

QUESTIONS FOR BREEDERS

*Sandra Myers, CPDT-KA
Alohomora Dog Training*

A GOOD BREEDER WILL EXPECT YOU TO HAVE LOTS OF QUESTIONS, AND WILL ASK YOU LOTS OF QUESTIONS. This is because they care about their puppies, who is taking them home, and how they will be raised and trained. If they are unresponsive to your questions, and don't ask you questions, find another breeder. Keep in mind that it is expected for a breeder to put you on a waiting list. They don't constantly shoot out puppies as responsible hobby breeders will only have 1-3 litters a year.

DO NOT FALL IN LOVE WITH A PUPPY BY COLOR/MARKINGS OR FIRST IMPRESSION. Remember that temperament and genetic behavioral history are the most critical components! A cute puppy that grows up to attack your neighbor's kids, destroys your house, or tries to eat a strange dog isn't cute.

ABOVE ALL: CHOOSE THE BREEDER, NOT THE PUPPY. THIS IS A PERSON YOU WILL AND SHOULD HAVE SOME SEMBLANCE OF A RELATIONSHIP WITH FOR THE ENTIRETY OF YOUR DOG'S LIFE. A GOOD BREEDER WILL DO THE PUPPY MATCHING FOR YOU BASED ON YOUR PREFERENCES AND THE DOG'S PERSONALITY. THEY SPEND THE FIRST EIGHT WEEKS OF LIFE GETTING TO KNOW THESE PUPPIES INSIDE AND OUT. TRUST THEIR JUDGMENT, AND IF YOU FEEL LIKE YOU CAN'T, FIND ANOTHER BREEDER.

About the Breeder:

1. Why did you become a breeder?

You're looking for an answer that isn't about money. You want to find the "hobby breeders" that breed to better their line.

2. How long have you been breeding this particular breed?

A good breeder doesn't switch breeds every few years, breed many different breeds at once, or has multiple litters from different bitches within short time spans. Breeders who have worked with one breed for many years know the breed and their bloodlines better.

3. What clubs/organizations do you belong to (i.e., kennel clubs, sporting clubs, rescue organizations, breed clubs, etc.)?

A good breeder may belong to local and national clubs and sign a code of ethics with them. They will be active on some level in dog sports (showing, obedience, agility, IPO/Shutzhund, Mondio, etc.) and take pride in the titling their dogs receive.

About the bloodline:

1. What are the congenital defects in this breed, specifically your line?

Avoid the breeder who says "none" or "I don't know" or "not my dogs!" A good breeder tells you about any potential problem in the breed, from a droopy left ear to deafness to epilepsy.

2. What steps have you taken to decrease defects in your dogs?

You want to hear words like "screened" and "tested" and "certified."

Look for PennHIP or Orthopedic Foundation for Animals (OFA) certification. These are expert, unbiased evaluators who know exactly what to look for. "I get them x-rayed/bloodwork done/regular check-up's and the vet says they're healthy" is a HUGE sign to put a big red line over that breeder's name.

3. What are the behavioral weaknesses of your bloodlines?

A good breeder will be very up front about their dogs' potential ailments. If the breeder says "my dogs are perfect," find another breeder. Major weaknesses to note are barking, separation anxiety, aggression/reactivity, shyness, or other concerning behaviors assuming the traits *are not a recognised characteristic of the breed*.

4. What are the behavioral strengths of your bloodlines?

You want to investigate their dog's ability to settle down or be calm (particularly indoors), obedience, gentleness, sociality, and adaptability + resiliency (i.e. to new places, new situations). If a breeder begins telling you how much their dogs like to protect their family/home (code for: this dog might kill someone who wanders onto your lawn), how they can run all day (code for: this dog will never stop moving and may have genetic predisposition to anxiety), how great they are at being independent (code for: this dog is easily distracted or I do not socialize well in the first 8 weeks of life), or how they'll be glued to your side all day (code for: this dog will destroy your house if you walk outside), consider asking some more questions for clarification.

