

## Designer Dogs

**Sort the facts from the fiction to discover what makes a dog a "designer dog."**

*By D. Caroline Coile, Ph.D.*

It's human nature. Given a choice, we choose the original gown before we buy off the rack. We customize our homes, our cars and even our coffee. We crave the unique. It was only a matter of time before we started eying our dogs.

No longer are as many people satisfied with their choice of white versus white when they choose a West Highland White Terrier. If only they could get one in black. Now they can sort of by crossing a Westie with a Schnauzer to produce a Wauzer, which are available in black or salt-and-pepper.

Gary Garner of Harvey, Arkansas, supervisor of the American Canine Hybrid Club, believes that "pet owners want something out of the ordinary, something their neighbor may not have." Nonetheless, with more than 150 American Kennel Club breeds and hundreds more established non-AKC breeds, many quite rare, it would seem that something already would exist for everybody who has a craving to be unique.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect is that the price tags attached to designer dogs are often more than what either purebred parent breed alone would bring. Some Internet sites, which often attract celebrity clientele, have prices as high as \$5,000 for certain hot breeds!

However, not everyone is as smitten with designer dogs. Some people contend that "designer dog" is just a ritzy term for a mixed breed. Many purebred parent clubs don't look favorably on their purebred breeders who cross their breeds with others.

**The Original Designer Dogs?**

Aside from the ultimate in customization and the controversy, what exactly is a designer dog? Well

The Silky Terrier was derived from a cross between the Yorkshire Terrier and Australian Terrier. The Bullmastiff was derived from a cross between the Bulldog and the Mastiff. Are they designer dogs? No; most designer dogs are first-generation hybrids. But exceptions exist.

The Doberman Pinscher was derived from crosses between the German Shepherd Dog and German Pinscher, probably with later crosses to the Greyhound, Weimaraner and Black-and-Tan Manchester Terrier. The Black Russian Terrier was derived from crosses among the Airedale Terrier, Rottweiler and Moscow Water Dog. Are they designer dogs? No; most designer dogs are the result of crossing only two breeds. But exceptions exist.

So what's the difference between a pure breed, a mutt and a designer dog? Sometimes, the lines aren't so clear.

A breed refers to a closed gene pool that has been bred only within itself for sufficient generations so that it breeds relatively true. The exact number of generations required for breed status is not agreed upon. A mutt refers to a mixture of more than one pure breed.

A designer dog is generally the first-generation hybrid offspring of two purebred dogs of different breeds. In a few designer dogs, such as Australian Labradoodles, more than two parent breeds may be involved in the recipe. In some other popular designer dogs, such as Cockapoos and Labradoodles, the designation also includes the progeny of multiple generations of hybrids bred to one another.

This is where the delineation between breed and designer dog gets fuzzy.

First-generation hybrids tend to be fairly uniform in type, because each has one set of genes from one parental breed and one from the other, and each parental type has limited genetic variation. However, this uniformity is lost when first-generation hybrids are bred to one another because they are sampling from parents each with more variability at each gene. That's why second generation progeny tend to be a mishmash of characteristics of both original parental breeds, often with no two looking alike. For this reason, breeding second generations of designer dogs often isn't attempted.

#### A Healthy Mix?

Garner points out that the interest in hybrids may be fueled by consumer awareness of breed-related genetic disorders. "There is a perception that 'hybrid vigor' contributes to healthier dogs," he says. "That has been purported with plants and animals, and there is foundation to the idea."

Dog breeds are closed populations based on a handful of founders. Whatever genes are present in the founders will be over-represented in their descendants. If these genes are for deleterious recessive traits, then in a closed population, the chance that their progeny will inherit recessive genes from both parents and thus develop a genetic disease increases.

Such is the case with most dog breeds, the majority of which can trace their ancestry to fewer than 50 foundation animals sometimes fewer than 10.

It is possible that by crossing two different breeds, the likelihood of the progeny being affected by genetic diseases will be lower because the likelihood that both breeds will carry the same deleterious genes is lower. However, certain disorders like patellar luxation (in which the kneecap slides out of place) are so widespread among certain families or sizes of dogs that interbreeding them will not decrease the incidence of the disorder.

As Garner warns, "Automatically crossing two different breeds does not guarantee better quality; it still depends on the quality of the individual parents."

Any advantage of hybrid vigor is lost after the first generation, so the designer dog breeds that include progeny from subsequent generations are no less prone to genetic disease than are either parental breed.

#### Designer Desire

Labradoodles and Puggles (Pug-and-Beagle hybrids) may be all the rage today, but they'll have a long way to go before they can claim the staying power of the all-time champion designer dog the one that never claimed designer designation the Cockapoo. Popular at least since 1960, the Cockapoo still exists mostly as a first-generation cross between a Cocker Spaniel and a Poodle.

A few independent organizations exist for the most popular hybrids (like the Cockapoo Club of America), but for most hybrids, the place to register is the American Canine Hybrid Club.

According to the ACHC registers, the most popular hybrids in 2005 were the Labradoodle, Goldendoodle (Golden Retriever and Poodle cross), Puggle and Cavachon (Cavalier King Charles Spaniel x Bichon Frise). The ACHC, which began registering dogs in 1992, lists more than 200 types of hybrids, and each one has at least one representative dog or litter.

Although most hybrids are the product of two breeds, a few have more than two breeds in their recipe. And at least one, the Cantel, is somewhat a trade secret. Dubbed the Cantel because you "can't tell" if it's a Poodle or a Bichon, the exact mixture of parti-colored Poodle and Bichon that goes into it is not readily divulged by its creator.