



# Selecting breeding stock

As a breeder, one of the most important roles you play will be the selection of breeding animals. The decisions you make can have ongoing consequences both for the puppies you produce and for further generations. Your choices can also influence your entire experience of breeding, whelping and rearing a litter.

You want to produce the healthiest puppies that you can, ones that are excellent examples of your breed. Pups that go on to have long, happy lives and who can perform the tasks that the breed was bred for.

The first step will be to make an assessment of your breeding female – making sure that she is both healthy and a good example of the breed. You will then have to assess the available males to find a healthy stud dog who best complements your female in terms of her virtues and faults.

You want as much information as you can to help guide and direct your breeding choices. This may include looking at the families of the individuals you plan to breed, researching pedigrees, collating health test results, and learning to critically assess individual animals against a set of criteria designed to help you reach your breeding goals. Never let it be said that breeding is easy!

## **Start with the best breeding female that you can**

When you are new to breeding dogs, your aim should be to learn as much as you can about your breed, about breed health issues, temperament and about function. You should aim to start with the best bitch that you can and look to finding a male dog who best complements her strength and weaknesses.

Very few breeders start their breeding program with a 'Best In Show' or 'High in Trial' winning bitch. Instead, most will begin with an 'honest' bitch that was sold to them as a family pet and who has grown into a pleasing example of the breed.

Ideally, your foundation bitch should be of a quality and have sufficient merit to make her worthy of being bred.

Merely wanting to have a litter 'so the kids can experience the miracle of birth' or because your girl is 'adorable' or 'cost a fortune', should not override the objective assessment of her positive attributes.

### **Remember:**

*Half of every pup's genetic make up comes from the mother, so it does not matter how amazing your selected sire is, he cannot magically make up for serious flaws or faults in your bitch.*

Although you will most likely already have a female, if she is a poor example of the breed, you may find that you are better off leasing or purchasing a quality bitch specifically for the purposes of breeding. Many new breeders spend generations trying to get to the place they might have started had they sourced a different foundation bitch, so take your time and choose wisely.

Your mentor should be able to advise and assist you in this regard.

## **Objective assessment of merit and suitability for breeding**

There are many factors you should consider when deciding whether an individual dog or bitch should become a breeding animal. You will want to think about their conformation, general health, temperament, results of breed specific health tests, and working ability or instinct.

One of the best ways to evaluate breeding stock objectively is to work through a list of attributes and document them individually for each animal before deciding whether the animal could improve in that area or if that feature is a particular strength.

Working through a list of attributes in a consistent way makes comparing and contrasting animals much easier and makes the assessment far less emotional. This will become increasingly important when it comes to matching up breeding animals in a way that ensures they complement each other.



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## Health and welfare considerations

Health and welfare considerations should always be at the top of the list when selecting or assessing breeding animals.

### General health and welfare

Any animals considered for potential breeding should be fit, well, and healthy. They should be at the correct body condition score (not too fat or too thin), and they should be receiving all the required preventative health care and nutrition needed to ensure they are at their prime when it comes to the actual mating and pregnancy.

In breeds where conformation may be linked to health issues, you want to make sure that you avoid exaggeration and extremes that might have severe welfare implications. In breeds where coat colour is linked to health issues, you want to avoid breeding colour combinations that increase the risks of disease.

#### **Note:**

*The Dogs Australia Regulations - Part 6 lists several **prohibited** colour combinations such as merle to merle and dapple to dapple with puppies from these combinations not eligible for registration due to the health implications of these combinations.*

### Screening and testing for known breed health issues

All potential breeding animals should undergo testing for any known breed health issues before being included in any breeding program. This testing needs to be conducted in accordance with accepted protocols, utilising reputable testing laboratories, and all results should be paired with the individual animal's microchip number.

Eye and heart clearances need to be performed by veterinarians who are Registered Specialists in these areas. Where testing is required to be repeated at intervals (such as yearly examinations), the most recent certification needs to be 'current'.

You will want to consider the outcomes of any health testing or screening carefully and understand the implications of the results. In most cases, the information obtained will be used to inform and direct your breeding choices, particularly when it comes to the selection of breeding partners.

There will, however, be some results that will mean an individual animal is never going to be suitable for breeding or is no longer suitable for breeding and needs to be removed from the breeding population.

