

So What Should I Expect From A Responsible Breeder? ☺

Puppy farmers and backyard breeders

In the selling of puppies of any breed there are many issues to consider in an effort to gain a healthy well-adjusted dog with which you can hopefully share a long happy life. Such issues include matching the right type of dog with your expectations and lifestyle, health issues (many conditions are not easily apparent in puppies but can cause long lasting, painful and expensive health problems), inbred temperament, early puppy socialisation, and post sale advice and support from the breeder to you as a buyer.

In looking at possible options for buying your puppy you will come across a wide range of possible opportunities for making your purchase. Whilst there are no hard and fast rules about what makes the best place to buy a puppy, here are some useful guidelines outlining issues worth considering.

One of the problems in identifying a good breeder is that registration of breeders or length of time they have been breeding (including some who may have been breeding for 15 years or more) does not guarantee quality, health, knowledge or ethics.

Even with new stringent rules in place in many States of Victoria, seeking out places which have puppies available you will no doubt come across what are often referred to as Puppy Farms / Puppy Mills and Backyard breeders.

The main purpose of a *Puppy Farm* is to mass-produce puppies to meet demand of the pet market. The primary motivation is a commercial one; that is to make money for the puppy breeder. Characteristics of such operations include:

Whilst new legislation may make it hard for large scale puppy farming operations to continue many may continue to find ways to breed with only a handful of dogs to continue to make money, with all the same problems and issues occurring due to their motivation and lack of care and attention to the dogs under their care. Animals are often kept in substandard or unsuitable conditions. Even where conditions are good or acceptable, usually not enough time and attention is spent individually with adult dogs or their puppies to satisfactorily socialise them with little thought given to health or temperament issues including faults that might pass from generation to generation. Many do not health screen parents because such tests are expensive and the goal is to make as much profit from each litter as possible.

Puppy Farmers also often breed continuously (another reason for the lack of proper socialisation and care given to the upbringing of each litter). Females are bred from each time they come into season with little regard for their health or mental wellbeing.

The possible implications of buying from such a breeder is obvious. Whilst you may end up with no obvious problems at all there are numerous stories of people having to pay huge amounts of money in vet bills, or to deal with temperament problems, or having to suffer the anguish of watching your pet in pain or suffering from anxiety or extreme nervousness. The not so obvious implication is that buying from such a place, no matter how well meaning your reason might be (such as saving at least one puppy from a bad start to life), means that you are financially contributing to the continuation of such operations and the conditions in which the dogs they keep live and the continuation of genetic based problems within dogs.

Good breeders do not require extravagant kennel complexes and a number of dogs. Nor does the term backyard breeder generically refer to anyone who owns only one or two dogs or houses a small number of dogs within their own backyard. There are many respected and really ethical breeders who operate within the confines of a normal backyard and breed from only one or two dogs.

Backyard breeders are people who breed because it's easy to do so rather than a knowledge and desire to seek to improve their breed. They think it's a nice thing to do because they have a nice dog or dogs, or they would like a puppy to keep from their much-loved pet, or they just think it would be good to breed dogs for others to have. The mistakes they make are usually from ignorance rather than in any way being malicious, but the problems they can cause for puppy buyers can be just as devastating as can arise from Puppy Farms.

BB's often don't undertake health screening of the parents, and even if they do this they lack the knowledge of recessive genetic genes which can be just as important in determining the chance of puppies inheriting genetic health or temperament problems as many problems frequently skip a generation or two. (Most ethical breeders have stock which have generations of health tested dogs behind them in their pedigree and also keep and analyse detailed information on other dogs within the same breeding lines such as litter brothers, sisters and outcomes of other similar litters from similar breeding lines.)

Most do not undertake temperament testing of any eventual puppies or implement socialisation processes for such puppies. Such breeders often unwittingly contribute to the ongoing problem of overpopulation, which sees so many dogs abandoned or surrendered to shelters around the country.

