, etc. will tell you how much thought the breeder has given to what they are doing. Progress requires a plan.

All of these questions can be applied to any breed. They are meant to guide you towards a responsible breeder who has done their homework. It will also help steer you away from irresponsible breeders who do not deserve to be monetarily rewarded for sloppy breeding practices. Irresponsible breeders feed off ignorance, reluctance to ask questions, and impulsivity. Having a purebred dog, breeding for a number of years, running advertisements and even finishing championships or other titles do not in and of themselves signify quality. Take time to find a breeder who maintains high ethics.

The price of a puppy can vary greatly. It is inadvisable to make cost your sole criteria of selection. A high price in and of itself is not necessarily a reliable indicator of quality, though. Yet many people who have gone for the bargain deal, have paid in vet bills and headaches. Talk to as many breeders as possible. Rule out those you feel uncomfortable about or who don't have the right kind of dog for you. Weigh all things. Be aware of what you need in a dog. The right dog, from the right breeder, will come along in good time and give you many, many happy years of unconditional love and unending loyalty.

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