

## An Open Letter to a Puppy Buyer

I'm an average sort of dog breeder, I guess. I have too many dogs, love every one of them and wish I could have more. I spend more money on dog shows in a year than I do on five year's worth of cloths. My doctor had been retired for three years before I found out, but my veterinarian's phone number is more familiar to me than my own. In fact when he adds to his clinic, the new wing will be named in my honor. After all, without my business he couldn't afford to expand.

The popular term for a person like me is hobby breeder, but I kind of think that obsession describes it better. A hobby sounds like something you pick up in your spare time, like stamps or ceramics, but dogs aren't a sometime thing. About this hobby breeder business though. It's probably called that because hobbies are usually something on which you spend money rather than make it and boy does that describe dogs!

Oh, I know some people are bound to think, "Humph, with the price of purebred pups, some of those breeders are making a bundle!" But there's a saying in my hobby – that if you're making money, you're not doing it right. There are a lot of expenses like vet bills, dog food, stud fees, tattooing, microchipping, registrations, all the pre-breeding testing, post breeding visits to the vets and advertising. If you start to think of it as a business, you start trying to shave expenses and show a profit – and the dogs suffer for it. So you think of it as a labor of love and damn the expenses!

### A TOP DOG FANTASY

Then why breed dogs at all? Maybe it's because puppies are such pure delights that to have a litter playing around the house is like living in a Disney movie. Maybe it's because I think my breed is so great that I like to see other nice people enjoy their company too. Maybe, it's because this could be the litter that contains that one perfect pup with all the special ingredients to become the best show dog ever. Other women fantasize about being shipwrecked on a deserted island with Burt Reynolds. In my own special fantasy, I'm being handed the Best in Show Ribbon at New York City's glamorous Westminster show while this magnificent dog that I've bred stands in the spotlight and charms the crowd with her poise and presence. Maybe that dog is in the next litter.

So I breed a litter every now and then. Not too often, because you can't run off to shows when you've got a litter of pups looking to be fed four times a day. They take a lot of time and work and don't leave you many spare moments. But I think they're worth it.

"How can you bear to part with them?" people ask. And truthfully, it isn't easy. The pups are born in a spare room and as they grow their territory expands until they're old enough to join the mainstream of the rest of the household.

I get to watch each developing personality and to know each one's nature. I watch them change from deaf, sightless, twitching blobs into positive characters that explore their territory with the tenacity of Cortez or Balboa. After eight weeks of constant companionship, I'm not anxious to hand them over to just anyone. I really try to find the best homes possible for my pups. That's why I screen buyers.

### AN "INVENTORY" OF LOVE

It all starts when they first call. Nothing irritates me more than callers who begin as though they were connected to the order desk in an auto parts supply store.

The first words are. "Hello. Do you have any puppies and how much are they?"

Do you have any pups? Unless you still believe in the Stork Delivery Service, the question conjures up a picture of a stock department with shelves of merchandise. Cold. Please remember I'm not a Dollar store!

Or they ask, "I want a dog for my husband's birthday. I'd like a black and white female who'll be eight weeks old on April 23."

"Sure thing! I'll just run back to the stock room again where I'll check under B for Black and F for female." I tell the buyer.

I often sound like don't want to sell the pups. I tell the people how much exercise they require, how much they eat and remind them that they're not the quietest animals in the world. If they're still determined, I invite them out to my place to meet the spotted gang.

It's really a sort of trial by fire when they show up at my home. First they have to drive way out into the west country.....into the bush and foothills on almost 20 kms of gravel roads to get to my place and look out for the steep hills and wildlife including cougars. The dogs (who have no manners) greet prospective buyers with all due enthusiasm leaping and licking faces and while I'm chatting away with the visitors, I'm watching for all sorts of little telltale things. Does one member of the family shrink back or push a puppy away? Is one person wildly enthusiastic while the other seems cold and disinterested? Does someone seem a little disturbed to find a dog hair decorating his or her clothing? It could be that a pup could be a bone of contention in the family.

Innocent words can be a warning. If someone remarks that they hate to see dogs 'cooped up' and think they should have their freedom, they're not likely to end up with one of my pups. I don't want to see one of my pups clobbered by a car while roaming the roadside, or choking on a chicken bone from raided garbage.

One couple happened to arrive while I was out in the back yard beating the bejabbers out of a living room scatter rug. Standing in the midst of a dense cloud of disrupted dust, I blithely remarked, "That's the sort of dirt four furry feet can bring in." I was exaggerating slightly, since sixteen feet had actually brought in the dirt, but the lady looked slightly aghast and murmured, "Well, we could always keep the dog in the basement." "No way!" I said, "I sell dogs for pets, not basements."

### SUITABLE CANDIDATES WELCOME

You know the kind of people I like? I like the ones who ask lots of questions, the ones who want to see all my dogs and the ones who ask if there are any books they can read to learn more about the breed. I like the ones who ask me to suggest training classes or show them how to groom the dogs. I like the people who speak fondly of dogs they have had that have passed on, tell you of the clever things they did and show pictures slightly tattered from much handling and perhaps a tear or two. Most of all, I like the people who will love the pups as much as I do. And that's a very tall order.