Neither Backyard Breeders or Puppy Farmers usually have the knowledge or take the time to address the issues of breed standards (breeding for the betterment of the breed) and specifically making decisions on what dog might be best to mate with which bitch considering in detail strengths and weaknesses of each dog themselves and also with regards to the breeding lines from which each dog comes.

'Both Parents On Show' is often used as a marketing line when advertising puppies for sale when in fact most responsible breeders will not immediately look to the male dog in their own yard to put over their own female. The best dog available for their bitch may in fact be interstate or even overseas despite the added expense that this brings for the breeder. Whilst it is not necessarily a pointer to irresponsible breeding (at various times any breeder may choose to put two of their own dogs together for specific well considered reasons - you can always ask breeders why they have made this choice and they should be happy to discuss this with you) the fact that both parents are owned by the puppy seller is at the very least an indication that further questions need to be asked to ensure that the breeder in question is not in fact breeding simply for commercial gain or taking the simplest route to breed puppies.

Another trap can be the use of the term *'registered breeder'*. Unfortunately, this term can mean very little in terms of quality assurance in relation to the issues raised in this document. This is because there are currently no foolproof requirements (although codes of ethics and and complex legislations that do exist for members of state based canine councils to which *'registered breeders'* must belong). Just about anyone can still pay the appropriate fees to gain a breeding prefix (the kennel name which goes at the beginning of any registered dogs name) and canine association membership.

This does not mean that you should not look for breeders that you come in contact with to be registered with their state canine council. Certainly being a registered breeder is an important attribute which you should definitely seek out as the starting point, however you would do well to look beyond this, once you have ascertained that such registration does exist, to seek further and much more detailed information about a breeders knowledge, breeding ethics and ways of operating.

Pet stores

The puppy that you see forlornly looking at you from a pet shop window can look totally adorable. However no ethical breeder will provide pet stores with puppies because a responsible breeder insists on knowing exactly who their puppies are going to, and that such

homes are likely to be suitable ones. They want to be able to assist with any advice or information should the new owners require it.

Therefore where pet shops are still allowed to sell puppies (thankfully severely limited now) pet shops usually gain their animals from Puppy Farms or from Backyard breeders. Even though Pet Stores might offer a 24-hour guarantee that the pets they are selling are healthy many genetic problems do not surface for many months or years, and 24-hour guarantees also do not protect buyers with regards to genetic temperament problems. Many puppies in pet stores have also lacked conditions that encourage them to learn good toileting habits and thus many puppies from pet stores prove hard to housetrain. Most are contributing to the continuation of horrific conditions at puppy farms by providing an ongoing income stream for puppy farmers.

I'm ready for a puppy now

Unfortunately many people find themselves seeking a pet at the very time they feel ready to obtain one and are disappointed if one is not readily available to them immediately. Because of the fact that many responsible breeders put considerable money into breeding their dogs (rather than seeking to gain income from it) and find it important to spend significant time and effort whelping and raising/socialising puppies, you will find that most only breed once (maybe less) or at most a few times a year.

Many such breeders have waiting lists of people wanting a dog from them for good reason.

Consider that the dog that you obtain is going to share its life with you for many years (in most cases a decade or more). It makes sense to do your homework, work out what type of dog is right for you, research breeders and potentially place yourself on waiting lists of a breeder or breeders that you feel are suitable.

An alternative to longer waiting times may be to consider rescuing a dog from a shelter or from one of the many rescue organisations that provide safe care for dogs in care who often have become homeless through no fault of their own; and who face an uncertain future if suitable homes cannot be found.

No matter what, always consider that buying a dog should never be an impulse decision and should be a commitment for the life of the pet.

What you might expect from a responsible breeder.

Ethical breeders consider themselves responsible for any puppies that they bring into the world. They should be willing and able to provide you with a lot of information about the breed, the pedigree of the litter they are selling and other dogs from within similar lines, and care and training advice. Many will offer some sort of health guarantee. They should also be willing to supply post sale support to answer any questions you might have and assist with any problems or concerns.

