

## **HOW TO GET A PUPPY FROM US (OR ANOTHER GOOD BREEDER)**

by JOANNA KIMBALL

I have found that a lot of people who would make excellent homes for puppies end up with puppies who are far less than ideal for them (or far less than well-bred) because they are intimidated by the process of getting a puppy from a good breeder. And it's not particularly fair (I admit this) that we breeders expect you to know the answers to questions that WE discuss at length but YOU have not necessarily ever heard before.

There's a lot of wariness on both sides, when the e-mails start coming; as a buyer you're worried that you're going to get ripped off or are choosing the wrong person and as breeders we always have the worst-case scenarios going through our minds. We've ALL been burned by puppy people and I'm sure most of you have been burned (or at least made to feel stupid) by a breeder, so it's not all air kisses and happiness for a good long while.

That having been said, as buyers you have GOT to get over the idea that either it's too much trouble to go after the best of the best, or it's a process that will be too invasive and inconvenient, or you're sure the breeder already has all the puppies sold and you'd better go find somebody who's a little bit more "approachable" (usually "mediocre" would be the correct adjective there). Every breeder, no matter how amazing, has to place pet puppies. And they're honestly just as happy to put a puppy with someone who lives in a doublewide as they are with someone who lives in a McMansion. The key is how good an owner you're going to be, not how much you can impress them with your ability to write a check. And yes, you will have to take some time and exchange some e-mails and phone calls, and at the beginning of the process it can be very intimidating or feel invasive. I know this because I feel that way too; when I get ready to sit down and e-mail a breeder for the first time (about buying a show puppy or about using a stud dog) I have to take lots of deep breaths and I start the thing about eight times before I finally hit "send."

It is MORE than worth it to go out there and get the best puppy you can. The rewards of having a supportive breeder, a sound and healthy dog, and a community of similar owners and breeders to enjoy can (and I do mean this literally) change your life. Buying a great puppy is the way you get a great family dog, but (for those who want it) it's also the way you become "a dog person," and entering that group is not to be underestimated.

So how do you do it? How do you get that great puppy?

### **THE PREP WORK**

1) Know what you want. If you're not sure you're a dog person; if you're not sure your family is ready for a dog; if you aren't sure how your ancient and beloved cat is going to react to a puppy, do not experiment by buying a puppy. One of the best ways to answer those questions is to become involved with a rescue group as a foster home or (as a longer-term but still temporary situation) apply to be a puppy raiser for a guide or service dog organization. If the answer at the end of that experience is no, that doesn't make you a bad person! It just means you shouldn't go out there and buy a puppy and hope that it turns out better this time. Before you even start considering a puppy, know whether you really want a dog after all.

2) Research breeds. You should not contact even a single breeder with puppies on the ground before you have decided on a breed. DO contact breeders when you've gotten to the point of deciding between two or three breeds, but be honest with them that you are trying to get to know their breed, not that you are looking for a puppy. Most of them will be very happy to talk to you about what living with the dogs is actually like, and this will (hopefully) help you make up your mind. But I promise you, almost nothing turns off a breeder more quickly than someone who says "I am also looking at Rottweilers, but I would like to come see your Yorkies." This is not because we feel like we're in competition with each other; it's because we spend thousands of hours completely bathed in one or two breeds and we (correctly, I think) immediately think that if you don't even know the difference between living with those two breeds we're not particularly interested in putting a puppy with you.

3) Be very, VERY realistic about what kind of care and commitment you can give to a dog. It is VERY TEMPTING to see a dog working at its best and to want that life yourself. You see a Border Collie running an agility course or a Gordon Setter quartering a field or a Golden running through a yard with its kids and you think you could do that. I know you do, because I do it too. I have a desire for an Irish Water Spaniel that borders on the obsessive, because I absolutely love how they're a completely multi-purpose breed who are insanely smart and active and because I love grooming. Every time I see one I start thinking of myself in a boat or on the agility grounds or with a dog up on the grooming table. However, you have to realize that YOU ARE VERY UNLIKELY TO CHANGE to meet your dog's needs. If you already run four miles a day no matter what the weather, or if you already hunt, THEN go get yourself a big sporting dog. If you already spend five hours outside every day in the woods, then look at a coonhound. If you imagine yourself on an agility course but in real life you spend eight hours in front of a computer every day, DO NOT GET a Border Collie.

I'd also add that you have to buy a dog for your WORST day, not your best. Maybe some days you do get that run in. But other days your kids have to go to soccer practice or you put off the run because it's too hot or you go to the gym instead. Or maybe you really do go camping every weekend... from May to November. Your dog is not going to need a different level of activity or a different level of mental stimulation because you had a bad day. If you're snowed in, two kids are sick, and you have a huge project due tomorrow, your Gordon Setter STILL needs 45 minutes of hard-running exercise. Can you provide that? How crazy will it drive you?

4) Never buy a dog to be anything other than a dog. Dogs are not good at teaching kids responsibility. They're not good at saving marriages. They're not good at getting you friends. They're not good at making you exercise. They pretty much all massively suck at being ornaments in a lovely home. If you get a dog to be a dog, if you meet its needs and desires and make its life wonderful, as a side effect it may well teach your kids good things; it may do good stuff for your marriage; it may get you new and wonderful friends; you may lose some weight. But those are pleasant side effects of doing the right things for a dog just because it's a dog.

