

Choosing a Mixed Breed Dog

Mutts Can Steal Your Heart

by: Joan Paylo

The mutt is the all-American dog. Call him a random-breed, a mixed-breed or a mongrel, at his best he's loyal, healthy, smart and friendly – a virtual melting pot of positive canine characteristics. For many animal lovers, owning a mutt is a badge of honor. Many come into the world as "surprises," born of a homeless stray or a roaming house pet, then sent off to an animal shelter. Others are simply abandoned in parks or at highway rest stops. Adopting one of these unwanted dogs means you are literally saving a life – and the odds are he will make a great companion.

What Makes a Mutt?

The terms "random breed" and "mixed breed" usually refer to a dog of unknown gene pool. A "cross breed" is a dog whose parents were purebreds. If two cross breeds mate, their offspring are also mixed breeds. By the time four different breeds combine in one dog, there's little chance to predict what breed traits, if any, will dominate in the dog.

The common belief that mutts are superior has some truth to it. Over generations, unscrupulous breeders have perpetuated and magnified genetic flaws in many of the most popular purebreds. Today's generic mutt most resembles the "prototype" or "pariah" dog, the robust original wild dog that was amiable enough to become man's first canine companion more than 14,000 years ago. This "ideal" dog weighs in at 35 to 50 pounds, is medium brown to dark blonde in color, and measures under 2 feet tall. He has perky ears, strong legs, an alert expression, a back that isn't overextended, and a long tail that curls slightly at the end.

Choosing Your Mutt

There are some common cross breeds: cockapoos are a cocker spaniel/poodle mix; pek-a-poos mix Pekingese and poodles; labradoodles are bred of Labradors and poodles; Bichon-Yorkies are bichon-frises and Yorkies. The lurcher is another prolific dog type not recognized as a breed. He is a mix of greyhound, Afghan, Irish wolfhound or other sight hound, with a herding or sporting dog, such as a beagle, collie, retriever or bull terrier.

The mixes found in shelters differ from region to region, depending on what kinds of dogs are popular in a particular area. For example, you'll find more chow chow, shepherd or collie mixes in rural areas, and more pit bull or rottweiler mixes in urban shelters. Although the apartment-sized Chihuahua is plentiful, you won't find many Chihuahua mixes, because such tiny dogs have limited breeding choices. If they mate with any dog but another toy, they usually can't carry a litter of large puppies to term.

Pluses and Minuses of a Mutt

He's inexpensive. Obviously, he doesn't come with a purebred price tag. In fact, donations at some shelters can be as low as \$60 for a full-grown mutt. Even though he's a bargain, he's not a self-sufficient Superdog. Once he's home, he'll need normal doggy upkeep – proper nutrition, training, toys, licensing and identification, medical care and inoculations and grooming.

He's healthy. "If a stray is a Dalmatian-Lab mix, he'll probably not inherit the deaf and lame genes that plagued his ancestors. He'll be a healthy pet," says Steve Zawistowski, the ASPCA's science adviser, who holds a Ph.D. in animal behavior and genetics from the University of Illinois. But a varied gene pool and a sturdier constitution don't guarantee perfect health. Mutts get sick by chance, like any other creature.

He might get big. If you're dealing with a puppy mutt, it will be tough – if not impossible – to predict his adult size, expression or coat type. Even if both parents are known, if their breeds are dissimilar, there's little telling which side of the family your puppy will take after. Looking at the size of a puppy's feet is the best, if still an unscientific, way to guess how much he'll grow.

The Temperament of Various Mixes

Being able to predict a dog's potential temperament is especially important for the elderly and families with children. Certain breeds are recommended for experienced dog owners only. Random breeding can cancel out negative breed-related personality traits. But there's little predicting in puppyhood whether a toy dog mix will exhibit all the yappiness and nervousness of their badly bred cousins. A medium or large dog descended from several stubborn, independent and aggressive breeds may be genetically wired to exhibit dominant and downright scary behavior; neutering before adolescence can help moderate their personalities. With an adopted mutt, there's another issue important in determining how he'll behave within the family – how he was treated by his earlier owners. He may not have been trained or may have been mistreated. In the end, a sorry past can play a larger part in an individual dog's personality than the jumble of breeds within him.

All things considered, it's best to consider the adult dog as an individual, rather than a collection of specific breeds, says Zawistowski. That's why shelter workers test a dog to determine his energy level, his learning ability and how he relates to grown-ups, children and other animals.

Mutt Tendencies

Toy mixes tend to nip at children; youngsters may also pose a danger to a toy's delicate size and nature. At worst, a toy-small terrier mix is both nervous and stubborn; at best, he is endlessly cute, cheerful and fun. A watchful, protective breed, such as a Doberman, can become dominant and hard to handle when mixed with an energetic sporting or herding dog, like a cocker spaniel or border collie.

Certain naturally aggressive or neurotic dogs who have bad temperaments because of over-breeding can pose problems when paired with each other or with gentler breeds. When Dalmatian, Rottweiler, Akita chow, German shepherd, or cocker spaniel genes unite with those of a golden or Labrador retriever or collie, the less desirable characteristics may dominate. Pit bull mixes, abundant in urban areas, can turn out to be sweet family dogs. Just be sure your shelter behaviorist screens the dog for inherited fighting tendencies. Boxer, Rottweiler or Great Dane blood in a mix can resemble the pit bull.

For the Love of a Mutt

You might think that dog shows and dog clubs are only for purebreds. Think again. In response to the huge numbers of fans of the mixed breed dog, various organizations and even dog shows are not available to give you and your pet an opportunity to shine and show the world how wonderful mixed breed dogs can be. For information on joining a dog club or attending a mixed breed dog show, visit their websites.

Mixed Breed Dog Club of America (www.mbdca.org).

American Mixed Breed Obedience Registry (www.amborusa.org).

United Kennel Club (www.ukc-dogs.com).

American Kennel Club Canine Good Citizen (www.akc.org).

The Great American Mutt Show (www.greatamerianmuttshow.com).