

Grooming a Cairn Terrier

Toto should be trimmed, but not too neatly.

By Kathy Salzberg, NCMG

Q. I have Cairn Terrier that I have had groomed several times. I would like to let her grow back in but don't want to have her stripped. The groomers here think that I should continue to have her done in the Westie cut. What would you do? She is inside all the time except to go out to potty or in the car. Frances from Pa.

A. As long as you are keeping your little Cairn Terrier's coat well-brushed between groomings, your groomer should be able to put her in an appropriate style without cutting her too short. When we use our clippers to create the proper trim on a Cairn, we may use a #7f, #5f, #4f or snap-on comb attachments, which would leave more hair than the blades listed. The head, legs and undercarriage are trimmed with scissors - both thinning and regular shears - and this pet should have a "carrot" tail, carried erect and alert like its up-and-at-'em personality.

The Cairn should never look overly manicured or styled. Instead, it should look tidied but tousled like the famous Toto of Wizard of Oz fame. Originating in Scotland in the 1500s, this feisty little breed has a harsh outer coat and a soft fuzzy undercoat that rendered it virtually weatherproof when it nosed out the cairns, or rock piles, for which it was named, enthusiastically routing out any vermin hiding there. As you may have noticed, your little pal still loves to dig, whether it sniffs out a trail on a woodland walk or redesigns your flowerbed.

I am not surprised that your groomers recommended a "Westie cut." The Cairn was actually the foundation stock for the West Highland Terrier as well as the Skye and Scottish Terrier breeds. White pups were culled from Cairn litters by prominent Scottish lairds, later becoming favorites of King James I who ruled England during the 1620s. Exhibiting the same happy-go-lucky personality as the Cairn, these white terriers were known by many names before they were shown under the name West Highland White Terrier back in 1904. They remain very similar in personality to this day, both making wonderful family pets.

As far as grooming goes, the Westie is customarily left fuller and more neatly tailored, more of a dandy than the Cairn. Its head is rounded in a dish shape and more hair is left on the chest and furnishings but the cuts are fairly similar. Pattern lines on the body should not be visible on either breed.

You mention that you do not want your pet stripped and I assume you mean hand-stripped, the technique in which the outer guard hairs are pulled from the dog's skin, using either the fingers, a pumice stone or a stripping knife, a process that preserves the topcoat's harsh texture. While it sounds painful, when done properly, it is not. Groomers experienced in this method use a gentle rhythm as they pluck the dead coat, a few hairs at a time. Their wrists are locked as they pull, never twisting or yanking, and once they get used to it, most pets do not mind. Once shown how to do this by a groomer, breeder or handler, many pet owners have no trouble mastering the process themselves. If you let your Cairn's coat grow out without trimming, hand-stripping, or a combination of both, she could end up looking like a bushy little tumbleweed. She will also be harder to keep clean and well-brushed and may become uncomfortable with all that hair.

You may also "card" the coat when you tend to her upkeep at home, using a device like the FURminator to pull out downy undercoat so her topcoat will lie closer to the body, keeping the coarse texture and rich tones of her outer coat which, according to the breed standard, may be any color except white.