

# "HOW MUCH IS THAT DOGGY IN THE WINDOW?"

A PRIMER FOR NEW OR FIRST TIME PUPPY BUYERS.

by Dawne Deeley

## "SO YOU BREED DOGS? THAT SOUNDS LIKE A LOT OF FUN – AND YOU PROBABLY MAKE A FORTUNE!"

It's not often I get to brag about my love for dogs, but if I bring up the topic of breeding, generally the reactions are much the same. Odds are, if you're a first time puppy purchaser you might not be aware of everything that goes on 'behind the scenes' at an established kennel - but the truth is, when done properly dog breeding is hard work. Hours are spent looking at prospective mates; health clearances must be checked and contract agreements hammered out. Weeks – or months – may pass before your bitch comes in season; at that point, timing is everything, especially if you're dealing with a 'long distance love affair'. Now we hold our breath for the next two months; there are no guarantees every breeding 'takes', and sometimes we're sent back to the drawing board. If everything goes well, we cross our fingers until the litter is safely whelped. Most females (referred to in dog breeding parlance as 'bitches') take to the job easily and readily, but it's also at that point that a breeder's life of sleepless nights is exchanged for insanely busy days. Yet for all that, it's a task we enjoy. A good breeder never tires of watching puppies grow and develop, and it is impossible to measure the pride we feel when they mature into sound, healthy adults that represent us in the best possible light. Nonetheless, a breeder's job doesn't end with a signature on a dotted line. Long established bloodlines reflect generations of persistence, consistency – and at times, heartbreak. I don't sell a puppy to everyone that sends an email, makes a phone call or pays me a visit. The perfect buyer might come along when I have nothing to offer, and the ones who \*think\* they're candidates will often be told my breed isn't appropriate for their current lifestyle. What follows are a few of the questions most commonly asked – and the answers one will hear if one comes to a breeder like me.

## "EVERYONE KNOWS MIXED-BREED DOGS ARE HEALTHIER THAN PUREBREDS – AREN'T THEY?"

Every breed has a genetic skeleton in the closet – even if it's relatively unimportant or seldom seen. Breed specific health issues run the gamut from seasonal allergies to life-shortening disorders, so it pays to familiarise yourself with those conditions \*BEFORE\* you hit the investigative trail. Talk to as many owners as you can; veterinarians too. National breed clubs (find them at [www.ckc.ca](http://www.ckc.ca)) can provide you with much 'ground floor' information, and in many cases will have strict breeding protocols that their members must adhere to. Learn what the relevant health test names mean, and when you \*DO\* visit a litter, ask to see proof of their

completion. Breeders who have been successful in reducing or eliminating problematic issues are proud to share their efforts, and not ashamed to describe the processes they undertook to get the job done. Odds are you'll be surprised at how healthy purebred dogs are. This doesn't mean a mixed-breed dog can't – or won't – live a long and happy life, but unless you know the genetic makeup of the parents, the risk is always there for genetic concerns to double up. No tests? No guarantees!

### **"WHY DO PUREBRED DOGS COST SO MUCH?"**

One of the best things about buying a purebred dog is knowing the baby you brought home will grow up to look like the one you fell in love with on the street, in the magazines, or at the shows. Breed 'type' is a physical template we all strive to perfect. In general, the price of a purebred dog can run anywhere from \$500 to \$2,500. It seems like a lot – and it is – but in the long run you're getting a bargain. The costs of putting a well-planned litter on the ground aren't obvious, but they're substantial. Start with health tests on both parents, add stud fees, transport costs for the stud dog or shipping costs for the dam; toss in pre-natal health care, registrations for the litter AND the individual dogs, and it adds up faster than you can say 'housebreaking'. This is assuming everything goes as planned; factor in an unexpected C-section, repeat breeding or vet-performed inseminations, and any semblance of profit becomes wishful thinking. At the end of the day, a breeder's bank account is rarely in the black. The satisfaction we get isn't from the money we may (or, more likely, may not) make, but from seeing sturdy, sound representatives of the breeds we love, placed in adoring, responsible homes. If you're uncomfortable with the price being asked for your puppy, think of all those expensive precautions as a form of insurance...and remember the effort the breeder went through the next time you see a 'no questions asked' newspaper ad!

### **"I WANT MY PET TO BE THE BEST!! ONLY 'PICK OF THE LITTER' FOR ME."**

I've often spoken to prospective owners who won't settle for anything less than 'pick of the litter', but aren't exactly sure what they're asking for and are subsequently offended when I've turned them down. The goal of many breeders is to produce "The One" – that special dog who will bring home top awards in a specific discipline, then hopefully go on to great things in the whelping box. It can years, if not decades, to bring that perfect combination of beauty, brains and health together, and understandably most breeders will want to keep that puppy for themselves. Should you find yourself being offered a 'pet' puppy, don't think of it as an insult or put-down, either to you or the dog. Show standards describe the perfect specimen, and many have disqualifications that are nothing more than cosmetic – so while a blue-eyed Samoyed or oversized Shetland Sheepdog can't have a career as a runway star, it won't stand in the way of being a perfect family companion.

