

Don't Just Ask a Breeder Questions — Ask the Right Questions

A lot of the questions we get from potential puppy owners are things like, "How many litters has the mother had?", "Have the puppies been socialised?" and "Can we see the mother?" There's nothing particularly wrong with any of those questions. The problem is that they've been lifted straight from the standard internet list of "Questions You Should Ask a Breeder", and they are incredibly easy for a bad breeder or puppy farmer to answer.

"Can I see Mum?" "Yes."

"Have the puppies been socialised?" "Yes."

"Have the parents been health tested?" "Yes."

What have you actually learnt about the breeder? Very little.

If a breeder can answer your question with a single word, there's a good chance you're asking the wrong question. The lack of depth in these standard questions makes it remarkably easy for a poor breeder to avoid scrutiny. And ultimately, that lack of information could contribute to you making a very bad decision when choosing your puppy.

Instead, ask questions that require the breeder to explain themselves. Ask them why they made a decision, what they were hoping to achieve, what they've learnt and what they would do differently. A knowledgeable breeder shouldn't need to make these answers up. They've already thought about them.

So here are 20 questions that, as a breeder, I would actually be excited to hear from a potential owner. They demonstrate real thought on the part of the buyer, but they also give me the opportunity to explain my breeding programme, my knowledge and the reasoning behind the decisions I make.

1: "How did you decide that this was the right time for this litter, and what factors will determine whether she has another litter in the future?"

Rather than: "How many litters has she had?"

What this tells you: You're exploring whether breeding decisions are based on the individual dog, her health and welfare, previous pregnancies and litters, genetics and the breeder's longer-term plans, rather than simply producing another litter of puppies.

2: "Tell me about the mother and father's temperaments. What type of dogs are they, and why did you choose to put these two dogs together?"

Rather than: "Can I meet the mother?"

What this tells you: This requires a breeder to demonstrate a genuine understanding of their dogs. They should be able to talk easily about temperament, strengths, weaknesses and why the two dogs complement one another. If they don't have a close relationship with

their dogs, or one of the parents is simply a convenient dog they had access to, this question may expose it.

3: "What health tests have you carried out, why did you choose those tests, and how did the results influence your breeding decision?"

Rather than: "Have the parents been health tested?"

What this tells you: Health testing isn't simply about collecting certificates. It requires an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses within a breed or cross and knowing how to use those results when making breeding decisions. A breeder should know what they're testing for, why they're testing for it and what the results actually mean.

4: "What diet have you chosen for your puppies, and does this differ from what you feed your adult dogs? What led you to those decisions?"

Rather than: "What have the puppies been fed?"

What this tells you: Are they making nutritional decisions based on knowledge and an understanding of what their dogs and puppies require, or have they simply chosen the easiest or cheapest option? You don't necessarily have to agree with their answer. What's important is whether they can explain it.

5: "What exactly have these puppies experienced since birth? Can you describe your socialisation programme week by week?"

Rather than: "Have the puppies been socialised?"

What this tells you: Real socialisation should involve thought, planning and observation. It is one of the foundations of giving a puppy a good start in life. If the breeder starts talking about this subject in enormous detail and you begin wondering whether you'll ever get home, that's probably a good sign. If the entire answer is, "They've met the children and heard the Hoover"...well.

6: "What parasite-control programme do you follow for both your adult dogs and your puppies, and why do you follow that schedule?"

Rather than: "Have they been wormed?"

What this tells you: There are many different approaches to worm and flea treatment. This question gives you an opportunity to discover how knowledgeable the breeder is, how much independent reading they've done and whether they understand why they're following their particular programme rather than simply doing something because they've always been told to do it.

7: "Which vaccines have been given, why have you chosen that protocol, and what advice do you give owners about socialising a puppy that isn't yet fully vaccinated?"

Rather than: "Have they been vaccinated?"

What this tells you: A knowledgeable breeder should be able to explain their vaccination decisions confidently. They should also be able to give you comprehensive advice about

balancing disease risk against the important developmental period during which appropriate socialisation needs to take place.

8: "Why did you choose this particular sire, and what qualities were you hoping to strengthen or improve?"

Rather than: "Can I see the pedigree?"

What this tells you: A pedigree is only useful if the breeder understands what's behind it. This question should open a conversation about the breeder's goals, what they know about their lines and what they were hoping this particular mating would produce. Or perhaps they simply put two available dogs together and hoped for the best. It's useful to know which.

9: "Why did you breed from her at this age, and what factors do you consider when deciding the best age to breed from a dog?"

Rather than: "How old are the parents?"

What this tells you: Age is only one part of a much bigger discussion. Previous litters, litter sizes, recovery, physical condition, health, how the mother copes with pregnancy and her maternal behaviour are all things you would expect a knowledgeable breeder to be able to discuss.

10: "How have the puppies in this litter been developing so far? What traits are you seeing that you've seen previously, what is different this time, and what variation are you seeing between the puppies?"

Rather than: "How big will the puppy grow?"

What this tells you: Experienced breeders should know their dogs and bloodlines well. More importantly, they should have spent considerable time actually observing this particular litter rather than simply feeding them, cleaning them and waiting until they're old enough to sell.

