

Designer Dogs Mix It Up

A look at the pros and cons of “designer dogs.”

By Sally Deneen

Ralph Richardson, DVM, wanted a relatively small dog that didn't shed and whose disposition fit with a busy family. So, when Richardson, dean of Kansas State University's veterinary college, set out to get puppies for himself and his grandchildren, he ended up with a novel choice of pet: the Schnoodle.

A cross between any variety of purebred Poodle and Schnauzer, whether miniature, toy, standard, or giant, the Schnoodle is touted by breeders and fans for combining what they hope to be the best of both breeds in one small, low-shed package. Fetching prices that can surpass purebred dogs and in some cases reach beyond \$2,500, a growing array of special-order pups comes from crossing two breeds.

The creations come with oddball names, such as Labradoodle (part Labrador Retriever, part Poodle), one of the oldest. It debuted in Australia in the 1970s to serve as a guide dog that would shed only minimally.

No-shed Poodles also inspired the Cockapoo, Yorkipoo, Goldendoodle, Malteepoo, and Saint Berdoodle, which, respectively, cross Poodles with Cocker Spaniels, Yorkshire Terriers, Golden Retrievers, Maltese, and Saint Bernards. Cutesy names seem required, whatever the pairing: Consider the Puggle (Pug-Beagle). The American Canine Hybrid Club recognizes scores of pairings whose names seem inspired by Dr. Seuss, including the Scoodle (Scottish Terrier-Poodle), Shepadoodle (German Shepherd Dog-Poodle), Woodle (Welsh Terrier-Poodle), and Foodle (Toy Fox Terrier-Poodle). Some call these breeds “designer mutts” or “designer dogs.”

Are they here to stay? Or just a fad?

Devotees predict the former, even as the most vocal detractors blast the trend and caution potential buyers against possible pitfalls.

The International Labradoodle Association now counts Labradoodle clubs in eight states. In April the nearly 400-member Cockapoo Club of America celebrated the birth of its first documented litter of third-generation American Cockapoos, representing three generations of Cockapoo-to-Cockapoo matings. By contrast, most Cockapoos — like most designer dogs — come directly from pairing two different breeds. Cockapoo fans consider the seven new pups “purebred” American Cockapoos, says CCA President Josie Montanari, of Westlake Village, Calif.

Don't mistake that to mean designer dogs will receive official recognition as purebreds by the American Kennel Club, the largest registry of purebred dogs in the U.S., or any other major registry.

To become AKC-recognized, any new breed must number at least 300 dogs with third-generation pedigrees. Among other criteria, the national breed club must want AKC recognition; so far, that doesn't seem imminent for any designer breed. When asked when the Labradoodle might be officially recognized, AKC spokesperson Daisy Okas told a Fortune magazine reporter, “It is unlikely in your lifetime.”

Detractors, flabbergasted by the trend, caution potential buyers. You hope your pup will represent the best of two breeds, but it's possible he'll represent the worst. Mixing breeds produces unpredictable results; even some designer-dog breeders caution that your pet may turn out to shed hair all over the house.

Some pairings — such as Labrador Retrievers and Poodles — bring together breeds susceptible to similar inherited medical problems, in this case hip dysplasia, epilepsy, and progressive retinal atrophy. Scrupulous breeders of purebred dogs are duty-bound to improve the line, which means they must never mate a dog with such inherited diseases and must never pair, say, a Poodle, with another breed, says Anne Rogers Clark, an AKC all-breed judge and past president of the Poodle Club of America. Serious Poodle breeders have done genetic testing for years and stand behind their dogs. Designer dogs, by contrast, often don't have a breed club, a breed standard, or an expectation of genetic testing — all of which help ensure the birth of healthy pups.

“If they [designer-dog breeders] don't know what they're doing, they could be creating dogs that have behavior and physical problems,” says Nancy Peterson, Humane Society of the United States issues specialist, who questions the need

for designer dogs. "Bringing more dogs into the world does not make sense," she says. "There aren't enough homes for the ones that are already out there."

Okas also questions the need. Want a dog that sheds little? A dozen AKC-recognized breeds usually produce less dander, including the Poodle, Schnauzer, Portuguese Water Dog, Kerry Blue Terrier, Maltese, and Bichon Frise. (See a full list at www.akc.org) "If you're going to spend the time and money, in my opinion you're safer getting a purebred," Okas says. They're "more predictable. That's the main thing we want to underscore."

Barbara Green, Poodle Club of America delegate to the AKC, adds, "This has nothing to do with being an elitist. Form must follow function. When you get a purebred, you know what they're bred to do." When you start mixing them, you have no idea what the result will be, she says.

Beverly Manners, president of the ILA, switched to breeding Labradoodles after more than 30 years of breeding German Shepherd Dogs because of health concerns.

"It was becoming increasingly difficult to breed a German Shepherd that would not develop one of the 89 inherited diseases of the breed," Manners says. "I became disheartened." When an Australian guide dog association began experimenting with the Labrador mixes, Manners grew excited upon learning that some pups didn't shed and seemed allergy-friendly. Manners switched to Labradoodles: "I saw the opportunity to start all over, with a fresh beginning." Her Rutland Manor Labradoodle Breeding and Research Center near Melbourne, Australia, aims to refine the breed and sells pups for \$1,600 and up.

Labradoodles aren't for everyone, Manners has found: "The very best non-shedding coats can be very thick, which can make it a high-maintenance breed."

While easy to train, "they are extremely intelligent and can be way ahead of their owners. If the Labradoodle's bright, clever mind is not guided into acceptable behaviors early on, it can become an attention-seeking brat," Manners notes. "Families who have not the interest, nor the time, to train their dog, should consider another breed."

Labradoodles seem to fetch the highest prices among designer dogs, averaging \$2,500, according to ILA, for a family pet that can't have pups. Critics question why a mixed-breed pup would cost more than a purebred. "It takes a lot of time and money. This is not a get-rich-quick business," counters Theresa Urban, of Manahawkin, N.J., whose organization has the dual purpose of breeding Labradoodles and providing work for disabled young adults.

So, where will the designer mixed-breed craze lead? Okas already suspects that some people simply make up an oddball "breed" name to help sell an ordinary mutt for a high price. When she saw an Internet ad pitching a Basset Hound-Chinese Shar-Pei cross with a homely square face and long ears as if it were a hot commodity, Okas thought: "Why? Why? Why? They had some crazy name for it ... When I saw that, it was like, 'This has gone way too far.'"

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