### Next, assess the individual against your breed standard

When breeding purebred dogs, the goal should always be to breed to the accepted breed standard. The breed standard describes the breed's history and purpose and gives a technical written description of the perfect specimen - a 'blueprint' of the ideal dog.

There is a description of the shape and size of the overall dog as well as the relative shape and size of eyes, ears, head, body, tail and legs and feet. It lists how the dog should look both standing and when on the move and lists the type and texture of the coat along with allowable colours.

Many of these breed features were important because they were directly linked to the dog's ability to perform the function it was bred for and ensured that the dog was sound and fit to work.

You will need to understand the terminology used in the breed standard and learn how that translates into assessing the animal in front of you. This is where your mentors can be a great help. They will have years of experience and should be able to help explain or demonstrate what it is that the breed standard is referring to.

You might also want to look at the breed standard *extension*, which is designed to clarify areas of the standard that may not be easy to understand and often contains illustrations that help visualise the different areas of conformation.



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## Consider temperament, working ability and instinct

Behavioural attributes are just as heritable as other traits and right up there with health and welfare in terms of importance. Having the most beautiful example of your breed is no good if the dog is so anxious that it bites people or harms itself.

When assessing suitability for breeding, you want to ensure that the individual has the correct temperament for the breed and does not have any behavioural issues that may impact its health and wellbeing.

Avoid animals that are highly fearful, anxious or aggressive – even if this is only in certain situations (e.g. thunderstorms or when left alone). The ideal breeding animal is calm, confident and outgoing. They have been well socialised and had some basic manners training and are a joy to be around.

### **Remember:**

*The mother of the litter has a significant impact on the temperament of the pups as her influence extends beyond her genetic input.*

*Her behaviour during the pregnancy, at birth, and during the feeding and rearing stages has a life long impact on the temperament of the puppies.*

If you are breeding for working ability or instinct, then you will also want to select individuals who excel in these areas. This may be demonstrated by titles in various dog 'sports' or in actual day to day working ability in the field.

## Finally, consider reproductive attributes

Mothering behaviour and litter size are both influenced by the 'dam' line. When choosing a breeding female, you should always look for one that came from a large litter, was whelped naturally, and whose mother (and even grandmother) was a 'good mother'.

Having a bitch who whelps easily and has excellent mothering instincts will help make your breeding experience a little easier.

By selecting for easy whelping and large litter size, you will help reduce the risks of whelping difficulties in subsequent litters and generations. Of course, there are many other factors that will influence whether or not you run into problems, but you will certainly reduce the risks.

## Write it down

Developing a spreadsheet or workbook with a space to describe your 'ideal' and space to describe whether you consider a particular attribute as a strength or weakness for each animal can take the emotion out of making an assessment. A spreadsheet can help document the important traits in the same way for every potential breeding animal, making comparisons easier.

If you are using a spreadsheet, a good idea is to have a column for each individual part of the breed standard so you can then focus on one physical attribute at a time. You can also record health testing results and even make notes about family members, progeny, and temperament.



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The following is an example of part of a spreadsheet assessing some Labrador Retriever males:

Dogs Name	Breed Standard Ideal			Health Testing		Temperament & Working Ability	
	Eyes	Feet	Size	Hip Score	PRA- prcd	Working Titles	Temperament
	Medium size, expressing intelligence and good temper; brown or hazel	Round, compact; well arched toes and well developed pads	Ideal Height at withers Dog 56 - 57 cms (22-22.5ins)	Current Breed Average = 9 Total	Progressive Retinal Atrophy - progressive rod cone degeneration (DNA Test)	Retrieving, Obedience, Tracking etc.	Notes on Observed or Known Temperament Issues
Spike	Dark Brown Eye, eye size correct	Feet a little flat	21 inches	2:3=5	Clear	CDX, TD	
Harry	Light Eye, eye size correct	Correct Round compact feet	23 inches	10:1=11	Clear	NRD	Litter brother has severe noise phobia
Sam	Brown Eye, eyes a bit small	Correct Round compact feet	22 inches	1:0=1	Carrier	None	
Morris	Hazel Eye, eye correct size	Correct Round compact feet	24.5 inches	4:5=9	Clear	UD, TCh, RATG	

As you can see, each dog has strengths and weaknesses in the different physical attributes and their health clearances. This is what you will find – regardless of your breed. No animal is perfect in every way. There is always something you could work to improve!

