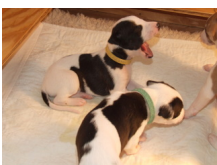


There is no one way to identify a good breeder. Obviously a lot depends on what kind of puppy you are looking for -- if you want to show, course, race, or compete in other activities, you'll look for a breeder who has a winning record in those things.

But we'll assume that you're looking for a healthy, well-socialized pet who will fit into your household, not cost you a fortune in vet bills the first month, and can be expected to live as long as a whippet ought to live. (The average lifespan is 12-14 years...not nearly long enough!) All the books say to buy from a "reputable" breeder. But what does one look like?

Some people say that all good breeders show their dogs. But we certainly know some show breeders we would not recommend and others who do not show but do produce very nice puppies. So it's not that easy. Lots of trophies and ribbons don't necessarily mean the breeder cares about her dogs. She might just care about winning! But people who concentrate on one breed -- maybe two -- and "do stuff" with their dogs tend to know the breed well and care about its future. They usually belong to dog clubs, understand at least basic genetics, and are up to date on breed health issues. They network with other breeders and have peer pressure to do things right.

Others say anyone "breeding for profit" is a bad breeder. We believed that too for awhile, till we met some commercial breeders who love their dogs and care just as well for them as any breeder we've met at a show. People have different motivations for breeding and you don't want someone who cuts corners on dog care to make a profit. But, in spite of the animal rights rhetoric, a commercial breeder is not by definition a "puppy mill." As long as the profit is not more important than the dogs' well-being, there's nothing wrong with making a profit.



So how can you tell a good breeder from a bad one? You can see it's not as simple as going to a dog show and picking a breeder from ringside and certainly not as simple as choosing an

ad in the newspaper or from a puppies-for-sale website.

Raising good puppies makes some very specific demands, so there are signs -- we call them traffic lights -- that the careful buyer can spot.

A good breeder will have all or most of the green lights from our list, few or no yellow lights, and no red lights. Some of these may show up in advertisements, others are things you can check on the telephone, by email, or during a visit. There may be exceptions to the rules--you should always ask questions if in doubt.

It's hard to walk away, but if you buy a puppy because you feel sorry for it, you are supporting that breeder and encouraging her to breed more...as well as letting yourself in for possible high veterinary costs. If you think the breeder is abusive or neglectful, *report her to animal control and keep calling till something is done.*
But don't buy a puppy!

Red Lights -- Avoid This Breeder!

1. Breeder's kennel/home is dirty. The breeder you visit may not have a *House Beautiful* home, but it should smell and look reasonably clean. Anyone can have a bad day or just keep a cluttered house, but you will be able to tell if the place hasn't been cleaned in ages. The area where the dogs are kept should be as clean as is possible, but remember that all puppies tend to poop as soon as a guest arrives!

2. Dogs appear unhealthy, extremely shy, or snappy. Your very first requirement for buying a purebred puppy is health. The adult dogs should appear healthy and have the correct temperament for the breed. Puppies should be clean, have bright eyes, no discharges from nose or eyes, and no signs of diarrhea.

3. Breeder advertises "Puppies always available."

That means lots of litters per year. If a puppy is to have the best chance to be happy in your home, he must be raised with lots of attention and love. It's less likely that a "mass-produced" puppy will receive the same socialization as one raised by a breeder who produces just a few litters a year.

4. The breeder asks no questions about your home or your dog experience.

A good breeder spends plenty of time talking to you, not only about her puppies, but about the breed in general, your situation, and whether this is the right breed for you.



Most require a written application. If the conversation consists mostly of "This is how much they cost, you can pick up your puppy Saturday," that's not a breeder who cares where her puppy is going.

5. "I'm sorry but the mother is (at the groomer, at a dog show, at the vet, at my sister's...) so you won't be able to meet her." Offer to come back when she's available and if you can't make arrangements, look elsewhere for a puppy. Mom's influence makes up for about 75% of your puppy's temperament, and if you don't like her, you don't want her pup. Why 75%? Her genes contribute half, and her attitude while she is raising the puppies accounts for another large percentage. A nervous, fearful mother produces nervous, fearful puppies. The father may or may not be on the premises, as many breeders use "outside studs." If he is there, ask to meet him.

6. Offers to sell puppies that are under eight weeks old.

Puppies need to be with mom and their siblings for eight weeks or more in order to learn skills that are near impossible for humans to teach. You can consider buying a puppy from this

breeder (if other traffic lights are okay) but do not take your puppy home before he's eight weeks old, even if she encourages you to. Some breeds mature more slowly, and these puppies should stay with mom at least another week or two. Puppies must be exposed to humans regularly before 12 weeks of age, and that's a big part of the breeder's job. A puppy that has this contact but has stayed with his litter at least eight weeks will easily bond to your family at any age. In many states it is illegal to sell a puppy under seven weeks old.

7. Advertising 'Easy payment plans.'

Payments are usually way too much trouble and risk for a breeder. She's already sunk a lot of her own money into this litter, and most breeders are not wealthy. A good breeder doesn't want you to buy a dog you can't afford. If you can't pay for the dog, how will you pay for vet care? Figure out how you will pay for the puppy before contacting the breeder and don't ask if she can float you a loan. Remember, most vets don't offer payment plans!

