

So You Want To Buy A Dog?

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You and all the members of your family decided on the correct breed of dog for your lifestyle. Everyone in the family agrees that they want the dog and will share in the responsibility of caring for it. Money is set aside for veterinary costs associated with routine care and emergencies. You know about health and behavior problems that your breed is prone to, and you are dedicated to finding a healthy puppy that will live to a ripe old age. You have read the breed standard and are familiar with your breed's normal characteristics, sizes, weights, and colors. (If you don't know what I mean by the "breed standard," then you haven't done enough homework yet!) Since you live in a rural area, there aren't any local "breeders" that you would consider going to. Sure, Bubba down the road breeds Labs and has done so for many years, but he scratches his head and looks confused when you mention the words hip dysplasia and progressive retinal atrophy. Bubba keeps his dogs in muddy pens in the yard, and many of them have gone their entire lifetime without visiting the vet. Also, Mrs. Jones bought a Lab from Bubba a few years ago, and now the poor dog has seizures. Buying locally is clearly not an option.

You open up the latest issue of Dog World and find that there are no less than 27 different breeders listed for your chosen breed! How do you sort out who is a "Bubba" from who is legitimate?

Not all advertisements are created equal. A large ad with glossy photos may be appealing but carry no real information. Alternately, a short classified ad with strange lingo such as OFA or CERF may be loaded with all the right stuff. Here is my guide to decoding dog lingo. This information can be used to sort out ads, interview breeders, and assist you in finding a dog or puppy that comes from a reputable source.

What to Avoid:

Puppies Always Available! - Stay away from these folks! They just want to make money and don't really care about their dogs. A real breeder breeds to improve the breed and not to have a steady cash flow. Real breeders rarely have more than a couple litters per year, and put more money into caring for and raising the pups than they could ever make in sales.

We Ship Anywhere! - These are the same as the "puppies always available" folks. Breeders that put time and love into their puppies would never mail them off to an unknown situation in exchange for a check.

Extra-Large or Extra-Small - This is where your knowledge of the breed standard comes in. Dogs that are oversized or very tiny for their breed are more prone to health problems. Breeding for extremes is not a sound practice, and responsible breeders do not select for these traits.

Rare Colors - Again, know your breed standard. Some "rare" colors are legitimate, whereas other (e.g. white Dobermans) are listed in the standard as a disqualification because they are linked to certain health problems. Reputable breeders do not select for disqualifying colors (and health problems) because they want something different or exotic to sell.

No Papers - Unregistered dogs, even if they are representative of the breed, should never be bred. The biggest reason for this is that the medical history of the dog's ancestors cannot be traced. Genetic diseases may show up in the puppies because the unregistered parent is a carrier, but no one knew because there was no pedigree to research. There is also no guarantee that the puppies are actually purebred.

What Doesn't Mean Anything:

Health Checked - Who checked the health of these puppies? The vet? The breeder? The 16-year old who works the cash register? Anyone at all? Also, a puppy that looks perfectly fine at 8 weeks old may develop crippling hip dysplasia just a few months later.

Written Guarantee - The guarantee is only as good as the person it comes from. Some agreements (such as those that come from pet stores) only guarantee the puppy for 48 hours. Others simply state the puppy had its first shots, but make no provision for return or exchange if something is found to be wrong the next day. Another bad deal is that if the dog ever develops hip dysplasia (or cataracts or seizures or whatever), then you will receive another puppy of the same or similar breeding. So you will have two sick dogs to take care of instead of one!

AKC Registered - This should be a given (except for rare breeds that the AKC doesn't register). Anyone who lists AKC registration as their only selling point wants you to think that AKC papers guarantee something special. In reality, any idiot can throw together two badly bred dogs to produce sickly "AKC" puppies. The AKC relies on breeder honesty to register litters, so the puppies may not be purebred anyway.

What May Be Good:

Parents OFA - OFA stands for the Orthopedic Foundation for Animals, which certifies hips, elbows, etc. as free or affected with diseases such as hip dysplasia, elbow dysplasia, etc. There are several grades for hips, but the dog will only be assigned a number if the hips pass as fair, good, or excellent. Fair hips are just that - not great, just fair. A dog that scores as a fair at 2 years old (the minimum age) may worsen and develop hip dysplasia later on. The fact that a breeder OFA's his or her dogs is a good sign, but be sure to ask what the rating of both parents is. Ideally, both parents should be good or excellent.