A responsible breeder's prime concern is breeding for the betterment of the breed, with breed standard health and temperament issues of primary concern. A responsible breeder does not breed for specific coat or eye color to satisfy the demands of a pet market. Females will not be bred from until they reach maturity (females have seasons and can have puppies well before an age when the dog is old enough physically or emotionally for breeding to not have a negative impact). Ethical breeders will also not breed from the same bitch's season after consecutive season.

Genetic health problems vary from breed to breed so it is a good idea to equip yourself with some knowledge of what specific problems exist in the breed that you are looking to purchase (breed clubs are often a good source of such information).

Ethical / responsible breeders should be willing to openly discuss with you how they are dealing with any health issues identified in their breed, supply results of any health tests undertaken on their breeding stock and supply information as to whether any such problems have been previously identified within the breeding lines that they use in their breeding program and whether test results from other relatives especially grandparents of prospective litters have been undertaken.

A good breeder will be just as happy to discuss the downsides of their breed as the upsides (and all breeds have both ☺). They will also often 'screen' prospective buyers to see if they feel that a puppy of their particular breed will be well suited to this home. They will not want their puppies running the risk of being dumped just because the purchase was an impulsive one and the owners really hadn't considered what they were getting themselves in for.

Many such breeders will ask as a condition of sale that should it become necessary for any reason that you give up your pet that they have first right to take it back or at the very least to assist in re-homing it if at all possible.

Responsible breeders will not make puppies available to leave their dam until they are at least eight weeks of age. In some less resilient breeds this age may be later such as twelve weeks of age. This is to allow adequate time for puppies to learn valuable skills and socialisation from their dam and littermates as well as to be exposed to other important socialisation techniques from the breeder. A breeder should be able to discuss with you what socialisation techniques they employ and the reasons for using such techniques.

Another useful point to know and understand is that breeders who are breeding for a specific purpose such as showing or as competition working dogs will usually not make available puppies until they have reached an age when the breeder can accurately assess the puppies temperament and physical structure. At this time they may decide which puppies demonstrate such exceptional qualities that they should be considered for show or working homes and which ones might be made available to pet homes.

There are no problems with puppies chosen as pets from such processes; usually a breeder considers only one or two puppies from any litter exceptional enough to breed on with and others may be excluded from this by the breeder simply due to colour markings, the way the dog holds its tail, or moves, or how it places its feet when standing. Only the very best is usually chosen to be used for showing as such dogs do so promoting a breeders name and breeding prefix.

It is not unusual for breeders to offer purebred puppies for sale as pets registered on a limited breed register rather than full registration as such pet puppies are sold as pets and not for show or breeding purposes. It is also not unusual for breeders to sell pet puppies on the condition that they will be neutered once they have reached an acceptable age for this to occur. Both of these conditions are in the best interests of the puppies themselves.

Some questions to ask

Asking the right questions can often ascertain a lot about a breeder. This is not an exhaustive list but here are a few suggested questions that might be useful in talking to breeders that you make contact with:

What is the breeders reason for breeding planned upcoming litters? On what basis have they matched the sire and dam and what do they hope to achieve from such litters in terms of quality, confirmation and temperament?

How many litters does the breeder have each year? (Good breeding practices are expensive and hugely time consuming and responsible breeders will not breed large numbers of litters each year). What was the purpose in having this litter and why were the sire and dam chosen?

What can the breeder tell you or supply to you about the breed characteristics?

What health screenings have been done on litter's parents (and is documentation available to you that demonstrates results of such tests)? What health issues if any exist further back in the pedigree of this litter or within dogs of similar lines?

Ask about the temperament of parents and other dogs within the same lines as this litter?

What is the breeders' process in socialising puppies?

What guarantee do they offer? What is their attitude to post sale support?

Do they restrict breeding rights to puppies sold as pets?

Further Information

There is a huge amount of information on various breeds available on the internet and through various breed clubs. As with most things the more informed you can be on any subject the better chances you have of getting the best outcome.



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