8. There is no mention of spay or neuter.

Not all dogs should be bred and not everyone should be a breeder. The breeder should talk to you about the issue of spay/neuter and listen to your thoughts. Some breeders require spay/neuter of the puppies they sell as pets. This is not to prevent competition for puppy buyers, but to protect the work and study they have put into their bloodlines. Good breeders are stewards of their breeds and care very much what happens to them. If you are interested in breeding, the breeder should be able to talk with you about it and determine whether the puppy you are buying may be suitable to breed, and if not, why not. Ideally, she should talk with you in depth about the responsibilities and risks involved and offer to help you learn more if you remain interested.



9. Puppies are sold at a public place like a flea market or in a parking lot. The only sure way to sell a puppy humanely is with an interview and plenty of time to talk about your new family member, ask questions, and get answers. The poor little fellows sold at flea markets and other

public places are handed to the first person who shows up with cash or a credit card, whether or not that person will provide a suitable home. Never buy from these places even if you feel sorry for the puppy. For every one bought, another litter is bred. The more clever hawkers even encourage you to feel sorry for the puppies so you will "rescue" them. *The only way to stop the practice is to boycott flea markets and other venues where puppies are sold...and let management know why you're staying away!*

10. The breeder is rude.

It doesn't matter how beautiful the home or the puppies or how famous or successful the breeder. If she is not someone you can imagine calling with a problem about your pup, steer clear. Your relationship with the breeder is as important as your relationship with your puppy's veterinarian. She needs to be someone you can like!

Yellow Lights -- Get more information!

1. "We ship anywhere."

Many good breeders will ship your puppy and there is nothing wrong with that. But most prefer that you pick him up if at all possible. That's much less stressful and dangerous for him and most breeders want to meet you face to face. Advertising shipping usually indicates more interest in making sales than in finding good homes.

2. "We'll meet you at the rest stop."

Some kennels really are hard to find, but anyone can take directions. Sometimes this just means "We'd rather you not see our kennel." A puppy from a dirty or overcrowded kennel is very likely to have parasites and/or other communicable illness. Corners probably have been cut on other breeding practices. Insist on coming to the kennel or home of the breeder *Update: Due to harassment from animal rights activists, some good breeders are reluctant to open their homes to people they do not know. Be sensitive to this and proceed accordingly. We still believe you should be able to see where the puppies were raised, but understand the fear of these breeders. Personally, I think that if I become too afraid to allow future owners of our pups to come to our home, it will be time for me to stop breeding.*

3. Dogs registered with unfamiliar registries.

The [American Kennel Club \(AKC\)](#), [United Kennel Club \(UKC\)](#) and (for Canadians) the [Canadian Kennel Club](#) are the only general registries that guarantee your puppy is purebred. These registries maintain pedigrees and protect their databases through inspections and DNA testing. Rare breeds which have not been recognized by the organizations above are registered with other organizations, as are many field/hunting dogs and some working dogs. A few breeds may be registered with their specific breed registries. (Border collies and Cavalier King Charles Spaniels are two examples.) Though no registry is a guarantee of quality or health, registries should maintain the pedigrees of purebred dogs: If you pay for a purebred you can be reasonably sure you actually get a purebred. If as the dog matures, you realize it is not purebred, you can file a complaint against the breeder and the registry will investigate. Some breeders register with other organizations. Always ask which registry the breeder uses and why. There may be a good reason, but be sure you know. The term "registered" by itself is meaningless and the same is true of "pedigreed." A pedigree is just a list of ancestors. Every dog, even a mixed breed, has one

simply because he has parents and grandparents. Write down those names and your mix is "pedigreed."

4. Special deals require you to allow the breeding of a litter from your pet.

A good breeder sometimes will sell a male puppy and ask that you not neuter him right away in case she needs him as backup to her bloodline. A breeder with a rare bloodline (or a rare breed) may have a good reason for not wanting to lose a certain female, but usually that breeder simply won't sell the dog. Whelping a litter of puppies is emotionally and physically draining for the owner as well as the mother and there's a lot that can go wrong. Most of these "puppies back" deals though are simply pyramid schemes. Look elsewhere for a puppy. Pet owners should not be required to breed their dogs.

5. "Ready for Christmas!"

Holidays usually mean lots of confusion and just going to a new home is plenty of stress. Christmas is the probably worst time to take a puppy home if you have young children, and many breeders won't even sell you a puppy as a Christmas gift. Some may allow you to take a puppy home at that time if you can convince them that you'll keep things calm, but a breeder using Christmas as a marketing tool does not have the best interests of the puppies at heart. And never buy a puppy as a "surprise" Christmas gift for another adult!

