

Where should you get a dog?

When you are looking for a new canine member of your family, where do you look? Shelters? Breed Rescues? Breeders? Pet store? Or do your pets just seem to find you? I suppose it might depend on what you are looking for in your next dog or what you plan to do with him/her.



The key to finding a dog you will love, that will be a perfect fit for you, is research and education! First, it helps if you know what you are looking for in a dog. Size, temperament, energy level, athletic ability, coat type, breed, etc. all can play a part in how well the dog is suited to your plans. If you live in an apartment and get a large dog that needs lots of exercise that might not be a good fit unless you happen to be a marathon runner in your free time. If you want a dog to cuddle on the couch and lay quietly at your feet, don't get a young hyper-active dog. If you plan to compete or enter conformation shows, you will have specific needs as well. Even if you are just looking for a companion to accompany you on walks after work and hikes on the weekend, you'll need to carefully consider the type of dog you plan to get.

Often, as dog lovers, dogs happen to come into our lives for whatever reason and we make it work. Maybe you try fostering and can't part with the dog or maybe a friend or relative can no longer keep their dog and you offer it a good home. Maybe a stray finds your car or porch and after looking for his/her owner with no success, you decide to keep the dog. But if you are carefully planning your next companion for specific goals, you'll want to look deeper.



Some people think that shelters only have "bad" dogs; dogs without training or with behavior problems or dogs that are older or have medical needs. While that is sometimes the case, they also often have dogs that give birth while in their care or entire litters of puppies dropped at their door. And dogs that are wonderful, but that had owners who could no longer care for them because they were moving over seas or lost their job and home or developed serious health issues or died unexpectedly. And some dogs, especially the young ones, just need a bit of proper training to become lovely companions, sport dogs or working dogs. Some service dog organizations and search and rescue/recovery groups get the bulk of their dogs from shelters or owner surrenders!

Some think shelters don't have pure-bred dogs. This is also a fallacy. While they often try to get pure-bred dogs into a breed rescue, there are often not enough foster homes in the breed rescue organizations to take the dogs, no matter how wonderful the dog is. So yes, pure bred dogs CAN be found in shelters; especially if you are looking for a common breed like a shepherd, lab, beagle or golden. But even less popular breeds may be available.



Websites like petfinder.com allow you to locate dogs of certain breeds (or mixes of breeds) in shelters and foster care near you or all across the country. Just be sure to do your research. While the internet is a great way to get more information about a particular breed, to find people selling that breed or to find the perfect mutt, you can't always believe what you see or read on websites. While a huge number of people and organizations that have websites are reputable, there are scams out there and there are disreputable individuals and organizations out to make a quick buck while keeping the dogs in horrible conditions.

Why is it so important to see where the pup is born/raised or where the dog has been living?

This is because, as the founder and 1st responder of a disaster response team, I have personally been in the homes and facilities of breeder/rescue hoarders that kept dogs/puppies in deplorable conditions, but that had websites that sounded like they were wonderful, reputable breeders or rescues. They know what to say to make it look good. But their homes were so full of feces and urine from multiple dogs (that are never let outside) that a respirator was required to enter. In one location, the dogs were literally living on more than 2 feet of their own excrement, in small makeshift pens we had to dismantle to get open (the same place their food was dumped for them to fight over). Places that were condemned by the health department as soon as we got the dogs out. So I urge you- go see the place in person!

- Chris Puls

Be sure to meet the dog and spend some time with the dog before you make your final decision. If you are buying from a breeder, go see their facility, meet the parents of the pup you are interested in, ask lots of questions. Places that care about where their dogs go will ask many questions about you and your home. They are trying to be sure that it will be a good fit, and that's a GOOD thing! Places that just care about getting your money without asking very many questions of you may not be as reputable. Any reputable place/individual should also be willing to take the dog back and may refund some or all of your money if the dog doesn't work out for some reason, even if it's years later.

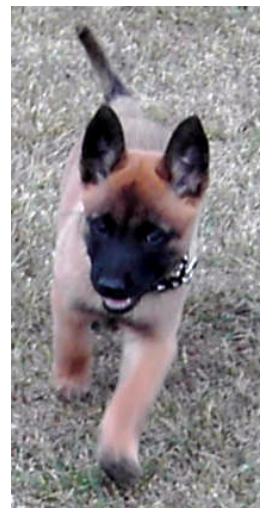
If you know you are looking for a specific breed, start with the breed rescue. You'll likely need to fill out an application and may have a home visit to be sure you are not a puppy mill buyer or hoarder and that your home and family are ready for a dog. Once approved, you can look through their website to see many dogs of all ages, from puppies to elderly adults, and various backgrounds that are available. Breed rescues are similar to shelters in the reasons they get dogs. So not all of them have "issues" and many are wonderful pets that just ended up in the wrong home- the home of someone that didn't do their research and found out the dog wasn't a good fit. To find a breed rescue, simply do a search for "(breed) rescue".