11: "What sort of things do your previous puppy owners contact you about most often? Can you give me a couple of examples of some of the more unusual requests for help you've dealt with?"

Rather than: "Do you offer support after I take my puppy home?"

What this tells you: No puppy comes with a guarantee of an entirely trouble-free life. At some point you may need advice. "Lifetime support" appears in an awful lot of puppy adverts. Unfortunately, sometimes it amounts to little more than two words in an advert. Ask the breeder to demonstrate what lifetime support actually means.

12: "What mistakes do new owners most commonly make with puppies you have bred?"

Rather than: "How much exercise will my puppy need?"

What this tells you: Experienced breeders who genuinely maintain relationships with their owners tend to see certain problems repeatedly. They should be able to tell you what

those problems are, why they happen and how they've helped previous owners resolve them.

13: "How do you decide which puppy is best suited to each family?"

Rather than: "Can I choose my puppy?"

What this tells you: A responsible breeder should be able to offer advice based on weeks of observing the litter and the individual temperaments and personalities developing within it. Videos and regular "pupdates" can also allow you to follow that development yourself. The breeder should be able to guide you towards puppies they believe may suit you and explain why. Ultimately, however, this is the dog you may be living with for the next 12, 14 or even 16 years, so you should be involved in that decision.

14: "What does Kennel Club registration actually tell me, and what doesn't it tell me?"

Rather than: "Are the puppies Kennel Club registered?"

What this tells you: There is a great deal of misunderstanding about what Kennel Club registration does and does not mean. Registration alone isn't a guarantee of health, temperament, responsible breeding or the quality of the breeder. Asking them to explain its significance should open up a much more useful conversation than simply asking whether the puppies are registered.

15: "What makes your breeding programme different from everyone else's?"

Rather than: "Why should I buy a puppy from you?"

What this tells you: A breeder who genuinely cares about what they're producing should have a clear philosophy. They should be able to tell you what they're trying to achieve and what they do differently. "Our puppies are raised in a loving family home" might sound lovely, but you need considerably more information than that before choosing your breeder.

16: "What qualities were you hoping to combine from each breed, and what potential drawbacks were you trying to avoid?"

Rather than: "Why did you choose this particular cross?"

What this tells you: This is particularly useful when looking at crossbred puppies such as Cockapoos or Labradoodles. A knowledgeable breeder should be able to explain exactly why those two breeds were selected, what characteristics they hoped to combine and, equally importantly, which characteristics they didn't want. "We thought they'd make cute puppies" probably isn't the depth of breeding programme you're looking for.

17: "What health problems can still occur in this cross, and what have you done to reduce those risks?"

Rather than: "Are these puppies likely to be healthy because they're crossbreeds?"

What this tells you: Crossbreeds are not automatically healthy simply because they're crossbred. A responsible breeder should understand the inherited conditions that can

occur in both parent breeds, where those risks overlap and what health testing or breeding decisions they've used to reduce those risks. This is an excellent question because someone breeding crosses simply because they're popular may have never seriously considered the answer.

18: "What variation do you expect within this litter, and what should each family realistically expect regarding coat, grooming, moulting and maintenance?"

Rather than: "What coat type will the puppy have?"

What this tells you: Particularly with crosses, puppies within the same litter can develop quite differently. An experienced breeder should understand that variation and give realistic expectations rather than promising that every puppy will have a particular coat type or won't shed.

19: "What sort of family would you refuse to sell one of these puppies to, and why?"

Rather than: "Will this puppy suit my family?"

What this tells you: Responsible breeders know their dogs aren't suitable for everybody. Listen carefully to this answer. A breeder should have homes they would turn down because the breed, cross or individual puppy simply wouldn't be suitable for that family's circumstances. If every home is apparently the perfect home, you might want to ask yourself whether suitability or the sale is the breeder's priority.

20: "What have you changed about your breeding programme over the last five years as you've learnt more?"

Rather than: "How long have you been breeding?"

What this tells you: The best breeders never stop learning. Health testing changes. Genetics advances. Research develops. Knowledge about nutrition, puppy development, behaviour and training changes. Someone should be able to explain how their breeding programme has evolved as their knowledge and experience have increased. There's an old question about experience that fits rather nicely here: Do they have 20 years' experience, or one year's experience repeated 20 times?

The best questions aren't the ones that can be answered with "yes" or "no". They're the questions that start conversations. Every detailed answer gives you more information and, importantly, gives you opportunities to ask further questions and the more a breeder talks, the more you begin to understand their knowledge, their experience, their philosophy and their relationship with their dogs.

You don't necessarily need to agree with every answer. In fact, I'd be suspicious of any guide that told you there was only one acceptable answer to every question, but what you're looking for is whether the breeder can explain why they do what they do or think what they think. Remember, many breeders advertise "lifetime support". Asking questions before you buy your puppy gives you an opportunity to test the depth of that knowledge before you discover, six months later when you actually need their help, that "lifetime support" ended shortly after your bank transfer cleared.

Choosing the right breeder might just be the most important decision you make for you and your new puppy.