

Ask Dr. Boyer

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All Breeders Are Not Created Equal

So, you've decided to get a puppy. You've spent a lot of time searching the internet to learn about different breeds, and now it's time to find the perfect dog. The purpose of this article is to discuss key points to consider when finding your puppy, and to make the best choice to ensure that the puppy you purchase is healthy and will meet your lifestyle and expectations.

Many of our versatile breeds are in high demand and, often, short supply. As you search around for a breeder, it is easy to get puppy fever and commit to purchasing a puppy from any breeder who has an available puppy and will take a deposit from you.

In ideal circumstances, you should have an on-going positive relationship with your breeder. Purchasing a puppy is not just a routine action; you're not buying a toaster. You may find yourself needing follow-on support with training, health questions and general information about the breed. A breeder should be there to support you after the sale and should want to assist you in making a smooth transition with your puppy.

Breeders and buyers need to interview each other. A breeder should take the time to understand you, your family and your living situation and be comfortable with where the puppy is going. The breeder should have sufficient information to know the purchaser is suited for both the breed in general and the characteristics of the specific litter. Temperament, training needs and energy levels vary by breed. What you read on the internet about a breed may not be accurate. Each breeder should understand the temperament of their dogs and make a judgment as to whether they are a good fit for a prospective family.

Some questions that may be asked of you are:

- What do you envision doing with the dog (hunt, performance work, family pet, search and rescue, breeding, etc.)?
- What is your dog experience? What breeds did you previously own and what did you like or not like about them?
- How do you intend to train the puppy (professional trainer, self train, etc.)?
- What is your hunting style? What type of training method would you use to train a hunting dog? Would you send your dog for training?
- What is your work schedule?
- Have you made provisions for someone to be with the young puppy during work hours?
- Where will the puppy live (indoors, outdoors, both)?
- Where will the puppy be when you are not home?
- Does anyone in your family have allergies to animals?
- Do you have children? Ages? Have they been around dogs?
- Do you have a fenced yard? How high is the fence?
- How do you plan to exercise the puppy?
- Have you ever relinquished a dog for any reason to a rescue, breeder or shelter?
- What happened to the previous dogs/pets you've owned?
- Are you willing to pick the puppy up in person? Are you willing to have a home inspection? Will you send the breeder photos of your home if they can't visit due to distance?
- Do you have personal and veterinary references?

Reputable breeders ask these types of questions, and more. Many require you to visit their home or at least do an interview by video conferencing if distance precludes an in-person interview. Breeders who have been involved in their breed for quite some time understand the unique needs of their breed. There are some breeds that wouldn't do well living in an outdoor kennel. Others have a particular hunting style that may not match with your expectations. A knowledgeable breeder will take the time to ask questions to help determine the likelihood of an owner's success with their breed.

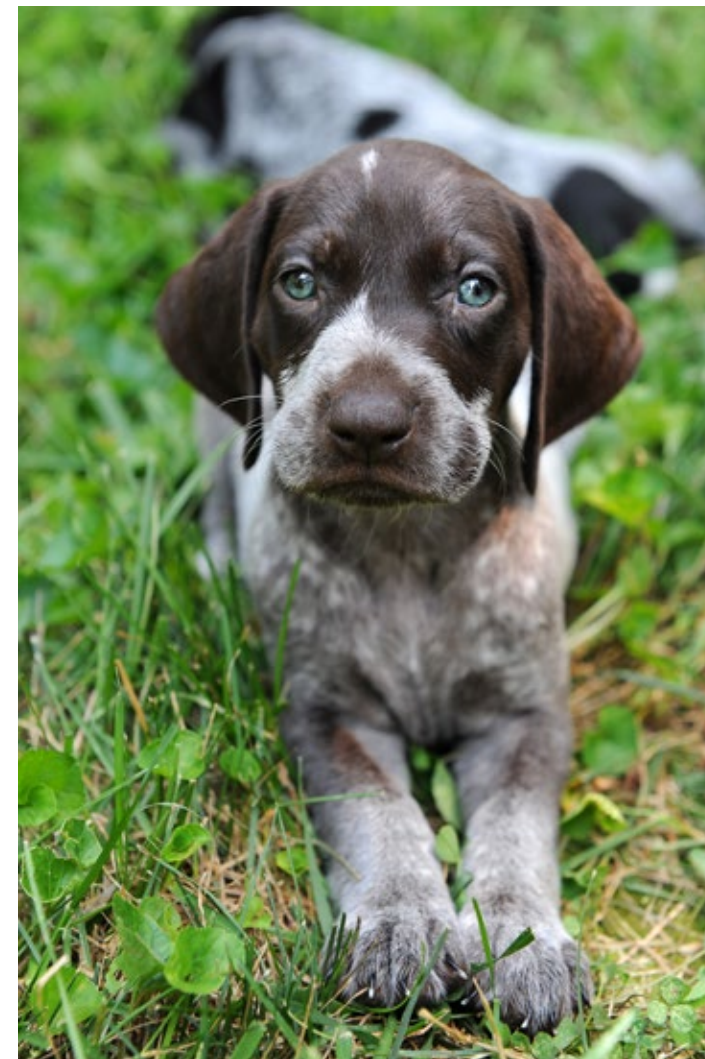
If the breeder you are working with does not ask many questions nor require you to fill out an application, that's a red flag and you may not receive much follow-on support. Additionally, it probably means that the breeder does not take much time to determine appropriate placements for their puppies.