Another option, if you know what breed you want, is to find a reputable breeder. This doesn't mean going with the first breeder you find on the internet selling dogs of that breed. And may not be a local breeder or the one with the cheapest (or highest) price. The adage of you "get what you pay for" may not apply. Some puppy mills take advantage of those who believe that adage and charge outrageous prices to give the illusion of quality (and to make a bigger profit.) In actuality, the adults they are breeding are just puppy machines that may or may not look much like the breed and that may also be passing along genetic health issues that will cost a lot of money to treat (if treatable) or may shorten the life of the dog. This is why it's important to meet the breeder and see where their puppies are raised. A puppy mill won't allow you to visit where the puppies are raised or meet the parents. If you do visit a breeder and get bad vibes, trust your gut. As much as you want the puppy now, just think of the problems that a bad snap decision could cost you later in health issues and behavior/temperament issues and heartache.

Many puppy mills have now gone to "internet sales" and while their website might look idyllic and sound high quality, the conditions they keep the dogs in are anything but! So if you are looking for a less popular breed, expect to travel to find a reputable breeder to get the pup. Keep in mind that a reputable breeder is not breeding with profit as their first motive. They are breeding to better the breed, to produce puppies that have the best qualities of both parents. After all the health checks, proper care of the mother dog, proper health care and feeding of the pups, etc., breeding is not all that profitable. When done right, it's not a get rich quick scheme.

To find a reputable breeder, go to conformation shows or dog sports that the breed frequents. Meet some dogs, ask people who their dog's breeder was, join Facebook pages or yahoo groups devoted to the breed and ask questions there. If you have done your homework and are sincere in your inquires, people that love their breed will bend over backwards to help you find just the right dog. To get an idea of what good breeders should be doing, do a web search for "breeder code of ethics" and you can see the examples for many different breeds. Often, the website for the breed of your choice will have a "code of ethics" listed for any breeders they may list on the site.



Reputable breeders:

- Are passionate about and protective of their breed and the puppies they produce
- Provide quality care to the producing adults and their off-spring (including quality food and clean water, all needed health care, clean and safe housing, proper exercise, daily handling of puppies, etc.)
- Care about what genetic issues the adults might have or be passing along and do health testing to prevent common issues from being passed along (screening for hip/elbow disease, eye diseases, heart disease, and other health issues common in their breed). They don't breed dogs they know have cancer or seizures or other serious health issues that can be passed along to the pups.
- Have specific goals for pairing two dogs- to produce quality off-spring that have specific qualities they can articulate. Ask why the breeder chose to pair the two dogs and what they hope to produce.
- Provide their puppy buyers with lifetime support and knowledge. This gives you a knowledgeable person you can ask when you have questions about the raising, training or care of your new canine.
- Will take back any offspring they produced at any time during that dog's life
- Can provide the lineage (pedigree) of both parents showing several generations

While you might want a puppy immediately, for a low price, as close to home as possible, keep in mind that what you are looking for is a dog that will be with you for the next 9-14+ years! You can spend a bit extra now to travel to find just the right breeder or you can pay less upfront and spend lots more down the road on vet bills and veterinary behaviorists for the dog's physical and mental issues. Price is not the only determination of quality. A reputable breeder may have puppies of higher quality and lineage and a lower price than a puppy mill producing off-spring that barely resembles the breed and has many genetic or temperament issues.

As for Pet Stores, while there are a few that only have dogs/puppies from the local shelter or occasionally have the pups from local litters that the breeder couldn't sell, most pet stores get their puppies from what most people would consider puppy mills. These are large operations that crank out puppies as though they are livestock. The pups often leave the litter early so they can be in the store windows at the cutest age to tempt you to impulse buy, but that means they missed out on some of the lessons they should learn from littermates, like bite inhibition and being able to read and speak their own canine body language. These are not breeders you would want to support and the puppies are not raised in conditions that benefit the pup. Just because they are displayed in a clean cage doesn't mean their parents aren't locked in small filthy cages, cranking out litter after litter.



Can you get lucky and get a healthy, sound pup from one of the less reputable sources, yes. But do you really want to take that gamble? If the dog doesn't work out or has major health issues, then what? Don't you dare dump the dog off at the shelter so someone else has to take on the responsibility of your mistake or hold the dog, telling him or her what a good dog they are, as the needle goes in to end the dog's life. The purchase of a dog or puppy should be a contract of care and love for the life of that dog. The reputable producers of dogs also have a contract for the life of that dog, which is why they are willing to take the dog back if you can't keep it.

The best way to end the puppy mill problem and disreputable sources of dogs is to not support them with your money (either directly or indirectly, such as through a pet store)! As long as there are customers, they will keep producing puppies.

So bottom line is **DO YOUR RESEARCH!** Be patient and don't buy on impulse. Be sure you are ready and that the dog will be a good fit with your lifestyle and desires and you will both be happy for the dog's entire life (and you'll likely save money and heartache in the long run!)

Information provided by Dog Scouts of America www.DogScouts.org