5. What is the lifespan of your bloodlines?

Anything under 8 years for giant dog breeds, 10 years for large, and 12-15 years for medium and small dogs suggests that the dogs are prone to serious health problems that will end their lives early. Ask clarifying questions.

6. What are the grooming requirements and how is the shedding of your bloodlines?

This is a trait you should be fully aware of before you contact a breeder. **ALL DOGS REQUIRE SOME LEVEL OF GROOMING**. Are you, as the owner, willing and able to either afford to pay someone to maintain your dog's grooming needs or meet them yourself? Is your breed double-coated? What does that mean?

7. How do your dogs behave around children and pets/animals (cats, etc.)?

About the parents:

1. How often do you breed, how many times has this bitch been bred, what age was she when she had her first litter, or is *this* her first litter?

Breeding every heat cycle (6-12 months) is too often and may indicate that the breeder is after profit. Also, good breeders will not breed dogs under 2 years or over 6-7 years of age.

2. Why did you choose these parents to breed?

A good breeder will give you detailed answers about temperament, health, drive, accomplishments, etc. "They're beautiful," "We wanted to have a puppy from our dog because we love him/her," "We wanted to experience puppies," are not acceptable reasons for breeding dogs. Both parents should also be AKC registered, though a clarifying question about inbreeding should be asked as AKC does not usually recognize this as an issue if the bitch or sire in question is not a direct first-generation descendant.

3. Could you tell me what health tests are performed on the parents and grandparents? Are the results submitted into the OFA (www.ofa.org)?

Routine health checkups are NOT sufficient. A good breeder will complete tests for all critical areas. Avoid breeders who say testing is too expensive, or too expensive to post online.

Check for...

Hips/Elbow: Both parents should have "good," preferably "excellent," 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 valid clearance.

Eyes: Eyes should be checked yearly and certified as normal by a board-certified ophthalmologist.

Heart: Heart should be checked by a board-certified cardiologist

Thyroid: 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.

4. Are all four grandparents tested for these clearances? Did any of the grandparents have behavioral concerns?

5. Are both parents and sets of grandparents free of allergies, skin problems, chronic ear infections, swallowing disorders and epilepsy?

If not, are you as the owner, financially prepared to maintain regular care of potential health issues?

6. What are the good and bad points of the parents, what titles do they have, and do the grandparents have these as well?

Why: You want to see show and working titles (Ch., OTCh, CD, JH, WC, and potentially many others) all over that pedigree. Don't be afraid to ask to see certificates and proof!

What YOU Can Observe:

1. Do you have the parents on site?

This is a bit of a trick question. You should always be able to see the mother but many breeders often don't have the father on hand (he was likely sent off to serve as a sire for another reputable breeder). If he is not on site, ask for information and pictures of him, and his owner's/kennel's contact information in case you have questions for them. As for the mother, she may be a little anxious with strangers around her puppies and it's not uncommon for a good breeder to decline the opportunity for you to see the mother with her puppies, but on her own you want to see a well-socialized, calm and well-mannered dog.

2. May I see any other dogs you have that are related to this line?

Are the breeder's other dogs friendly? Do they have good temperaments? They should be a reflection of what you want to see when your puppy grows into an adult dog. Also, are they clean? Is their housing clean and spacious? Do they all live inside a climate controlled area? Do they have adequate water and shelter available?

About your puppy:

1. Where will the puppies be raised?

"In the house" is the best answer. You want a puppy who knows what the dishwasher sounds like, a dog you don't have to peel off the ceiling when a pan drops, who has set a paw on linoleum, carpet, hard wood, and tile. While it's important to allow the puppies supervised exploration time of the outside world, breeders who keep the bunch in their garage, barn, yard, etc. should be avoided.

