John Rogerson - Questions for the Breeder

Even before you get a puppy it will already have learned a great deal about life from the environment it lived in, from its mother, from its littermates, from the breeder and hopefully the breeder’s family. Many behavior problems can be traced back to the breeder who produced the litter because what they sold was fundamentally flawed. Even when buying a puppy raised by a really expert mother and breeder in a perfect environment, it is still possible for the new owner to get things wrong, but for may behavior problems it is unlikely. Buy a puppy that already has fundamental flaws in its behavior and you will almost certainly have problems with it.

If you are going to hand over some of your hard-earned money to a breeder, you may well get some good material with which to work. Would you go out and buy a car that had defective transmission and brakes that did not work? Or had a fault in the engine that required you to go through a complex procedure before it would start? So why take on a puppy that then requires a behavior modification program to get it to behave acceptably? For the same amount of money it is possible to get something that you and your family will enjoy without the need for expensive maintenance.

Before you even think about going to a breeder, do as much research as you can on your chosen breed and sit down with your family to discuss what you want your new family member to provide you with. Remember that if the presence of a family dog does not enrich your life in some way, it is better not to get one in the first place.

Maybe you want your dog to be a great agility champion, in which case you will probably be buying a Border Collie. Or how about the first Bassett Hound to get an agility title? Maybe your new dog is destined to become a therapy dog, or maybe a great companion and playmate for you children. Perhaps you like to go out walking and a good walk is wasted without a dog with you. Perhaps the presence of a dog in your house will give you a greater sense of security or the chance to meet more people socially. In other words, there has to be a reason for wanting to won a dog. I have never met anyone who has purchased a puppy with the express intention of “donating” it to an animal shelter between the ages of ten to 18 months! Yet every year tens of thousands of dog owners do just that, simply because their choice of breed was poor or the puppy came with problems.

Once you’ve decided on the breed, phone a breeder and ask a few questions before deciding to go and view a litter. Here are some of the things to look out for:

* The mum. What is her temperament like? How friendly is she towards visitors? Why did the breeder want a litter of puppies from her? Has she had litters before and if so, how many? Ask for contacts so you can make enquiries about her offspring. How about the dad? The same questions apply.
* The breed. What is its country of origin? What were they originally bred for? What are the breed’s typical behavior traits? (All breeds must have some particular trait that resulted in the breed being developed.) Are there people who still use the breed for their original purpose? What, if any, hereditary problems does the breed have? (Do you want to pay lots of money for a breed that has heart problems, eye problems, hip dysplasia, will cost you then times the purchase price in veterinary care and will die before it reaches the age of six?) The answers you get should match the research that you have carried out. If the breeder does not appear to know the answers then I would certainly not advise you to invest in one of their puppies. There is no point in even viewing a litter if you have concerns about the breeder’s intentions in bringing these puppies into the world. Remember that for the same amount of money you can get a good puppy!
* Now go and have a look at the litter. Take your whole family along and insist that the mother is present with her puppies when you arrive. It is normal for a dog to bark when a visitor arrives at the front door, but is it acceptable, and how much can the breeder control the barking? When you enter the house, does the mother have to be restrained? If so, you have to ask yourself why. Mum should be proud to show you her litter. If she appears to be suspicious or even aggressive, or has to be removed, then leave and look elsewhere for the puppy of your dreams.
* Now look at the floor surface and the toys they play with. Pick up a toy and you should have the whole litter surrounding you wanting to play.
* Ask the breeder to groom one of the puppies for at least ten minutes. Does the puppy wriggle around and try to escape? Does it start screaming? Does it try to bite? By six weeks of age the puppies should be used to being touched, restrained and groomed by the breeder. If the breeder can’t do this, I would be unwilling to by one of their puppies.
* Now ask the breeder to feed the puppies. If you see any signs of food aggression then reject the whole litter. You can also ask the breeder to stroke each puppy as it is eating. Again, if you see any signs of food aggression then move on.
* Remember that any display of aggression in a puppy under the age of nine weeks should result in the puppy being left at the breeders, or returned to the breeders if it has already been purchased. Remember if you purchased a new car with a fault on it, you would take it back right?

If all is well, the paperwork is checked and found to be right, decide if you want a dog or bitch and then shut your eyes and make a choice because if the breeder has got it right then any puppy has the potential to be a great dog.

Now we are driving home with the new family member in the back of the car. We may dream of it being a great family companion it may be a particular breed and we may want it to take out hunting or to engage in some dog sport. It is a bonus if it grows into a really good look example. We want it to be the sort of dog that people in the community will admire because of its’ good behavior. No matter how beautiful your dog looks, your friends and neighbors will think it ugly if it behaves really badly. Conversely, any dog that is visually unattractive will be deemed one of the most beautiful dogs if they have ever seen if it behaves impeccably.