## Selecting the best stud dog for your bitch

Now that you have completed all of the assessments, it is time to select the stud dog that you plan to use.

You will have a list now of all of your bitch's strengths and weaknesses, and you are looking to complement these in your selection of a sire. You need to look for a sire who not only excels in the areas that you are hoping to improve, but preferably one that has shown he can produce this improvement in his progeny.

Your mentor may provide you with some guidance in this area, and if they are involved in your breed, should have an excellent knowledge of the various stud dogs available.

### Remember:

*Don't just use a dog because he is 'convenient' or because your girl's breeder has offered you a 'free service' to one of their dogs. Do your homework and try to select the best male for your female, regardless of where he is located or who owns him.*



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The best advice is to consider stud dogs from all over the country or the state. If your breed has low numbers, you may want to consider dogs from around the world. Luckily with modern breeding technology, you have the ability to access reproductive material from pretty much anywhere in the world!

If the dog has been used at stud already, take the time to look at the progeny he is producing. This is more important in some ways than the dog himself. He might be the biggest winning, most amazing dog you have ever seen, but if his progeny are average, and he does not 'produce' well, then you might be better with another sire.

Next, you should prepare a short list of potential males and sit down with your mentor and assess them as you have done with your bitch. Make a comparison. Try to narrow it down to one or two males that best compliment your girl and her strengths and weaknesses.

## **Remember:**

*Although there will undoubtedly be high profile stud dogs being shown or trialed in your breed, there are many other males that may be available. These may be up and coming dogs, dogs that are not shown, or older males that have now retired from active competition.*

*Make sure that you visit breeder websites, look carefully at stud dog listings and talk to breeders (including those that your breeder may not have a lot to do with!).*

*Look at the pedigrees of dogs you admire, and try to find any common family groups that might mesh well with your bitch's pedigree.*

Let's use the male Labrador Retrievers from the previous spreadsheet example:

If we look at the evaluations recorded for the four 'short listed' Labrador stud dogs, we can see that each of them have some excellent breed points as well as some areas that you would prefer to improve.

If you had a bitch that had been tested as a PRA prcd **carrier** – you would immediately have to remove the dog 'Sam' from consideration due to him also being a carrier of this disease. If you had a bitch who had tested **clear** for the genes for PRA prcd, you would have the choice of all four of these potential stud dogs.

You would then start to put your own priorities on the things that you needed to improve. No matter which dog you use, there will need to be some compromise, and it really does depend on your bitch and your breeding objectives.

For example, if your bitch was a little on the tall side, had a lighter eye, but had excellent feet, great working ability and a hip score close to the breed average, 'Spike' may be the best match.

If she was a little on the small side, had a lovely dark eye and a super low hip score, and you were looking to improve working ability, you might want to use Morris.

...this is where the 'art' of the breeder lies - finding the dog that best matches your objectives and your breeding female....



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Finally, once you have selected your preferred male, you will need to contact his owner to discuss their terms and conditions, and to do your '**due diligence**'.

You will want to make sure that you sight copies or originals of all of the dog's health testing results, and ensure that he is up to date with any screening requirements. You don't want to base your decisions on health screening that is years out of date, to find that you have already bred your bitch to a male who now has signs of disease.

You will also want to confirm that he is registered on the **main register** (blue pedigree papers) and therefore eligible for breeding. You will also need to ensure that all of the dog's registered owners are current members of their state controlling body.

Many new breeders have been caught out when they have gone to register their litter only to find that the dog is not eligible for breeding, or his owners have let their membership lapse.

Next you want to confirm his availability, stud fees, and conditions. You may find that you will not be able to access the male of your choice, or maybe the stud agreement's conditions are not to your liking. In this case, you may choose to look elsewhere and go to your second choice of male.

You want to make sure you are clear on all of the Stud Dog owner's terms – When is the stud fee payable? What happens if your bitch does not get pregnant? Will there be the need for travel or boarding? Do they have the facilities to house or board your bitch at their property if she needs to stay? Will they supervise the mating themselves, or will you need to use a veterinarian and potentially artificial insemination techniques?

Ideally, they will have a written 'Stud' contract for you to read and agree to. Having the conditions written down and agreed to means that both parties are protected and that no misunderstandings can occur.

Now you have locked in your preferred stud dog, you will have to wait patiently until your bitch is ready to mate...

