

How to Pick a Breeder of a Prospective Service Dog

By Julia Markham, RPh

Once you have decided on a breed and have a trainer lined up, the next step is to find a breeder. It's important to remember to take your time to find the right breeder with the appropriate lines. Do not be surprised if you have to wait for your puppy. Good breeders generally have waiting lists before they breed and they don't breed often.

You can start by checking out your local kennel clubs, obedience clubs, breed clubs, specialties or breed-related forums. It is always nice to go to dog events in your area, such as AKC conformation events, obedience events, agility events, and other dog-related activities. You can often meet with breeders at these events, see how well their dogs work and how they handle crowds and other dogs. Be sure to include your trainer in this process. Ask questions about what their litters have gone on to do. Any therapy dog work or service dog work in the line is optimal. But lines that work in other non-guardian or non-protection roles are also a good choice. It implies intelligence and a work ethic.

If you are not new to the breed, the line, the breeder, or the process of training a dog for a job, you have a head start. If you are new to these things, there are some points you should probably research before putting down a deposit on a future puppy. Once you have narrowed your list of breeders down to a short list, it is time to prepare questions about their line and how they raise their litters and at what age they anticipate sending your prospect home with you. You will probably be inclined to ask these questions over time as you get to know a prospective breeder better. Start by expressing an interest in their line. By the time you put your name down for a puppy, these are the things you should have learned about the breeder over time.

- Ask about how many litters they have a year. It is always a positive sign if the litter is raised in the home. If they are producing more than 2 to 4 litters a year, you may want to check out the conditions puppies are raised in before pursuing any further. You may ask to visit a current litter to get a feel for those conditions.
- Find out how they will assist with the puppy selection process. A breeder's diary is often helpful.
- Ask whether they will allow an outside source to evaluate and temperament-test the puppies.
- Ask to see a copy of their contract for review. They may have several variations of their contract. For instance, if a pup has too much color for the breed standard they may include a clause that requires you to alter your dog. They may also include a clause about at what age to have the dog altered. Read the details on their return policy. They may give you 3 days to a week to have the dog vetted by a veterinarian of your choice, or to better evaluate the dog in your home, with a guarantee of a full refund or replacement

puppy from a future litter. Past that time period, they may have a return policy that gives you up to a year to return your puppy for a partial refund. Most reputable breeders have a clause that you may return the dog after 1 year of age with no refund at any time during the life of the dog.

- Ask for recommendations from owners who have gotten puppies from your prospective breeder. Ask these references about health issues, personality traits, work ethic, and temperament.
- A good breeder will be open with you about any issues in their line related to health or temperament. It is a good sign when a breeder points out the flaws within their breed and their particular line, such as bad bites showing up from time to time. These flaws are not deal-breakers at all and should be considered on a case-by-case basis. A willingness to point out flaws also indicates the breeder is responsible and will be trying to outcross away from any bad traits, rather than line-breeding in such a way that increases the likelihood of these flaws. No line is perfect. Good breeders are constantly trying to improve their line with each litter.
- Ask if the breeder is available to consult about your puppy. They may have helpful hints for training or working with their line.
- Ask about their plans to socialize and raise their litters. Those first few weeks are very important ones. Most responsible breeders will work hard to socialize their litter to all kinds of people, children, and sounds. They will have things available for playtime that enhance both your pup's coordination and confidence. Examples may include safe children's toys that make noises, interactive dog toys, small tunnels, or perhaps a small wobble board. Boxes of different sizes are often available for the puppies to navigate during play time. A good breeder will make a play pen that is truly an adventure for their litters to enjoy with supervision.
- Ask them about what they do for early housebreaking. Most offer a potty area for their pups that the pups will most likely start using naturally to avoid soiling their living or play area.
- Ask if they have any video online that shows the work their dogs have or are doing.
- Remember, your puppy needs to grow up with their siblings and mother until at least eight weeks old. Twelve to 16 weeks is even better. Early removal of your pup from the litter may stunt its ability to socialize properly. If the breeder wants to send a pup home at five or six weeks old, that is a bad sign. So ask about what age they send the puppies from a litter to their new homes.
- Ask about any testing they do on their dogs. Most breeders CERF-test eyes and have their dog's hips x-rayed and rated. There are also tests done that are particular to your breed. Research those tests. A breed-specific example might be reputable Border collie breeders who test for the "collie eye" gene.

Reputable breeders are accustomed to having the best of proven homes for their puppies. When approaching a breeder you don't know, do not be surprised if you have a hard time convincing them that your home is worthy, especially if you have never actually trained a dog for a job

before. Do not be offended. This is a sign of a good breeder. They will probably ask more questions about your home than you will ask them about their practices. They will expect and accept nothing less than a safe home environment for their puppy. Remember, a reputable breeder isn't focused on making a living from selling puppies. They are passionate about their breed and more interested in making their breed into the best it can be.