If you live within driving distance to the breeder, they should be willing to allow you a visit to their home or kennel to see the dam and sire, if on site. Frequently, only the dam is on site and the stud is elsewhere, so this is not an issue. However, the breeder should provide you with specific information about the sire and why they chose to breed these two dogs. Simply having titles are not good enough reasons to breed dogs. There are no perfect dogs and when pairing a dam and sire, the goal should be an improvement in the next generation. Ask the breeder about their goals with the mating. They should be able to tell you the strengths and weaknesses of both dogs and how they compliment each other.

An experienced breeder should be able to discuss their dogs' lineage and what traits have been consistent throughout the generations. They should understand their breed's standard and be able to explain how their dog exemplifies the breed. Ask questions about temperament as much of this is genetic. How are the dogs, their parents and their grandparents with children and strangers? What type of training worked for them? How easy were they to train? Were they cooperative or stubborn? How independent were the dogs? Has there been issues with separation or other anxieties? Have any of the dogs in the line had aggression issues? Remember that not all aggression issues are hereditary; some are situational.

Ask a breeder how many litters a year do they breed? Also, how many times is each bitch bred? Some cause for concern with these questions are if a breeder breeds a dog before 2 years of age (the age at which full health clearances can be done) or after 6 years for a bitch, 8 years for a stud, depending upon his semen quality and health. There is nothing wrong with breeding a female "back to back" on successive heat cycles, provided they are in good body condition and have recovered from the previous pregnancy. It is far better to breed a dog in successive cycles and finish her breeding career at a younger age than risk a pyometra (an infection in the uterus) which occurs more frequently as an intact female dog ages.

Ask your breeder if he or she ships dogs to owners either out of state or out of country. If they do, there are many federal requirements that they must meet. Ask if they can explain them to you and see if they follow them. They should understand the new USDA regulations that govern the shipment of puppies by breed-



ers. This can give you some insight into the breeder's ethics. Ask the breeder if they will deliver a puppy before 8 weeks of age. In many states it's illegal to do so. Moreover, separating a puppy from its dam and litter mates before 8 weeks is not usually in the puppy's best interest. The puppy learns so much about his world in the last few weeks. At 8 -10 weeks, he's ready to bond with his new family.

As hunters, ask about the dog's hunting style. How is their endurance and drive and what motivates them? How cooperative are they? Do they like water and will they get in it willingly? A breeder/hunter may offer to take you out and hunt over their dogs, or at least be able to show you video of their dogs working in the field. Titles earned do not tell you everything you need to know. If you are a hunter who prefers a specific hunting style, look for a breeder whose dogs exhibit what you are looking for. Ask the breeder for references of owners who are hunting their dogs and call these people and ask questions. It's worth the time and effort.

