

## **BUYER BEWARE!**

Puppy mills are nothing new; we've all seen them exposed on TV. The words "puppy mill" conjure up images of hundreds of dogs, kept in small crates, malnourished, living in their own feces, producing puppy after puppy until their bodies give out. When they are no longer productive they are thrown out with yesterday's garbage. Well unfortunately, the definition of a true puppy mill is not always that simple. When searching for your new companion, you will run into puppy mills, commercial dog breeders, hobby breeders and back yard breeders. The first key to success is to know the difference:

**Puppy Mills** range from the extremely large operation down to medium and small operations. It is truly the conditions in which the dogs live and are treated that determine whether or not it is a puppy mill or a commercial breeder. A puppy mill is a "cash operation", cutting corners just as any businesses would do in order to reduce expenses and maximize profits. They may breed several different breeds -- or -- maybe specialize in just one breed; however, they usually have an extremely large number of dogs (50+). Living conditions for the animals are usually extremely poor and Puppy mills tend not to worry about the health and temperament of the dogs they are breeding. They may advertise that the dogs are cleared by x-rays and for hip dysplasia and other genetic defects; but in the end it is doubtful such x-rays were done or they were not professionally evaluated. Some puppy mill owners will try to portray they are active with their dog through clubs and various activities however a closer look may reveal that although at one time they were, they are no longer active -- or may never have been active at all. Puppy mills usually advertise in newspapers and over the internet. They may sell puppies to Pet Stores, they may sell puppies directly to the puppy buyers.

**Commercial Breeders** A commercial breeder is someone who has many dogs and produces many puppies. This is not always a bad thing. Looks around, how clean are the facilities, how social are the dogs? The mental and emotional well-being of the dogs is just as important as the health of the dogs. Is there an adequate number of staff members on hand to care for the dogs? Where are the puppies raised? Commercial breeders are concerned about the health of their dogs and the puppies they produce. They ensure each dog has been evaluated and received clearances before they are bred. Some commercial breeders are active in the same dog activities as hobby breeders. Commercial breeders usually advertise via the internet, occasional newspaper ad and possibly in the phone book.

**Hobby Breeders** Hobby breeders are truly the future of the pure bred dog. Their dogs do not just live to produce puppies. Hobby breeders are active with their dogs, whether it be in conformation (show); obedience, agility, hunting, tracking, luring, and therapy, to name just a few. Hobby breeders are breeding for themselves first and foremost. They want to produce a healthy, sound pup that can live up to their expectations. A hobby breeder may keep their dogs in their home, or in an outside kennel -- but in either case, the dogs are well socialized, trained and loved. Hobby breeders not only clear both parents before breeding; they also evaluate the health clearances for the entire pedigree of puppies they wish to produce. Hobby breeders will breed a litter with the goal to keep a pup or two from that litter. Unfortunately, not all the pups in a litter measure up to the hobby breeders' high standards. Maybe their nose isn't dark enough, maybe they aren't quite tall or short enough, maybe they simply

have a white mark where there shouldn't be one. These are the circumstances that the companion puppy buyer should be looking for. The slight cosmetic imperfection that will allow them to bring home a sound, healthy, happy puppy that can play, run, jump, live and love a family for years (not just 12 months). Hobby breeders may or may not have a personal website, some will advertise in the newspaper -- but it is very rare. The best way to locate a hobby breeder is to contact a local all-breed OR specialty breed dog club; visit a local dog show; or ask your veterinarian.

**Back Yard Breeders** Back yard breeders, for lack of a better term, are companion animal owners who wish to breed their dog because their friend loves their dog and wants one; because they feel it would be a good experience for their children to see; because they love their pet so much they want another one. Back yard breeders (BYB) often do not understand the importance of health clearances; they do not know the grandparents, great-grandparents of their dog and the important role they play in regards to the pups that will be produced by breeding a litter. Although their heart is in the right place, the education and knowledge isn't quite there. Some potential back yard breeders take the time to learn and become educated; in that case they turn into the novice hobby breeder and deserve to be taken seriously. A Back Yard Breeder typically advertises in the newspaper.

Now that you are educated in the type of breeder you are dealing with, the choice is yours. The only sure way to stop puppy mills is to stop supplying the demand. That is why you must interview each potential breeder of your future puppy.

### **Puppy Search Recommendations**

There are ways to ensure that your search for a new puppy will ensure you bring home a happy, healthy companion.

**Observation:** At some point, you will visit the kennel. You do not necessarily have to visit before you commit to buying a puppy, in today's digital age -- photographs work just as well. A simple visit or receipt of photographs is all it takes to see if the living conditions of the dogs. Try and view all places where the dogs reside; but don't expect a tour of the breeder's medicine cabinet. Remember, in most cases this is the breeder's home. Note: It is quite common for breeders to protect their new puppies and expectant mothers from disease; please take appropriate precautions as directed by the breeder when visiting their property. In most cases you will not be permitted to visit the puppy nursery area, however, it is not unreasonable for you to ask for photos of these areas.

**Interview:** A reputable breeder will expect you to ask questions. A reputable breeder will also expect you to answer questions. Be prepared to be asked such things as: what is your work schedule? ; Who lives in the house with you? What is your yard layout like, do you have a fence, if so, what kind? Do you rent or own your home? Although these may seem like personal questions, a breeder who cares about their puppy wants to ensure that it is placed in the best possible home. A breeder who does not ask questions is probably just looking for a sale and won't be able to offer you the same quality of puppies as a reputable breeder.