## **"I DON'T WANT OR NEED PAPERS FOR MY DOG – WHY ARE THEY SO IMPORTANT?"**

Registration papers are like a birth certificate; they tell you who your dog is, who his parents are, and where he comes from. Whether they're issued by the CKC, AKC or even from abroad, your certified pedigree gives you everything you might want to know. You can be assured your pet is a purebred specimen, whose parents were also purebreds, and are recognised by their respective registries as such. Many countries also indicate various health clearances and titles acquired by your dogs' forebears. It's fun to investigate the bloodlines of your dog; think of it as a family tree! However, be wary of different companies who claim to register cross-breds, hybrids or 'designer dogs', and know that in Canada it is against the law to charge extra for this paperwork.

## **"I DON'T WANT JUST 'ANY' BREED – WOULD A RARE BREED FIT MY LIFESTYLE?"**

While it's exciting to think you could be the only one on the block to own something 'different', it pays to take a hard look at the work ethic and heritage of these unique and special canines. Some breeds are rare because their fanciers want to keep them that way. It's not elitism; in most cases this stems from a desire to protect their historical integrity, and not have them 'toned down' to fit the whims of urban society. However, some of our more recognisable varieties have 'kissin' cousins' that are far less common, but still possess similar temperaments and/or physical features. If you're bowled over by a Beagle, try checking the sturdy Drever. Covet a Corgi? A Swedish Vallhund might be for you. 'Rare' doesn't always mean 'incompatible', and besides, the research is fun.

## **"I TALKED TO A BREEDER, AND THEY TOLD ME I HAVE TO GO ON A WAITING LIST. DOES THIS USUALLY HAPPEN?"**

Chances are, the best breeders will have waiting lists; how long they are depends on a myriad of factors. If you decide on a less common variety with a history for producing low-number litters, you could be in for a dry spell. In that case breeders will generally ask for deposits to reserve your 'place', so if you're not comfortable with this it will be up to you to decide if you're willing to wait things out. Rather than looking at this as a setback, think of it as a positive opportunity to get to know your breeder, and to better familiarise yourself with the breed you've chosen. Hit some dog shows, visit obedience classes, join a local kennel club and be prepared to experience a whole new world!

## **"WHAT IF I WANT TO BREED MY DOG LATER?"**

Recouping purchase costs, watching the miracle of birth, playing with puppies, sharing the love with your friends – breeders hear all these reasons and more. This often becomes a sticking

point, and for good reason. Are you prepared to take proper pre-and-post natal care of a bitch? Can you afford the possibility that something might go wrong at whelping time – and could you recognise it if it did? Are you sure all the puppies will have good homes? And have those potential owners put a firm commitment towards actually taking a youngster? What will you do and how will you feel if one of your 'breeding' turns up missing, ends up in a shelter, or suffers from a disease or genetic condition you didn't see coming? These reasons and more will be the answer you'll get to this question. Most breeders will sell dogs on what is called a 'non-breeding' contract, and violation of this agreement can become a legal and logistical nightmare. It's best for all concerned if you address this right up front; be HONEST and your breeder will be too. If joining our ranks is what you really want, then be prepared to be coached, mentored and advised. It's a long and steep learning curve, but great breeders are generally good teachers – so expect them to tell you straight up what they expect from a student.

### **"QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS...WHY ALL THE QUESTIONS?"**

If you think you're getting the 'Third Degree' from the breeders you visit – you're probably right. For every question you have, it's very likely we'll have two. We're not trying to be difficult; we're just being sure our breed is the right one for your needs and lifestyle. A Border Collie may not be the best choice for apartment living, and even the most energetic Pug would be in trouble with a marathon runner! A poor decision now makes everyone unhappy later, and unfortunately it's usually the dog that suffers most. So, when you're advised to fence that yard if you want to keep your Saluki contained, or sexually alter your pet to keep them healthy and prevent unwanted 'accidents', remember this is done out of concern for everyone's well-being and safety.

### **"WHAT HAPPENS IF I CAN'T KEEP THE DOG?"**

In a perfect world all dogs would live long, happy lives and pass away peacefully in their owners homes; the reality is Life isn't like that. Divorce, death, job transfers, a change in housing – the reasons people give up dogs are many, and often heartbreaking. Heaven forbid, but should you find yourself in a no-option position regarding your dog, this is where a solid relationship with your breeder will REALLY pay off. For us, the thought of our 'children' ending up abandoned, sold, given away or left in a shelter is our worst nightmare – I know it's mine. Don't be ashamed or embarrassed to ask their advice or assistance. A great breeder doesn't turn his or her back on you when you walk out their door. Their responsibility to the animals they bring into this world lasts a lifetime, and they'll be your first line of defence if you need help.

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