

Twenty-five questions for puppy owners to ask the breeder

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There is nothing cuter than a Golden Retriever puppy, but please be informed before you buy a purebred dog. A reputable breeder will not be offended by a polite question concerning their dogs. A little research now may save you heartache in the long run. Also, do not take the kids to see “Fluffy’s puppies” until you’ve done your homework over the phone. No matter how awful the breeder might be, it is very difficult to ignore a cute fluffy puppy, especially for children. Ask questions before you look, and if you don’t like the answers, move on.

Now is not the time to “bargain hunt.” A well-bred puppy is a small investment for a lifetime of joy. You may know of someone who has purchased a backyard-bred dog, puppy mill or pet store puppy and had great success, but please know that this is not always the case. The growing incidence of health problems makes it prudent to be on guard. Temperament problems, hip and elbow dysplasia, eye problems, heart defects, swallowing disorders, allergies, epilepsy, thyroid disease and cancer are among the growing problems we face.

Here are some questions to help guide your conversations with breeders. I hope they are helpful in finding a wonderful, loving, healthy companion.

1. Where did you find out about this breeder? Responsible breeders will only breed when they have a waiting list of puppy buyers. They don’t generally don’t advertise in the newspaper. They will not sell to pet shops or place signs out on their front lawns.
2. What clubs/organizations do you belong to (i.e., kennel clubs, rescue organizations, breed clubs)? A good breeder will belong to local and national clubs and sign a code of ethics . They will be active in some level of dog sport.
3. What dog-related activities do you participate in? (conformation showing, obedience, tracking, hunting, etc.)
4. How long have you been in the breed? Are you involved in other breeds as well? You probably want to avoid anyone who has switched breeds every couple of years, from popular breed to popular breed. Look for someone that has experience with the breed in which you are interested. Be wary of people who have multiple breeds. It is not uncommon to find breeders with several breeds, but a breeder producing litters of many different breeds of dog is not going to be your best source and probably should be suspected as being a puppy mill or a disreputable breeder.

5. How often do you breed and how often has this bitch been bred? Breeding every heat cycle is too often and may indicate that profit is the primary motive for the breeding.
6. Are both the sire and the dam at least two years old? Final hip and elbow clearances are not issued by the OFA (Orthopedic Foundation for Animals) until the dog is 24 months of age. The Golden is not considered mature before that time.
7. Are all four grandparents, siblings of the parents tested for these clearances? A responsible breeder will keep track of these statistics and honestly discuss any problems that have occurred in the lines and what steps they are doing to prevent them from reoccurring.
8. Are both parents free of allergies and epilepsy? Dogs with allergies and/or epilepsy should not be bred. Idiopathic epilepsy, which is hard to diagnose, results in recurrent seizures which have no apparent environmental or physiological cause. Inherited epilepsy may appear between one and three years of age or as late as age five. Currently, there remains no registry or certification for epilepsy-free dogs.
9. Do both parents (the sire and the dam) have hip and elbow clearances from the OFA or PennHIP? A veterinarian can perform the x-rays, but they should be evaluated by one of the established organizations. Ask to see the certificates. "My vet says the hips look good" is not a valid clearance. You can also check clearances with the OFA on line if you know either the dog's AKC registration number or the registered name of the dog at www.offa.org.
10. Do both parents have current eye clearances? They should be checked yearly and certified as normal by a board-certified ophthalmologist. For information about eye diseases visit www.vet.purdue.edu/~yshen/cerf.html. There is no excuse for missing an annual check-up.
11. Do both parents have a heart checked for SAS (sub-aortic stenosis) by a board-certified cardiologist? In some areas (like Alaska), it is very difficult to have this procedure performed by a board-certified cardiologist, but responsible breeders make the effort to find one at clinics or by traveling great distances.
12. Have both parents been tested for thyroid disease? Thyroid testing is done at Cornell and the University of Michigan. The OFA now provides a registry for thyroid screening. Screening for thyroid abnormalities should be done annually from ages one to six. Avoid breeders who say it is too expensive to test for these things.
13. What kind of congenital defects are present in this breed? What steps are you taking to decrease these defects? Avoid anyone who says "none," or "not in my dogs!" There are genetic problems that are present in almost every breed.

14. Are both Golden parents free of allergies, hot spots, skin problems and chronic ear infections? Are both parents free from esophageal (swallowing) disorders?
15. Will the breeder take the dog back at any time, for any reason, if you cannot keep it? This is the hallmark of responsible breeding (and the quickest, best way to make rescue obsolete).
16. Are there a majority of titled dogs (the initials Ch., OTCh, CD, JH, WC, etc.) in the first two generations? The term “champion lines” means nothing if those titles are back three or more generations or there are only one or two in the whole pedigree.
17. Is the breeder knowledgeable about raising puppies, critical neonatal periods, proper socialization techniques? Puppies that are raised without high exposure to gentle handling, human contact and a wide variety of noises and experiences or are removed from their dam or littermates before seven weeks of age may exhibit a wide variety of behavioral problems. Temperament, a genetic trait carried over from the parents, still needs development from the early beginnings of a puppy’s life. The breeder should provide extensive socialization and human interaction to the puppies in the litter.
18. Have the puppies’ temperaments been evaluated and can the breeder guide you to the puppy that will best suit your lifestyle? A very shy puppy will not do well in a noisy household with small children, just as a very dominant puppy won’t flourish in a sedate, senior citizen household. A caring breeder will know the puppies and be able to show you how to test them so that good matches can be made.
19. When you visit the litter do not be offended if the breeder does not allow people before four weeks of age to see them. Expect to be asked to remove shoes and wash hands and not to visit if you have been around an ill dog.
20. Are the breeder’s other dogs friendly? Do they have good temperaments?
21. Do the puppies seem healthy, with no discharge from eyes or nose, no loose stools, no foul-smelling ears? Are their coats soft, full and clean? Do they have plenty of energy when awake yet calm down easily when gently stroked?
22. When ready to go home, do the puppies have their first shots and have they been wormed?
23. Do the puppies have clean water, are their surrounding clean? Are they bright eyed and no discharge from their eyes? Are they at least seven weeks old before being sent home?
24. Is the yard and or kennel free of feces, urine and debris?
25. What are your overall feelings about the environment? About the breeder? Trust your instincts!

Take the time to read everything you can about Golden Retrievers. I suggest visiting the web site of the Golden Retriever Club of America at www.grca.org.

And as cute as puppies are, have you considered a rescue dog? There are rescue groups throughout the country looking for loving, qualified homes. A homeless Golden Retriever can be your devoted companion, and you will get an extra jewel in your crown for helping a needy dog. A list of rescue organizations can also be found at www.grca.org.

Originally printed in the Golden Retriever News Magazine, October 2003

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