5) Learn enough about what dogs in general and what the breed you have chosen in particular need in terms of training, feeding, and exercise that you could do an "elevator pitch" for the breed. You don't need to be able to quote phosphorus/calcium ratios or the proper distance between weave poles, but feel like you know how to meet the needs of the dog you're considering, and be sure that you are ready to do so.

6) Prepare your house and yard, or have a plan for doing so. Many times the first thing a breeder will ask is whether you have a fenced yard. This isn't because we're trying to be mean; it's because we know our breed well enough to know that it's very difficult to manage them without good fencing. This is a question you should expect to answer. Some breeders absolutely will not put a puppy anywhere without a fenced yard; others will put a puppy with you as long as you have a good plan for providing exercise without it. Either way, the correct answer is NEVER "We live in the country so our dogs love running around." I do not care if you live fifteen miles from the nearest road, you are NOT letting one of my puppies off-leash until it is trained enough to have a reliable recall, and even then you should only do it when you are mindful and involved. Many a dog with a wonderful recall has been killed when an owner got distracted with yard work.

In your home, you should plan on making at least one room (a room you actually live in, not the laundry room) completely puppy-proofed, and that includes not freaking about pee and poop. Crate training is wonderful and you should do it, but you should also have the puppy on your lap on the couch or on your feet, and you should play with your puppy and bond with it and tug with it and watch TV with it, and there WILL be accidents.

7) Pick out a training center for Puppy Kindergarten (Puppy K). This is an absolute requirement if you're buying from me and it's a very good idea if you're buying from anyone. Puppy K is the BEST gift you can give yourself and your puppy, and that means everybody, including experienced owners and even trainers. You should plan on entering puppy K when the puppy is between eight and ten weeks old, so you have to have one picked out before you find the puppy and should be registered for class before you take the puppy home. Puppy K is about socialization, not hard-line training. Look for one that offers a good long puppy playtime at the beginning of each class, and that uses happy, positive methods. The AKC STAR classes are getting very good buzz, so finding a STAR trainer may be a great way to begin.

#### CONTACT A BREEDER

The reason you should have that elevator pitch ready is that you're going to write an e-mail to ONE BREEDER AT A TIME, and you're going to use that pitch. Contact the breeder using whatever medium makes you most comfortable. I think e-mail is ideal because you can make sure you're saying all the things you want to say and you can do it at 4 am if you want to, but some people are very uncomfortable when they have to write out a long e-mail and may prefer to call.

a) If the breeder does not have any puppies available or anticipated, say "May I talk to you about the breed to make sure I am making the right choice?"

- b) Clearly communicate that you understand the breed, understand its needs, and are willing and able to meet those needs. Ask the breeder if she agrees or could add anything.
- c) Say "Do you have any questions for me?" and "Is there anything else I should be asking you or another good breeder?"
- d) Try to get two or three e-mails back and forth, and then (if you like the tone of the conversation so far) say "Is there a good time for me to call you?"

This level of exchange is very likely to establish a couple of things for you: If you were right about the breed, and if this is going to be a good breeder for you to either get a puppy from right now or to wait for a puppy from. Confirm this with a phone call. A great sign is if the call lasts half an hour or more and you get the feeling that this person is absolutely an encyclopedia on the breed.

Oh, one note on semantics: Breeders SELL puppies. Rescues ADOPT them out. Retired dogs are PLACED. Dogs who are not happy in their home are REHOMED. I know that there's no way you could know this, and most people use language that they think will be the least likely to offend (and that means "adopt"), but it can set our teeth on edge a little bit. Our puppies do not need homes; they have a home here. They are not up for "adoption." So use the word "sell" or "buy" when you're talking with a breeder about a puppy, or "place" (as in "I was wondering if you have any retired dogs to place") if you are inquiring about an older dog. If I have a rescue here who does need a new home, I'll use the word "adopt"; if I have a dog who is returned to me I will "rehome" her. It's a small thing but you'd be surprised how much using the correct words can help set the tone for the communication with the breeder. Under no circumstances should you use "get rid of" or anything of the kind.

#### MOVE FROM CONTACT TO PURCHASE

The biggest step is to not stop communicating. Call, e-mail, keep up the contact. I'll be posting pictures daily or close to daily on my blog, so drop a comment every few days so I know you're still alive and interested. The goal is for both of us to feel like we're in a partnership where the end goal is a great home for a great dog.

Number two is to make a deposit. The way I do it is pretty standard for show breeders; only the amounts vary, usually \$100 up to 1/3 of the puppy price. I take them if you are sure you want a puppy and you will be happy with me choosing one for you. Giving a deposit means that you WILL get a puppy. I do not like to take a deposit if you only want one particular puppy and won't be happy with any others, because I simply don't know if that one puppy will be the right one for you or will be available after the show/pet evaluation. If you are CERTAIN that you want a puppy from a particular breeder or a particular litter, MAKE A DEPOSIT.

Buying a puppy is a VERY BIG DEAL and we want you to treat it that way, but it's a joyful and wonderful deal too. Any breeder will tell you that the greatest reward they get is that e-mail saying that Lydia is now a therapy dog, or that Bogart passed his herding instinct test, or that Cherry has gone to her great reward and that everybody cried for three days because she was such a wonderful dog. We are eager for you to have the rewards and joys of owning a great dog, just as we do. So please, DO go to the trouble to get a dog and a breeder who can get you there. It is SO worth it.