

To Breed or Not To Breed?

This is the question – my apologies to Mr. Shakespeare...

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I am not even going to start hounding you on the millions of animals euthanized each year in shelters or that die on the streets. No one ever thinks this could happen to a litter they breed. I am going to tell you what makes a responsible breeder and the major effort that goes into ensuring the best, healthiest critters possible. Breeding is not just putting two cute dogs together and sixty-three days later you have cuddly pups. Responsible breeding requires work. It is not to be jumped into headfirst.

What a responsible breeder does:

Knows the breed standard. Each dog has a standard accepted by a kennel club that states what the ideal specimen of that breed should look like. It covers fur to teeth, color to structure. A dog not fitting the standard will not be considered for breeding. Also, they get out and show the dogs. Just because you think the dog may fit the standard, does not mean it is a good breed representative. Only by having the dog evaluated many times can you truly get a feeling your dog is breeding material – this goes for males and females (what a dog show does as well as other competitions such a Schutzhund – I highly regard a dog who has achieved a SchIII – field trials, lure coursing, etc.). Even if a dog is top notch physically, meets the standard well, but has temperament issues (shy, aggressive), it will not be bred. Many breeders also want to prove their dogs have brains to match the beauty. There are various sports that test a dog's working ability. A dog should have both form and function.

Know the pedigrees. Just because two dogs are great specimens does not mean they are compatible. Not all hereditary problems are a simple Dominant/Recessive gene thing. Some require a combination of multiple gene sequences before being expressed. So, two dogs could have parts of these sequences and if bred, the problem could be expressed though there is no sign in either dog's background of the problem. Two great dogs also may not produce great puppies. A responsible breeder will research pedigrees and talk to other breeders to find the best possible matches. This can be a big undertaking. And just because a dog is winning all over the country does not mean he is the best. It may just mean he (or she) is being shown loads; chances are by a well-known handler, and everyone wants to breed to him (or get a pup from her). This dog may not be the best – just the most popular at the time. Do not be blinded by wins.

You also must know color inheritances. Some colors, like merles (blue or sable/red) should not be bred together. The merle gene, if doubled, can cause problems. Merle to merle breeding can be very bad...

Knows the dog. A responsible breeder will test dogs for things like hips, thyroid, eye problems (eye should be tested yearly on breeding stock) and whatever problems are common to your specific breed. If something is suspected, the dog is not bred. They also require testing for the dog they intend to breed to. There are also diseases such as brucellosis that can cause fetal abortion (miscarriage) in pregnant females – it is sexually transmitted – your dog must be clear of. Brucellosis does not always have outward symptoms, your dog could carry it and you never know. Your dog also must be current on all inoculations.

Accepts the risks. Breeding is not all happy. If you own a female, you must be willing to wait until she is physically mature to breed (about two years old). To breed too soon is like a teenage human having a child. They are not physically ready or emotionally. To breed too old is like a woman having her first child later in life. Males also must be at least two. You cannot get hips certified until they are two years old at least. Dogs of both genders must be fully mature and in top shape before breeding.

You must be willing to be in close contact with your vet from the moment of mating. There is so much that can happen and that you should know. There are nutrition concerns – pregnancy and nursing is taxing on the female body. There are risk factors – some breeds are prone to birth complications and almost always require medical intervention. I remember hearing an English Bulldog breeder state 99.9% of all English Bulldogs litters are born by C-section due to the physiology of the breed. Even in a breed not prone to birth complications, they can arise and be costly! Many breeders will have their vet x-ray (radiograph) a pregnant female to get an idea of how many pups, their placement, etc. A big pup could get stuck in the birth canal. A retained pup (not born for some reason) can die and cause massive infection as it decays. A female may die during delivery. Are you willing to hand rear a litter of pups? This is NOT easy and very tiring. What if your female has poor mothering instincts? Will you take over? Are you willing to accept that you could lose your dog and her puppies? What if one is born deformed or has a problem show up weeks down the road – then what? Are you willing to have your children see the miracle of death? I have only scratched the tip of the iceberg...

If you own a stud dog, you will have someone's dog in your care for seven to ten days. You must ensure her safety, ensure another dog does not breed her, and that any of her needs are attended to. What if she will not breed naturally? Can you Artificially Inseminate?

Accepts responsibility for puppies. Puppies need to be with Mom for 8 weeks – in some areas it is illegal to sell or give away an animal younger. This means eight weeks of poop, piddle, and then the fun of a litter of pups playing with food as they grow. They will require vet exams and at least one set of shots before going to homes. Vet costs, feeding, time to socialize and clean up after, postnatal care of them and Mom all can be expensive. What if down the road your dog develops a problem, say starts having seizures. Are you willing to call everyone who bought a puppy from you and inform them? What if someone calls you down the road and cannot keep the puppy – now dog – what will you do? What health guarantee will you offer? What if someone's puppy

proves deaf, dysplastic, epileptic, what will you do? You brought the pups into the world; therefore, you are responsible.

I have only *touched* on responsible breeding. There volumes devoted to responsible breeding. Whether you own a male or female, you must act responsibly. Do not breed haphazardly. Do not breed to get a dog "just like Scruffy" – it won't happen. Do not breed to produce crosses (peke-a-poos, schoodles, etc.). Do not breed if you cannot devote the time and money to do it responsibly. If you cannot ensure good, loving homes for pups (they do not go to pet stores or get dumped at shelters or given to just anyone), do not breed.

I hope I have given you a bit of food for thought...