

How to choose a designer cross - without getting stitched up



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Trends change in the dog world, just as they do in every other area of life. One minute we're singing along to Boy George on the radio, the next we're dancing 'Gangnam' style in front of our iPads, and while ten years ago my classes were full of Labs, Golden Retrievers and German Shepherd Dogs, today, other types of dog have taken their place in popularity.

Over the last three years, the demographics of our dogs in classes have changed dramatically. Pure breeds no longer hold the top spots, and true mixed breeds are relatively rare – instead, the 'designer' crosses have launched ahead, with their numbers now dominating the new puppy scene.

Top of the list for us last year were Cockerpoos – their delightful personalities and practical size making them a number one choice for families in our area in the South of England. We also enjoyed meeting and training a plethora of other first-crosses, including Westichons, Cavapoos, Puggles and even a handful (and I mean a handful!) of Huskamutes... Husky/Malamute crosses.

However, there is a less up-beat side to this trend – one which threatens dog welfare and prospective owners alike - it has opened the floodgates for puppy farms and dealers to ply their trade, and it has made looking for a first-cross puppy something of a minefield. With no regulation, and very little in the way of public guidance, just how is someone supposed to find a healthy and happy puppy from a reliable breeder, especially when pretty much the only way of finding a cross-breed dog is via the internet?

A quick search reveals the problem almost instantly. Pop 'Cavapoo puppies for sale' into Google and you'll be met with a bewildering array of ads from sites such as 'Preloved' and 'Breederonline', as well as independent sites. The prices range from £200 to £1100 for a pup – with no real way of telling whether you are looking at a cunningly disguised ad from a puppy farm, or one from a genuine, loving family home. Of course, all claim to be breeding healthy puppies that have been vet checked – and you can watch video clips of puppies cavorting and being cuddled by cute children to convince you further that this is the real deal.

Even on calling, it's hard to pull the facts from the carefully calculated sales talk of some of the sellers. Ask whether the puppies have been born and raised in the house, and you are told, no, they aren't – but that's because we are "professional breeders, not amateurs."

To someone who doesn't know better this makes it sound as though buying a pup from a 'pet' home is somehow sub-standard to buying from a 'trade outlet' – which from a behavioural stand-point alone is highly unlikely to be the case.

The claim that, "We have scrupulously clean breeding kennels," sounds wonderfully professional – although in one establishment that I phoned, they failed to tell me that they have over 100 of these – that was something I had to discover for myself through the twilight-barking that is the behaviourist network!

So, what are the guidelines for those people who just want to buy a lovely puppy of their choice of crossbreed from a home environment? Do all the 'old' snippets of advice still add up in this brave new world of crossbreed pups?

Always see the puppies with their mother

Great advice – but for newbie pet people, how would you know that the female dog you are presented with is actually the mum? First and foremost, she needs to be at least one of the breeds/crossbreeds that the puppies are! This sounds obvious, but a client of mine only a couple of months ago showed me a photo of her puppy at 4 weeks old. He was sold as a 'Schnoodle' – a Mini Schnauzer crossed with a Poodle, and there he was sitting with his 'Mum' – a lovely looking Staffe-cross! Not quite what it said on the tin!

Secondly, it needs to be apparent that the 'mum' is a nursing mother. This is pretty obvious, as nursing bitches have prominent teats from feeding their offspring, and are clearly at home with their own puppies.

Finally, be aware that if mum isn't there, it's suspicious. It's not unheard of for prospective owners to travel a long way to look at a litter of pups only to be told on their arrival that mum is taken ill, at a friend's house, or worse.

Anti-puppy farm campaigner Kerry Bowles says this is nothing new. She says that dealers will stop at nothing to convince you to buy from them, and have some remarkable excuses to explain away sensible questions about where the mother is. She says, "One puppy farmer famously tells the purchasers that the Dam escaped from the garden and got run over. They even manage to cry at that point, and this delightful individual has told this story for the last 15 years!"

I recently went to a local pet shop and discovered – to my horror - that they were selling puppies there, in pretty abysmal circumstances. All fully licenced and vet inspected of course. The owner of the shop claimed that all his puppies were 'home bred and reared' – indeed one of the puppies they had left over from a litter had actually been bred by his wife at home. Oddly, he didn't seem to know whether mum was a Pug or a Poodle, and hadn't a clue how many pups were in the litter. Oh really?

Anyone who genuinely owns the mother will surely know everything about her, so asking questions in advance and on meeting is a good idea. How many litters has she had? What funny little ways does she have? Do they own any relatives of the puppies, such as grandmother, or aunts or uncles? How old are these adults (this gives you a good idea as to whether their dogs are healthy and long-lived). Can you meet them?

Have the puppies been born and raised in the house, as part of the family?

This is one question that you can probably only get a feel for when you visit. Let your instincts guide you here, and be observant. You should get the impression that the pups really have been brought up in the house - not at the bottom of the garden in a shed or 'bought in'. I would be happier buying a puppy from a 'hectic' household than one where there is little interaction or human contact.

Puppies should be bright and bouncy, not lethargic, and you should be allowed to handle them, cuddle them and pet and stroke the mother. Look for photos around the house of the owner's family with their pet. If you don't see any, then ask to see some. Not many true dog lovers are reluctant to show you pictures of their beloved pets! Mum's temperament will be a big indicator of what the pups are like, so walk away if she's nervous, aggressive or very barky - it's not just 'being protective'!

What tests for hereditary diseases have the parents had?

Do your homework, and make sure you know the names of the main problems that the parents' breeds often encounter. Does the breeder then sound knowledgeable when they talk about this? Just saying that crossbreeds have 'hybrid vigour' and are therefore healthy is not enough!

The breeder should have taken careful steps to ensure that both parents have been tested and are clear of hereditary diseases – and it's up to the buyer to check this out.

Are the breeders selling lots of other breeds or types as well?

Lots of different breeds, or pups of different ages for sale, indicates puppy farming or a puppy farm outlet. Most good breeders concentrate on very few breeds or crosses, and true 'family pet' litters are going to be one-offs, not part of a production line.

What made them decide to have puppies, and what made them choose the breed mix?

This is a great question. Good answers do not include, "Well, this mix is just so popular at the moment," "My children wanted us to," or "Well, I used to run a car showroom... but my business went bust."

Puppies are precious living creatures. They deserve the best possible start, and I believe that prospective owners are owed this too. Those first weeks of life are so influential that it truly is worth spending extra time and effort to make sure that the puppy you buy is right in every way. Of course, it's hard to see a litter of pups and then walk away, but not nearly as hard as the heart-ache of knowing that you have perpetuated a trade in puppies that is not just puppy farming, but puppy harming.