2. How have you socialized them?

Good breeders make sure puppies have been safely exposed to other human and dog adults of both genders, children, other dogs, and exposed to a wide variety of noises and experiences. Good breeders should have an extensive answer for this. GREAT breeders will be a part of a puppy raising program, such as Jean Donaldson's Puppy Culture (<https://puppyculture.com/>). This website provides a directory of breeders who practice this - it's not promised that they are all adequate, but it's a great starting point for research.

3. May I see the puppies?

Outsiders are often not allowed to see the puppies before 4 weeks of age, and even then you should be asked to remove shoes and wash hands. 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 the puppies have clean water and clean surroundings? Is the yard/kennel free of waste/debris? Everything should look good.

4. How have the puppies' temperaments been evaluated?

There are many tests for temperament evaluation – ask which ones have been done and what the results were.

5. Can you guide me to the puppy that will best suit my family and lifestyle?

Good breeders will have studied the puppies so they can recommend each one to a suitable home. Watch how the puppies play together. You should identify and avoid the most obnoxious puppy (they'll be pushy, out front, and knocking the others over). You should also avoid the shyest or most nervous puppy, who might approach with a very low head and tail or may not approach at all. You are looking for the puppy in between! A "temperament test" can be conducted by you: simply "accidentally" drop your car keys within 5 feet of the litter and see which puppies confidently ignore or explore the noise, and which show avoidance behaviors. The puppies that avoid the stimuli should be avoided.

6. At 7-8 weeks, do the puppies have their first round of shots and have they been dewormed? How old were the puppies when they were weaned off mom and what have they been fed since?

Pups should be dewormed at 2, 4, 6, and 8 weeks, and a record kept to document what was given to the pup and at what age. Puppies should come complete with a minimum of their first round of shots - paperwork for all the puppy's healthcare visits are important so you don't over-vax! Puppies should be weaned no sooner than 4 weeks of age, and should have a healthy diet afterwards - avoid breeders who feed "grocery store" brand kibbles or unbalanced raw or cooked diets.

7. At what age would I receive the puppy?

Good breeders will never send a puppy home before 8 weeks of age, as earlier weeks are important for puppies to learn from their mothers and littermates. Some breeders may prefer to hang onto their puppies until 9-10 weeks of age - this is perfectly fine so long as they can update you on what levels of socialization are happening and how the puppy is reacting every few days.

8. Do you track the puppies you sell?

Good breeders will keep track of all their puppies, because they love each one and want to know how the pups are developing physically and mentally. They will check in to see if there are difficulties in the dog/owner relationship.

9. What guarantees do you provide? May I see the contract?

You want to see a contract explaining the breeder's responsibilities should the puppy develop a congenital ailment. Good breeders should offer to take the pup back *at any time during its life* to avoid it ending up in a shelter or unsafe living situation. The contract may state your responsibility to spay/neuter your pet by a certain age (for the health of your dog, this age should not be younger than 18 months minimum), if you have breeding rights and what they are, provide remaining vaccination information, possibly require a certain diet for the dog's first year or every year of life, or possibly require that the dog is trained with a set of particular methods.

10. What paperwork will I receive if I purchase a puppy?

AKC papers and a record of vaccinations/worming are NOT enough. A good breeder should provide those as well as a health certificate from the OFA/PennHip and/or other health testing organizations, and a veterinarian check-off regarding that your particular pup is at a good weight and parasite free.

11. What type of training methods do you use for early socialization and training?

Breeders who use physical punishment or force should be avoided. Puppies go through very critical socialization/learning periods between birth and 16 weeks of age, and using physical force or punishment with dogs this young can have a lifelong impression on their learning abilities, temperament, and can cause a predisposition to aggression, anxiety, and/or fearful behavior.

DO NOT take a puppy without all of the paperwork in hand.

DO NOT pay in advance, other than a deposit that should amount to less than half the cost of a puppy after the contract is signed.

If you show up to pay and pick up your puppy and the records are not available, arrange to return later when everything is prepared - but note that this is a bad sign!