Parents PennHIP - PennHIP is another hip registry, but unlike OFA, they do not assign a rating. PennHip scores dogs based on the laxity (looseness) of the hip joint and assigns a percentile based how that dog compares to others in its breed. Ideally, both parents should score 0.3 or less for each hip, or be in the 75th percentile or higher for their breed.

Parents CERF - CERF stands for the Canine Eye Registration Foundation, which screens breeding stock for heritable eye diseases. Dogs need to be screened yearly, so make sure both the sire and the dam are up-to-date.

Health and Temperament Guarantee - Like I stated earlier, a guarantee is only as good as the breeder it comes from. Some good things to look for are a breeder who stipulates that the dog be returned to him or her if you are unable to care for it in the future, a breeder who will refund a significant portion of the purchase price if the dog develops hereditary health problems in its lifetime, a breeder who requires you to take the dog to obedience classes, and a breeder who requires that all puppies sold as pets be spayed or neutered. Breeders who give you a meaningful guarantee are concerned about the health and temperament of the puppies that they produce, and want to be sure that their puppy doesn't end up in the shelter if the home doesn't work out.

Show Quality - Breeders who breed for show generally have puppies that are good Examples of the breed, and screen for hereditary problems. Even if you are not interested in a show dog, not every puppy in the litter is a future champion. The advantage of buying from a show breeder is that the pet quality puppies generally come from excellent bloodlines, so the health and temperament screenings are there. The puppy may be designated as pet quality because of a minor fault such as an incorrect bite, but otherwise is a wonderful example of the breed. Pet quality puppies are generally sold for much less than their show littermates, but you still have the advantage of a thoughtfully planned breeding. However, some unsavory characters may point to champions several generations back and call the puppies show quality. Even breeding a beautiful champion to a miserable dog may not produce greatness, so carefully investigate exactly what this breeder's definition of "show quality" is.

Home Raised - This indicates that the puppies were raised in a house and not a kennel. Although not all kennel dogs turn out to be shy and un-socialized, the advantage of home-reared pups is that constant contact with humans prepares these pups better for life with a family.

Working Lines - This is similar to "show quality." Breeders who compete with their dogs in activities appropriate for the breed are generally serious about producing good examples. Again, carefully research what the breeder's definition of "working" is, because one great dog several generations back has little impact on your puppy.

Member of Parent Club - In general, breeders who join the parent club for their breed are serious about it. The parent club sets the breed standard and generally makes the important decisions about that breed. "Bubbas" who breed dogs just to make money don't really care about much organized activities, and usually won't put in the effort to join and go to meetings. However, the standards for joining a breed club vary, so membership may be as simple as sending a check. Membership in a parent club does not guarantee a good breeder, but it may indicate a level of dedication.

What to Look For:

Puppies Available Occasionally - As I stated earlier, reputable breeders rarely have more than a couple of litters each year.

References Available - A breeder who will give you a list of owners who he or she sold the last litter of puppies to probably isn't hiding anything. Take the list and actually call everyone to verify that the breeder is honest and fair.

References and/or Home Visit Required - A breeder that requires references from you or checks your home before selling you a puppy is serious about sending her puppies to a good place. After all, the breeder has put a lot into these puppies, and wants to be sure they will be well cared for!

Parents Health Screened - A breeder who makes sure both parents are clear of genetic disease before breeding them is someone you want to get a puppy from. When you do your breed research, make a list of common genetic diseases that your breed suffers from, and make sure that both parents have passed the screening tests.

Pet Quality Puppies Sold on Limited Registration - A limited registration means that although the pup is AKC registered, no offspring from this dog can be registered. This ensures that pups that are sold as pets are not used for breeding. A good breeder will do this to prevent people from misrepresenting their intentions when purchasing pet puppies.

Puppies Already Spayed or Neutered - A breeder who does this has a high level of dedication to preventing unwanted litters and should be applauded!

Rescue Dogs Available - A breeder who rescues dogs from bad situations and places them in good homes cares about the breed above and beyond his or her own puppies. This sort of breeder has the highest level of dedication to the breed, because rescue is often a difficult job. Although this person may not have puppies on a regular basis, he or she can help you find the perfect rescue dog for you and your family.