

What Makes a Good Breeder?

Guidelines to "good" dog breeding.

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What makes a good breeder? Remember those five words the next time you want to start an argument among dog breeders.

Somebody will start with the basics: A good breeder is somebody who breeds in order to improve the breed, breeds only superior stock, and isn't in it for the money. Somebody else may add that they must be willing to take back every puppy they breed for the rest of those dogs' lives. Another will stress that the breeding stock should all be proven in some competitive venue. Several will chime in that they shouldn't make money off their puppies, but rather breed as a labor of love. "Waiting lists!" somebody shouts, and everyone nods. They must have waiting lists before they breed. They must breed on a limited basis (a comment that leads to a gossip-fest filled with speculation about how many litters Miss Breedwell has produced that year alone). Things are going well until some newcomer finally pipes up and asks, "Why is it bad to make money? Why is it bad to breed a lot of litters? What if I just want a pet?"

That's what happened in a recent dog show list discussion of what makes a good breeder. Most people managed to agree – sort of – on the following criteria:

A good breeder breeds with the welfare of the puppies first and foremost in mind. Every breeder agreed enthusiastically to that. But how many of these same show breeders, when confronted with the choice of placing a dog in a situation where it could live on the road and become a famous show dog or live with a family and never be shown, would choose the latter? Would their choice really make one breeder better than the other?

A good breeder stands behind her puppies for life. But at what cost? Some breeders pointed out that the ultimate responsibility lies with the owner, not the breeder, of a dog. What would happen if a breeder had hordes of dogs returned at once? At what point does the breeder's responsibility for her own dogs, family and sanity take priority?

A good breeder refrains from breeding litters in which there is a good chance of producing unhealthy puppies. That means health testing the parents (and better, their siblings and other relatives) and avoiding doubling up on possible carriers of genetic diseases. But even this statement is not without contention – some breeders maintained no dog should be bred if it has ever produced a single disease, even if that disease isn't known to be genetic. Others balked, saying this was throwing the stud dog out with the bathwater and decreasing genetic diversity.

A good breeder strives to produce good examples of the breed. Simply because somebody "only" wants a pet, the fact that they chose a pure breed indicates they did so expecting it to look and act a certain way. But here's where breeders disagreed: At what point does a dog cease to be a good example? Is merely being identifiable as its breed sufficient, or must it be more?

After that, agreement went downhill. Sure, the criteria sounded good and certainly were nothing new to seasoned breeders. But how reasonable are they in the real world? Breeding is a big responsibility, but the dog world is not a one-size-fits-all universe.

A good breeder breeds to improve the breed and tests her breeding stock in various competitive venues. Sharyn Hutchens, herself a respected breeder of the highly successful Timbreblue Whippets in Lexington, Va., points out the limited nature of that view: "Dog showing is a hobby that perhaps 1 percent of dog owners are involved in. For those of us who want to show, that's great. But showing is not the only reason to breed.

Dogs are pets first and foremost, and there is no shame in producing healthy, happy pets for loving homes. When did we decide that no one in the world should breed except show people? And what gives us the right to proclaim that?"

A good breeder breeds only on a limited basis. That's an oversimplification. For some breeders, one litter is too many. They don't have the breeding stock, potential buyers, facilities, or time needed to produce a litter responsibly. For others, several litters a year is not too much. It depends on the breed, the market, and their ability to stand behind their dogs. Hutchens points out other considerations: "If good breeders (and I mean show breeders and responsible, caring pet breeders) stop breeding or cut way back, that leaves the market wide open for breeders who forget the puppy and new

owner as soon as the check is cashed. And they are the ones producing the dogs that end up in shelters. If a good breeder is capable of and willing to produce a litter of quality pups that she may or may not keep one from, then that's one less litter that will come from a bad breeder. We have allowed bad breeders to simply shove us right out of the marketplace and by chanting the animal rights 'overpopulation' song, we are doing more damage to our breeds than we know. We've allowed many of them to be essentially taken over by people who don't do health testing, don't provide owner support, don't screen homes."

A good breeder loses money on every litter. This point has been used for years to differentiate hobby breeders from puppy millers. But why should making money on hard work and a good "product" necessarily be a bad thing? It is a bad thing if you cut corners to do it – if, for example, you feed cheap food, forgo genetic testing, and shirk on veterinary services. It is a bad thing if your primary motivation is to make money rather than produce healthy, happy dogs. But is there a reason, besides dissuading new breeders, that losing money has become a prerequisite for breeding a good litter?

What makes a good breeder? "A good breeder is one who breeds the healthiest puppies possible both [mentally and physically], breeds as close to the standard as possible, screens homes carefully, provides support for owners, treats people fairly, and should a home not work out, either helps find the pup another home or takes it back," says Hutchens. Then why do breeders make it sound so hard? As Hutchens says, "There is something about breeding dogs that turns us all into church ladies doing the 'superior walk.'"

There are still more irresponsible, bad breeders out there than good, responsible ones. Could it be that by adding so many impossible criteria we're only discouraging the responsible ones?

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