The OFA website (www.ofa.org) lists recommended breeding stock health clearances by breed. Before speaking with a breeder, take time to understand the diseases that are common within a breed and how those diseases are screened. For example, a breed with inherited eye issues must undergo an examination by a board certified veterinary ophthalmologist to "clear" the eyes. The results of the clearances are usually placed in the OFA database. If a clearance is not in the OFA database, then it either wasn't done,

or the result was abnormal and the breeder chose not to publicly disclose the abnormal result. Some clearances, like eyes and thyroid, must be repeated more than once over the breeding lifetime of a dog. On occasion, a breeder may choose to use a private lab to run the same tests as required by OFA and not submit something to the database. If this is the case, a breeder should be able to provide you with a copy of the paperwork proving the clearance was accomplished. Your veterinarian can help you interpret those results. It surprises me that in my 10 years of breeding dogs, how few people actually ask to see the clearances on breeding stock. In addition, some breeders will say that health clearances were done, but when pressed for proof, cannot provide it.

Breeders should be able to provide you with information about deworming, vaccinations and any other relevant health information about the litter. In addition:

- Does the breeder microchip their puppies?
- Will they assist you in registering the microchip?
- How was the litter socialized?
- What things have the puppies been exposed to (children, vacuum cleaners, television, car rides, crates, busy household, cats, other dogs, music, etc.)
- Were the puppies exposed to live birds and what kind?
- Does the breeder have video of the bird introduction? If the breeder only exposes the puppies to a “wing on a string” or frozen birds, that may do more harm than not exposing them at all. The wing on a string teaches a puppy to sight point rather than scent point.
- What precautions were taken to prevent exposure to Parvo and other diseases?
- Who picks your puppy? If the breeder does, how are the puppy assignments made?
- Will you receive registration papers for the puppies and if so, when? Papers are necessary to participate in organization events like NAVHDA. If the breeder doesn't follow through with registration, it may be difficult to participate in testing.

A breeder should provide you, in advance of any deposit being taken, a copy of the purchase contract. You should ask if the deposit is refundable and if so, under what circumstances and get that in writing. You should receive a receipt for the deposit. Sometimes, even the best breeders have situations they cannot control (small litters, unexpected health issues, etc.) and may not be able to follow through on a particular sale. When the breeder cannot provide you a puppy as promised, you should be offered a refund of a deposit or at a minimum, a pup out of the next litter if within a reasonable period of time. In contrast, many breeders will not refund a deposit if you back out of the deal. This is very reasonable given the fact that the breeder has already invested significant time working with you and now has to find another buyer. Make sure when making a deposit to have everything in writing.

A purchase contract should detail, at a minimum, the following items:

- The identifying names and registration numbers of the dam and sire.
- Purchase price.
- The type of registration (NAVHDA, AKC, other registry) provided and when papers will be provided, if applicable.
- Health guarantee for infectious diseases for a period of at least 10 days, which is the incubation period for diseases like Parvo and parasites.
- Health guarantee for congenital or hereditary diseases like hip dysplasia, elbow dysplasia, entropion (an inherited eyelid disorder), etc. for a period of 2 years. Some of the diseases are not able to be detected prior to 2 years of age.
- What is the recourse if the puppy has an infectious disease or a hereditary disease?
- Under what circumstances can the puppy be returned? Will anything be refunded if the puppy is returned?
- What is the policy if the puppy needs to be re-homed at an older age?
- Will the breeder take the dog back for any reason throughout its lifetime?
- Are you allowed to breed the dog? If so, under what terms?
- Is the breeder willing to mentor you if needed and help select the pairing? Is the breeder entitled to a puppy back (or more) from any litters?
- Does the breeder require the owner hunt test or show the dog?
- If the terms of the contract are broken, what is the jurisdiction of any legal action or mediation?

A red flag for me in a contract is if the breeder stipulates that the health guarantee is void if you “vaccinate the puppy for particular diseases.” The breeder should allow you to make health decisions for your puppy with the help of a veterinarian.

In my veterinary practice I see many puppy buyers who come to me for their puppy's first health exam after getting it from a breeder. More often than not, when a health issue is found and I ask if they have a written contract with a health guarantee, they do not. They have paid thousands of dollars for a puppy only to discover it has a medical issue that may or may not be treatable. Although most NAVHDA breeders are excellent breed stewards and care about their puppies, there are those that either are inexperienced or do not wish to provide a reputable level of service to their buyers. It is an individual's choice to decide what they want in a puppy and what is important to them when making that choice. But given the fact that you will pay thousands of dollars for a dog, make sure you know what you are getting and under what terms before you enter into an agreement to purchase your next family member. Be informed before you buy. Remember, a puppy is, hopefully, a 10-15 year commitment. 🐕