**Health Clearances:** Ask to see the actual Health Clearance Certificates for each parent or, if the parents were cleared through the Orthopedic Foundation for Animals, conduct a search on their website to verify the clearances [www.offa.org](http://www.offa.org). If the sire and dam have passed their clearances they will be listed on this site, if they are not listed they either did not pass clearances or exams/x-rays were never submitted. Different breeds require different clearances, search for a specialty breed club website or AKC Breed Parent Club; the recommended clearances are often listed. ([www.thelabradorretrieverclub.com](http://www.thelabradorretrieverclub.com)). Bait and switch tactics have been used by less than reputable breeders. They may show you certificates for another set of parents; take the time to write down the name of the dam and sire of your future puppy. In some cases, health clearances may have been obtained through a foreign registry (British Veterinary Association, BVA) or another U.S. registry (Penn-Hip, Wind-Morgan) without an open data base; in those instances you will need to see the actual certificate.

**Photos:** As you wait for your puppy to grow old enough to come home with you. Expect to be sent photographs as they develop.

**Contract or Bill of Sale:** Most breeders offer a contract or bill of sale. What is said within the context of that document is what sets apart the reputable breeder. Read it word for word and understand it fully, never sign it without reading it and understanding it. Do not be tempted to sign such a document at the last minute without reading it first.

**AKC Individual Registration:** Expect the AKC papers to be provided with the puppy. Never leave the premises with the puppy on the condition that the papers will be mailed to you. No certificate, no puppy. Some breeders have taken weeks, even years to forward papers, if they are ever forwarded at all. Review those papers. Ensure that the parents on the paperwork are in fact, the parents of the pup in your arms. Do not accept home-made registration certificates (not to be confused with breeder generated pedigrees) -- or -- certificates from a registry other than the AKC. Some breeders have actually made up their own certificate of pedigree and don't actually have any registered dogs. A breeder generated pedigree is perfectly acceptable if accompanied with the official AKC Puppy Registration.

Reputable breeders will be able to help you find the puppy that is right for you and will be happy to give you tips on raising and caring for your new family member. They will be available to you for the life of the dog. As long as you find a reputable breeder, finding the right puppy is as easy as 1-2-3!

### **Checklist of Potential Questions to Ask Breeders**

Remember, you are bringing in a new member of your family for the next 10 to 15 years. This is not like shopping at Wal-Mart where you can pick up a name brand at a bargain price.

#### **Where did you find out about this breeder?**

(Reputable breeders don't usually advertise in a newspaper and never put a sign out in their front yard).

**Do both the sire and dam have hip clearances from the OFA or another acceptable registry?**

Ask to see the certificates; "My vet Okayed the x-ray" is not a valid clearance. Take time to research the parent's clearances on [www.offa.org](http://www.offa.org) -- you can even find information on clearances for the grandparents, siblings and offspring.

**Are both parents at least 2 years old? Final hip clearances cannot be obtained before that age through OFA.**

Preliminary Clearances before age two may be obtained, but have been known to change when final clearances are done at 2 years of age. (Note: The BVA & Penn-Hip have different age requirements than OFA).

**Do both parents have current eye clearances from an Ophthalmologist or a CERF certificate (Canine Eye Registry)?**

This must be done every 12-18 months.

**Do either parent have other clearances -- Elbow, Heart, Optigen (PRA-Eyes)?**

(Specific to Labradors as Labs have been known to have problems in these areas)

**References -- remember, reputable and less than reputable breeders will both provide you with excellent references.**

**Will the breeder take the dog back at any time for any reason if you cannot keep it?**

**Is there a written guarantee against congenital health or temperament problems?**

Read the guarantee closely, having both parents and all four grandparents who have passed their clearances is worth more than a written guarantee.

**Will the breeder be available to answer any question you might have for the life of the dog?**

**Is the breeder knowledgeable about the breed? Are they involved in competition (conformation, obedience, field, etc.) or other positive activities with their dog?**

**Will the puppy have a limited registration with a mandatory spay/neuter contract?**

**How often is the dam bred?**

This can be a mis-leading question. More important is how many litters has the dam whelped. This will give you a more accurate indication of how often this girl is bred.

**Are the sire and dam available for you to meet?**

Quite often, the sire resides elsewhere. Sometimes in another state or another country. Ask if it would be okay to contact the stud owner.

**Where have the puppies been raised?**

Socialization for a puppy begins at 4 weeks of age, they need human contact. Puppies that are raised without high exposure to gentle handling, human contact and a wide variety of noises and experiences OR are removed from their dam or litter mates before 7 weeks of age may exhibit a wide variety of behavioral problems.

**Does the breeder provide you with a three or five generation pedigree, a contract to sign, copies of all clearances, a health guarantee, health records, and material to help you with feeding, training and housebreaking?**

**Have the puppies temperaments been evaluated and can the breeder guide you to the puppy that will best suit your lifestyle?**

**Do the puppies seem healthy** -- no discharge from the eyes or nose; no loose stools; no foul smelling ears? Are their coats soft, full and clean? Do they have plenty of energy when awake yet calm down easily when gently stroked? Do they have their first shots and have they been wormed and vet checked by the time they go to your home?

**Does the breeder have only 1 or 2 litters at a time?**

If there are many dogs and many puppies, the chances are the breeder cannot devote the time it takes to raise a properly socialized puppy.

**Does the breeder belong to a breed specific club or a local all-breed club?**

**Do you feel comfortable with this person?**

You are entrusting this person with one of the most important decisions you will ever make. If you are feeling intimidated or pressured, keep looking. Remember, trust your instincts! Finally, don't be afraid to tell the breeder you need a few days to decide.