6. You see signs that the breeder has more dogs than she can properly maintain.

Everyone has a bad day sometimes and a lot of dogs can mean a lot of confusion and noise, but if conditions don't look right to you, ask questions. Maybe the dog with the infected eye has an appointment this afternoon; perhaps most of the dogs are crated when company comes to simplify the visit but actually get plenty of exercise. But dogs in dirty pens, matted or smelly dogs, those who appear to need medical care and have not gotten it, or dogs stacked in crates for most of every day cannot be healthy, well-adjusted dogs. You don't want a puppy from this environment.

7. The breeder advertises oddball or specialized varieties that may have health problems or may not be purebred.

Rare longhaired whippets (see below), Warlock or white Dobermans, teacup Yorkies, extreme large or big boned dogs -- check all these out before you decide you want one. There are breed standards for each breed, and dogs who are bred intentionally not to meet them (colors that are not "recognized" by AKC, etc) may be perfectly fine. But sometimes these 'improvements' are often done by mixing in other breeds, and sometimes the characteristics may involve health issues. If you want, say, a white dog in a breed that specifies darker colors, study before buying. Tiny-tiny dogs often have trouble with hypoglycemia. Very large dogs may have joint problems.

Read your breed standard at the AKC web site and be sure you understand any breed fault in a puppy you're considering buying and whether the fault is related to health. (The [Whippet Standard](#) is also at the [American Whippet Club](#) site.) For example, light colored eyes are a fault in whippets but they don't cause any health problems--it's strictly a cosmetic issue. A whippet with one or two blue eyes can see perfectly well and has a charm all its own, but cannot be shown because the standard calls for dark eyes. Floppy ears in an adult German Shepherd Dog are also cosmetic. And parti-colored poodles and Yorkies should be as healthy as those of the accepted colors. In some breeds, white coats are simply a color choice -- in others, such as Boxers and Dobes, a white coat can be associated with severe health problems. Research these things before starting to look for a puppy

Note: "Longhaired whippets" were originally produced by people who stated that this is a purebred whippet with a "lost" gene for long hair. The consensus of the American Whippet Club and the decision by AKC is that there is and was no such gene. Most whippet breeders believe that this breed is a mix between the whippet and another breed with long hair, such as the Sheltie. Healthwise, there is nothing wrong with these dogs, but be aware that according to the American Whippet Club anyway, they are not really purebred whippets.

Other people are developing new breeds that closely resemble a whippet with long hair, but they state clearly that their breeds began as a mix, not that they are purebred whippets with a rare gene.



Green Lights -- This looks like a good breeder!

1. Breeder offers a list of specific health checks done before breeding and/or on puppies before selling.

Examples might be CERF (eye), OFA (hips, heart), thyroid tests, von Willebrands Disease (blood clotting) and BAER (hearing) as appropriate to the breed. You must know which problems are likely to occur in your breed and what checks should be done. 'Vet checked' is too general -- that statement is a yellow light if given as the answer to "What health checks do you do?"

2. A lifetime "takeback guarantee" is offered with a request that you contact the breeder before placing your dog in another home.

Good breeders do everything in their power to prevent their puppies from winding up in animal shelters or pens in some friend of a friend's backyard, and that includes giving the dogs they've bred a home for life if necessary.

3. A written (or on-line) application is required.

Good breeders put too much work and love into their puppies to sell them to just anyone, and they have learned by experience what kinds of home are likely to work out and which ones probably will not. Most, but not all, require a written application.

4. The breeder makes sure you know the breed's disadvantages and special requirements.

All breeds have some drawbacks. If the breed you're considering drools a lot, is hard to housebreak, does not live long, may instinctively chase and kill small animals, or (fill in the blank!), a good breeder makes sure you understand those characteristics. If your dog must be kept as an indoor dog, must always be leashed or fenced, requires lots of grooming, or is subject to heatstroke, a good breeder tells you these things upfront. If a breeder starts to sound like a used-car salesman, telling you only the good things and she refuses to talk about the bad ones, find another breeder.

5. A written contract with specific requirements and guarantees is provided.

But watch out for extremely restrictive contracts -- for example, specific feeding instructions or you forfeit the dog, no vaccinations regardless of veterinary advice, etc. This may be a very dedicated breeder but is likely to be way more trouble than you want. In some situations good breeders may offer a special deal for retaining control of the puppy. You get a cheaper price, but the breeder's name stays on the puppy's registration papers as co-owner. We advise against doing this unless you're very experienced. Though a breeder who cares about her puppies will encourage you to keep in touch, a breeder who cannot let go of control can be very difficult.

6. You receive a written health record for your puppy.

This should include the date of whelping, any health problems, the date and kind of each shot he got, and the dates of deworming and drug that was used. Your vet will want this information and having it in writing makes it more likely that your puppy has gotten the care he needs.

7. You are asked lots and lots of questions about your lifestyle and how the puppy will fit in.

Good breeders care where their puppies are going and what sorts of lives they will have. They want to keep track and will encourage you to send pictures and updates. They are as interested in their "pet quality" puppies' lives as much as their show puppies' careers.

Happy hunting! And remember you are buying a best friend who will be with you for many years if you're lucky. Don't get in a hurry!

Traffic Lights!

Last Updated Thursday, 30 December 2010 18:54

