
Choosing to Adopt a Rescued Dog

Dogs of all breeds, mixes, sizes and types are always available for adoption from shelters or rescues. The selection changes daily, unfortunately. The decision to adopt a "recycled" dog can be a positive one if careful choices are made and a commitment is made to train and socialize the new family member.

Decisions, Decisions

In order to make your shelter adoption a more informed and less of an emotional decision, certain requirements need to be listed before the trip to the shelter:

Size - Large, medium, or small dog? Keep in mind size does not necessarily designate space required or energy level.

Coat - Long, short, one that will require grooming/shaving? Keep in mind short-coated dogs such as Labs and Dalmatians shed just as much if not more than longer coated dogs such as Golden Retrievers or Shelties.

Breed - Purebred? Mix? If a purebred is desired, make sure ALL breed traits are researched - EACH breed has good and bad traits, and those are variable depending on the person!

Activity Level - Usually if the breed or mix is known, the level of activity will be able to be ascertained, as well.

Age - Puppy or adult or senior? Most dogs find their way to shelters between the ages of 6 months and 1 year of age, because that is the worst behaved time of a dog's life - their adolescence; they will misbehave more during that time period. Adult dogs can also come to you with excess baggage of behavior problems from their previous life, but usually they can be worked through. Seniors can sometimes have age-related health or behavior problems, but can be a wonderful laid-back companion.

At the Shelter

When you've made the decision to adopt, plan on spending some time with the dog(s) that you are considering adopting before you make your final decision. It may be loud in the kennel area - the dogs are anxious to get out and exercise, and meet their potentially new family. Ask to spend some time with the dog(s) that you are interested in, in a quieter area away from the masses. Ask for information about the dog - it's temperament, medical history, behavioral issues or pleasing traits. All family members should meet the adoptive prospect - even down to the smallest child. If the dog shows any fear or aggression towards anyone in your family, the adoption should not take place.

Quick Checklist for Adoption

Don't use your heart in decisions! Think your choices through carefully. Make sure the new adoptee will work in your home - with other pets, men, women, children, whatever and whomever he will encounter in his new life with you.

Carefully research: breed choices, size, coat, etc.

Carefully consider why you want a dog, and why you want a shelter/rescue dog. After all, the idea is to have adoptions work!

Consider what you want to do with this dog: vegetate on the couch, long walks, competition flyball or Frisbee, obedience or agility competition? Use this to help in your decisions.

Do you want all that comes with a puppy? Or would you rather start with a dog that is a little more mature?

Do not adopt with the idea that you will change a dog! You will be able to work with what you have, but generally a dog is the way he'll be, unless you plan to invest a lot of time and money in training, with no guarantees.

Do not hesitate to engage the help of an experienced behaviorist or trainer to help ease the adoptee's transition into your home and your life.

Older Pets are Great

Sure puppies and kittens are cute, but... Don't forget about older pets that may fit into your life perfectly.

With an older pet, you will get a less destructive, more graceful animal, and one that has probably passed "basic training"- you may not need to housetrain the pet, and it will most likely know to come when called and what "no" means. The animal may have been neutered, which will save you money. And if you work, a full-grown pet is better able to stay home alone during the day - this is especially true for dogs. Older pets are just as loving as young animals, but because most people want "cute" puppies and kittens, millions of older animals must be euthanized each year.

If you're looking for a good companion, look at the older dogs and cats at your animal shelter. They have lots of love to give and the admirable qualities that come with maturity.

Why mixed breeds make great companion animals

Each breed is descended from a limited number of dogs. Because breeders have sought to create animals that have certain fixed attributes, purebred dogs today are very inbred. Genetically this means that, while all purebreds do not have significant health problems, they are predisposed to a range of hereditary and congenital diseases, including skin and eye conditions, allergies, various cancers, cardiac problems, and abnormalities in the kidneys and other organs.

A 1994 Time magazine article on the effects of overbreeding reported that as many as 25 percent of the 20 million purebred dogs in the US are afflicted with a serious genetic problem.

Mixed breeds, on the other hand, have something called hybrid vigor. When you mix two or more separate gene pools, the recessive genes that carry the health problems are buried. As a result, you get a healthier animal. Simply put, mixed-breed dogs are, in general, healthier than their purebred cousins and typically require fewer visits to the veterinarian.

Mixed breeds are also more temperamentally sound than purebreds. Not all chows are aggressive, not all cockers have a nervous tendency to bite and not all retrievers are gentle, but generalizations about breed temperament often hold true, at least to some extent. Mixed breeds are typically less extreme temperamentally. Character and behavioral traits do manifest in mixed-breed dogs, but in a diluted form.

There is a final, compelling reason to adopt a mutt rather than a purebred. Our shelters are filled with primarily mixed-breed dogs in need of good homes. With the tragedy of pet overpopulation still far from being solved, we can't see perpetuation a market for yet more dogs.

In the Time magazine article cited above, syndicated animal columnist Mike Capuzzo noted, "Mutts are the Hondas of the dog world. They're cheap, reliable and what nature intended in the first place."