

RESPONSIBLE DOG BREEDING

Anyone who wants to be a dog breeder and who wishes to be regarded as a RESPONSIBLE breeder should consider a number of questions:

1. The first, and most important is: Am I prepared to accept responsibility for all the dogs that I breed for the rest of their lives if necessary?

That implies being willing and able to take back any dog if:

- a new home and/or owner turn out to be unsuitable for whatever reason or if the owner proves to be unable to cope with the dog;
- at some stage an owner is unable to keep the dog any longer due to death, illness, divorce or any other cause;
- some congenital or genetic condition manifests with which the owner is unable or unwilling to cope.

2. Am I financially able to be a responsible breeder, even in the case of unforeseen circumstances arising?

Most responsible breeders seldom make much, if any, money from breeding. Providing proper accommodation and high quality food for the bitch (both when in whelp and while nursing) and the pups is essential but definitely not cheap. Puppies should not leave home until at least eight weeks old and pups of this age normally have very healthy appetites, eating substantial (and expensive) meals four times a day. Deworming, inoculations, microchips, registration, etc all cost money. In addition all sorts of emergencies or mishaps may occur: miscarriage, caesarean section, still-born or malformed pups, illness of the dam or puppies, death of the dam, mastitis or other feeding problems. These are just a few.

3. Do I have the time?

Careful around the clock supervision is necessary. This might mean curtailment of recreational activities for two months or longer and weekends away are simply not possible. Cleaning up after a litter of puppies is also quite time consuming. Most important of all is the need to spend ample time handling and interacting with the pups, especially after three weeks of age, to ensure that they receive the early socialisation required to develop into balanced, steady and easy-to-live-with dogs.

4. Do I have suitable facilities?

The bitch should NOT be left to whelp on a piece of cardboard or an old sack in the corner of the garage or the outside loo! The whelping room/area must be hygienic and easy to clean, draft free, quiet and have a heat source such as under-floor heating, a panel heater or an infrared lamp. A suitable whelping box must be provided and the room should ideally have direct access to an outside run.

5. Am I sure that all the pups can be placed in suitable homes?

Preferably one should not breed without having a confirmed waiting list of at least 4 –6 prospective owners. The breeder must be prepared to keep, feed and socialise any pups not sold by eight weeks of age. All breed clubs have experience of frantic members who thought of making a few bucks over Christmas, only to find that there are no prospective buyers at that time...

If the answer to all the above is an unequivocal “yes”, the prospective breeder needs to consider the suitability of the dogs intended for breeding. Just because a dog/bitch is purebred, pedigreed and registered does not automatically mean that it is suitable for being bred from. The following aspects must be considered:

Health

Both the intended sire and dam of a litter must be examined by a veterinarian for abnormalities and tested for any genetic conditions which occur in the breed, such as heart or eye defects, hip and elbow dysplasia, deafness and so on. Unfortunately the fact that an individual does not actually itself display a certain condition may not mean that it is not a carrier. If at all possible, the ancestors on both sides should therefore also have been screened, especially when dealing with conditions such as hip dysplasia, which is not simply caused by a single gene.

Disposition

No dog/bitch that does not have absolutely sound temperament should be used for breeding. Any signs of viciousness, inappropriate aggression, fearfulness or undue nervousness should disqualify a dog or bitch, no matter how beautiful it may be. In addition both dogs and bitches should preferably possess the temperament traits that are typical for its breed, such as hunting ability, protective instincts, herding ability and so on. For dogs and bitches of especially the guard and defence and the herding breeds (e.g. German Shepherds, Boxers, Dobermanns, Rottweilers, Bouviers) it is useful to have them assessed at a Breed Survey, Breed Assessment or an Aptitude Test. Even better is a working qualification in an appropriate discipline: field trials, working trials, tracking, obedience, agility, etc.

Conformation

All owners tend to think that their animals are beautiful and excellent specimens of their breed. It is however a good idea to enter the dog in a Breed Assessment (where this is offered by breed clubs), a specialist breed show or at least to ask someone who is really knowledgeable to give an opinion on the conformational soundness and breed type of the dog or bitch.

Pedigree

A breeder should try and obtain as much information as possible on the ancestors listed in the pedigrees of his breeding prospects before deciding whether a particular dog and bitch are likely to be a good match in terms of not only their own phenotypical (visible) and mental attributes, but also those of their ancestors. A pedigree also indicates whether the combination would constitute outcrossing, linebreeding or inbreeding and the breeder must then decide what the implications could be. The main reason for breeding only with registered, pedigreed dogs is that it makes the results somewhat more predictable than when dogs of uncertain or unknown lineage are used.

And finally

Carefully selecting new owners for puppies and making sure that they will be going to a safe, suitable, knowledgeable and stimulating environment is responsible. To sell a puppy to anyone who is prepared to pay the asking price without checking his/her bona fides, simply because the puppy is six weeks old and not yet placed, is totally irresponsible. Even worse is the practice of handing over all unsold pups to a pet shop or "dog dealer" and taking no further interest in their fate. Making sure that puppies and their new owners are well-matched in terms of temperament, age and energy levels is responsible. Selling a strong, dominant, boisterous and wilful puppy to an elderly or frail person is irresponsible. Puppies should be sold with a carefully worded contract, spelling out and safeguarding the rights and responsibilities of both the seller and the buyer. Once the pups have gone to their new homes there should be regular contact between the breeder and new owners and good "after sales service" to solve any problems which may arise before they become insurmountable obstacles, resulting in an unwanted problem dog being passed from one home to the next, to a rescue service or animal shelter and perhaps finally to being euthanased.