

Picking a Breeder

This is more important than picking a breed. Keep in mind that I breed as well as train. I have heard it all from breeders and owners and am giving you the best advice I have so you can get the dog that suits you best.

First breeders will tell you the good things about their dogs and leave out or down play the bad. I do try to be honest, but a lot of breeders are not. They do not all do this intentionally but it is just like parents and their kids. There is a term for breeders who only see good in their dogs. It is called "kennel blindness"

Some of the things you want to look for in a good breeder are that they compete their dogs, preferably in a similar discipline to what you want to do with yours. If you want a hunting dog then Hunt Tests or Field Trial is what you want your breeder doing. In some breeds, like the Chesapeake, you can look at what others have down with their pups or what is further back in the pedigree. In labs and especially Golden Retrievers it is best to have the pedigree and competition of the breeder in your favor.

Also do they invite you to meet their dogs, the parents as well as others they may have. Many times the sire (dad) will not be available due to someone else having ownership of him.

Also do they only use studs that they own or co-own? Line breeding is fine but you want to see out crossing about every 3-4 generations, too much line breeding is another sign of kennel blindness. Also do they want to control your breeding rights, co-ownerships and limited registrations have their place, but is the breeder normally selling their pups in one or both of these ways? If so they may be telling you that they know they have big problems in their lines and want to control breeding or give themselves a scapegoat when something comes up.

Health clearances vary some between breeds. In Chessies you need to look for Cerf checks, PRA testing, DM testing and Hip x-rays. Labs you also need to look for EIC and CNM in Golden's hearts and thyroid can be added. This list is changing so the National breed clubs should be consulted for an up to date and complete list. The tests are great but some, such as hips, do not tell the whole story. What is the breeders' written guarantee, the more in the buyers favor the more the breeder has confidence in the quality they are producing. Some breeders want you to give the dog back to receive any compensation. This is a way out for the breeder as most people do not want to give up a dog they have fallen in love with.

Are they producing dogs within the breed's written standard? Again check with the National breed clubs. Not every dog needs to be inside the height and weight guides but should be normally close. Breeders that are honest about which of their dogs are and are not in the standard and are trying to stay in standard by not breeding 2 dogs that are far outside the standard are what you want to look for. Breeders that proclaim to have dogs way outside the standard should be shied away from. For example in Chessies the weight range is about 60 to 80#, it is one thing to have a male at 95# bred to a 70# bitch, it is another to say you are intentionally producing 100# + animals.

Color is another red flag issue. If the breeder is breeding "for color" or getting a rare for the breed color on a regular basis you run a big risk of having other inherited issues. Some issues are physical while others are psychological. This can be said for any main points of the written standard.

Each breed has its own problems and you should ask a few breeders what they test for or what issues they have in their lines. Honest breeders will not only tell you what issues are tested for in their breed but which ones they are concerned about in their lines. Some issues such as cancer do not have tests, again the honest breeder will disclose if these types of issues are a concern for them.

You may have figured out by now that there is no perfect breeder or dog for that matter. As the buyer you will need to decide which issues are important to you. I think one of the best questions to ask a breeder is "How long do your dogs live? If a dog is passing on at or after 12 years old I do not feel the exact reason is of much importance. On the other hand if a fair number is passing at 8 or less then again it may not matter why, they are still passing way to young.

Another question is about the contract, does it have a "right of first refusal" clause, I feel that a breeder that does not want to at least have the option to buy/take back 1 of their pups is just in it for the money and does not have the long term welfare of their dogs or breed at heart. Personally I take this a step further and foster for one of my breed's National rescue organizations. Not everyone can do this but I feel they should show their support somehow.

Proof is in the pudding. If you are buying a hunting dog and the breeders have suggested that they have "great hunting dogs" are there pictures of the parents hunting or after the hunt. Pictures can be deceiving, are they taken at the same place or time. If they are selling pheasant dogs do they take pictures at more than 1 group preserve hunt a year. If they are selling duck or goose dogs do they have pictures from multiple hunts in multiple years. Do they hunt their dogs or are most of the pictures from people that have bought their pups. Do they have pictures of more than 1 generation of their dogs hunting. Staged pictures are fine, I do a lot of after the hunt staged pictures. What you need to look for is indications

that the hunt was true and the dogs did their work. You want different dogs on different days with different game, and in different places. If all the pictures are of a preserve pheasant hunt with a pile of birds on the same table or of the dog and 1 bird in the same place it may be an indication of a breeder stretching the truth a bit. If you can hunt with the breeder and their dogs, or watch them at a field test.

A breeder's web site can tell you a lot about them too. Is it clean and neat. Is it up to date. Spelling and grammar correct. Captions match photos. Now a lot of us do our own sites so a mistake or 2 is not a big deal, but look at the site as a whole, is it something you would be happy to publish if it were yours?

Where are the pups whelped and raised, basement, living area of the house, or outside. The best is in or close to the living area of the house, they should be both whelped and raised as close to normal human activity as possible. Each breeder has a different house and setup to deal with. Personally I keep the whelping area off to the side but the pups are near and exposed to the normal going on in the house, vacuums, other dogs, phones, and people. Some breeders will whelp the litter in the basement or an attached but separate area of the house, then when they are weaned move them further outside. Then claim they are house raised. It is necessary to be specific when you ask where and how the pups are whelped and raised.

If weather permits has the breeder taken the pups outside?

As you can see picking a breed may be fairly easy but picking a breeder is the hardest part. This is not a complete list of questions or a complete list of issues and concerns. Hopefully though it will give you a general idea of what to ask and what kind of response indicates good and poor breeders.