

Popular Dogs: German Shepherds

The German Shepherd is one of the most intelligent breeds of dog, and it needs structure, someone to love, companionship and a purpose in life.

Virginia Parker Guidry

Reputable breeder Expectations aside, where might prospective buyers find the German Shepherd pup of their dreams? "From a breeder," says Ginsburg. "That should go without saying almost." Not just any GSD breeder. It's got to be someone with integrity, good reputation and a genuine love for the breed. That's your best chance of buying a healthy, beautiful, good-natured German Shepherd.

How do you find a responsible breeder? Contact national dog clubs and local breed clubs to acquire the names of breeders. Get referrals and recommendations from vets, groomers, owners and other breeders.

Also, check out parent breed clubs on the Internet, but do your homework carefully and check your sources cautiously. "Don't ever buy a dog from someone without a recommendation," says Pottle.

When you visit the breeder's home or kennel, take a good look. What are your first impressions? The dogs should look healthy and clean. "Your nose will tell you a lot," says Ginsburg. "I don't necessarily mean the person's house is immaculate, but their dogs should look, feel and smell clean. That takes a lot of work and it means these people are conscientious."

Additionally, "You want to meet the parents," says Pottle. "They must be dogs that you can pet and touch. If you can't pet and touch them, why bother?" Take time to talk with the breeder and visit the litter more than once. Is the breeder actively involved with the breed? What are her goals for breeding? Does she seem genuinely interested in the breed? Does she question your ability to care for a pup appropriately? Does she offer a reasonable guarantee? These are all signs of a reputable breeder. Don't settle for less.

A Healthy Pup All new owners want a healthy puppy. Ultimately, buyers must rely on the breeder to sell them a healthy puppy. That's why who you choose to buy from is as important as which pup you choose. That breeder must be reputable. It's the best chance you have at buying a healthy animal.

Birch advises prospective buyers to get a health guarantee and ask questions. For example, the German Shepherd suffers from a variety of heritable diseases that cannot be determined by a quick look-see. Degenerative myelopathy, bloat and exocrine pancreatic insufficiency are the most common genetic diseases seen in German Shepherds. The best way to avoid purchasing a pup that is prone to these diseases is to research the incidence of the disease in the pup's parents. A good breeder should already know a great deal about these illnesses and be able to discuss the likelihood of the diseases developing in your puppy.

Hip dysplasia and elbow dysplasia are very common in large breeds, too, and are a persistent problem for German Shepherds. Tests that help screen for these conditions are available. Deal only with breeders who routinely screen for diseases and conditions that affect the breed. This is the best assurance-though it's no guarantee-of taking home a healthy pup. Orthopedic disorders are screened by evaluating x-rays of a dog's joints. The Orthopedic Foundation for Animals, a nonprofit foundation evaluates and registers X-rays, is the most common certification.

The Wind-Morgan Program of the Institute for Genetic Disease Control in Animals at the University of California, Davis, School of Veterinary Medicine, is another nonprofit program offering registry and screening of orthopedic disorders. Genetic studies have shown that breeding radiographically normal dogs produces fewer dogs with joint disease than when affected dogs, or dogs of unknown status, are bred.

Ask the breeder if the pup's parents are "OFA certified." Ask to see certification of both parents from one of these organizations; reputable breeders will usually offer the information without asking.

Eye diseases, though not as common in the GSD as in some breeds, can be present at birth or develop later in life. These conditions can be screened by the Canine Eye Registration Foundation, an organization that works in conjunction with the American College of Veterinary Ophthalmologists. Ask to see each parents' CERF number, which is evidence that the dog has been screened and found free of heritable eye disease. Be aware that CERF registration is good only for 12 months from the dog's examination date; thereafter the dog must be re-examined by an ACVO diplomate and re-registered to maintain an up-to-date CERF number.

In addition to asking the breeder about certifications, ask for a health record of shots, dewormings and exams. And, take a close look at the pup. It should be a proper weight (not too chubby or too thin); clean, odor-free and kept in clean surroundings; eyes should be clear, not runny or red; clean ears; full hair coat (no balding patches); no excessive scratching; and appear well-socialized, playful and friendly. Take the puppy to your vet for a complete exam with 48 hours of purchase.

You'll probably agree: Choosing a German Shepherd pup requires an investment of time and energy, but it's an effort you won't regret one minute.