- They may ask questions about the inside of your home and puppy-proofing. They may ask if you have an exercise ("ex") pen or safe place for your puppy when you cannot monitor your prospect. They could ask about your plans to crate-train and to housebreak. They may even ask about flooring and how you feel about dog hair on your furniture!
- They will most assuredly ask about your yard. They will want to know if you have a fence or intend to get one. They may also want to know how large the yard is if it is a breed that requires more exercise.
- Speaking of exercise, they will most likely ask about how you intend to keep your dog properly fit and exercised. They may even suggest some physical activities for your puppy that stimulate their mind, provide physical exercise, improve coordination, and may help your prospect to become confident enough to meet the demands of being a service dog.
- They may ask you about your intentions for grooming. Good breeders will often make loads of great suggestions about properly grooming their breed, how often to do it and what not to do.
- Feeding our dogs different kinds of diets is to some extent a personal choice. However, good breeders will often make suggestions about feeding their breed and, in particular, their line.
- They may ask about the other animals in your home, including the sex of another dog in your home or whether the dog has been altered.
- If you do already have pets, they may ask for a reference from your veterinarian as well as references from individuals that have actually seen how you care for your animals.
- They will ask about the members of your household, including children. If you have children, do not be offended if they ask you about how you will monitor the puppy when it is with the children and how you have or will teach your children to properly handle a puppy or dog. Once they ask about these things, do not be surprised if they attempt to educate further about mixing dogs with children. In fact, if they go to all the trouble to educate, take that as a good sign that they are interested in your home.
- They will ask about your intentions for your puppy. In this case, the fact that your dog may go on to become a service dog may interest your breeder more in your home. On the other hand, they may feel their breed or line is inappropriate for the job, so be prepared to explain your choice. It is important to listen to their input and weigh it carefully. They may also want to discuss your plans should the dog

wash out. They may also be interested in any other activities, such as obedience or agility, that you plan to do with your future partner.

- Finally, they may ask about the trainer you have lined up and your training methods. You should be prepared to discuss the methods you intend to use. For instance, will you be clicker-training?

You should always keep in mind that there are many bad breeders out there and be aware of the red flags.

- They breed lots of litters each year and breed without having homes lined up. Advertising in places like craigslist is a very bad sign.
- Most good breeders, though not all, actually raise their litters in their homes. The conditions the puppies are raised in can tell you a lot about a breeder. If they do breed in a kennel, the condition of the kennel will be an indication of the quality of the dog. Is it clean? Are the dogs clean? Are the adults frightened of strangers?
- If they breed for nothing but pet homes, it may indicate they are more interested in selling puppies than seeing them grow up happy and healthy. Most reputable breeders do have pet homes lined up. But that is in addition to working or show homes.
- If they do not have a contract or are willing to sell you a dog without researching you, they are not a reputable breeder.
- If they do not socialize or do things to mentally engage their puppies with activities and toys, this breeder is most likely not producing puppies that can meet your needs.
- If their contract does not allow for you to do a vet check of your own with a return clause, they are probably not a good breeder.
- If they do not welcome an outsider to evaluate their puppies, they are probably not a good breeder.
- If they do not have waiting lists lined up for future litters, they are probably not a good breeder.
- If they breed multiple breeds of dogs, this may also be a sign they are not a good breeder. Most stick to one or no more than two breeds. They apply their attention and resources to that end. The exception might be in the case of breeds still used on farms, in that somebody on property with livestock may have terriers for vermin, dogs for herding, and guardian dogs to protect a flock.
- There are lots of good breeders who do breed "[designer dogs](#)" or a planned mix breeding. But there are a multitude breeding poorly-bred designer dogs to make a quick dollar. The breeding pair often has not been properly vetted. Even well-bred designer dogs are less predictable in their temperament and physical traits.

Be sure to take your time and savor the process. This can and should be an enjoyable experience as well as a rewarding one. When you find the right breeder and get your pup, remember that most breeders like updates about how their puppies are doing. It helps them to

improve future litters and to see that your home is what they had hoped. They are vested in your success and will want to help in any way they can. They always want pictures of their happy, healthy well-adjusted pup as it matures into adulthood and takes on the role of service dog. They will gladly follow their puppy throughout its entire lifetime so be sure to share the adventure with them. Before you know it, you will have a lifelong friend and a reliable breeder you can return to in the future when you are ready for your next prospect.

You can use the following websites to locate events and clubs where you might meet your breeder:

<http://www.apps.akc.org/apps/clubs/search/>

<http://www.nadac.com/>

<http://www.apps.akc.org/apps/events/search/index.cfm>

<http://www.ahba-herding.org/MainPage.php?AreaName=EventsCalendar>

<http://www.aftca.org/>

http://www.flyball.org/tournaments_2014.html

<http://www.u-fli.com/tournreport.php>

<http://www.ukcdogs.com/Upcoming.nsf/EventView?Open&Group=DogEvents&Type=M>

<http://www.worldcaninefreestyle.org/>

<http://www.americantreibballassociation.org/>

<http://www.nacsw.net/trial-calendar-information>

Resources:

<http://www.bulldogsworld.com/breeding/sample-dog-breeder-contract>

http://www.akc.org/enewsletter/akc_breeder/2007/spring/contract.cfm

<http://lawfordogs.com/Articles.html>

<http://dogbreedercontracts.blogspot.com/>

http://www.apps.akc.org/apps/contact/answer_center/faq_findabreeder.cfm

<http://www.ukcdogs.com/Breeders.nsf/BYBREED?OpenView&Breed=AmericanBlackAndTanCotonhound&Start=1&Count=20>

<http://www.1stopfordogs.com/united-states-all-breed-dog-clubs.htm>

http://www.akc.org/breeders/index.cfm?nav_area=breeders

<http://www.dogplay.com/GettingDog/checklist.html>

<http://www.offa.org/eyes.html>

<http://www.dogbreedinfo.com/designerdogs.htm>

<http://www.dogbreedinfo.com/breedingdogs/socializingpuppies.htm>