

Puppy Mills vs. Reputable Breeder

Often I hear from a new prospective family a comment such as “We would never go to a puppy mill”, only to be told when I ask where they ended up purchasing their puppy that they went to a puppy mill and may not even have realized it.

So what is a puppy mill then? To address that question let’s look at what constitutes what a reputable breeder is. Reputable breeders in very basic terms do extensive health testing, pedigree research and take responsibility for any puppy that they produce.

So what testing do reputable breeders do? As I am a Labrador Retriever breeder, I am going to make this article specific to Labradors. We test all breeding animals for hips, elbows, eyes, hearts and various genetic testing through a reputable laboratory. The physical tests (hips, elbows, eyes and hearts) look at the areas of a Labrador that are known to have issues in the breed. Each breed is different but the good news is that the Orthopaedic Foundation for Animals lists the specific tests that should be completed for each breed. The link for Labrador tests is listed below. There is no excuse why a breeder isn’t testing all breeding stock for the tests listed below.

<https://ofa.org/chic-programs/browse-by-breed/?breed=LR>

Each test is performed by a specialist in the area to ensure either parent is not affected with the disease specific to that area the specialist is examining (hips and elbows are tested by the same specialist). The testing costs about \$2,000 per dog, and is a one-time test after 24 months of age for hips and elbows, 12 months of age for hearts, and repeated annually or biannually for eyes.

Now I can’t promise your new puppy won’t develop an issue in life as it is a living breathing animal, but I can do every test available to limit those chances along with selective breeding. Selective breeding means not going forward with any lines that exhibit a disease in higher proportion than otherwise expected, which is normally extremely low and a reason why you need to be able to trust the breeder you pick for your new puppy.

As for the genetic tests, there are a half dozen or so reputable laboratories that run the genetic tests, each breed usually has a standard panel for diseases that are identified in that breed. We often use either Animal Genetics in Tallahassee, FL or Paw Print Genetics in Spokane, WA.

Once an animal is tested clear of those diseases, it will never develop those diseases in its lifetime. Most diseases that are tested follow a single recessive inheritance pattern meaning that both parents would need to carry the disease in order for a puppy to be affected. Reputable breeders use these tests as guidance to ensure we never produce these issues.

So what is a puppy mill (or back yard breeder) in my opinion? A puppy mill is a place that you might think of a traditional puppy mill, lots of animals packed into a small inhumane spaces and filthy living quarters. Those are easy to spot if you attend the premise. Although many of those breeders, and I use that term loosely, won't allow you to see the living conditions or will want to meet you in the parking lot of your local Wal-Mart and give any reason why that is.

A back yard breeder in my opinion is someone that has fewer dogs, but breeds very indiscriminately to produce a litter for various incorrect reasons such as money or to get a puppy from their beloved pet. Although a back yard breeder usually has fewer dogs, the damage they do to the breed is no less significant by producing puppies from parents that have not had proper testing and often use the "dog down the road" as a stud. Although a different situation than a puppy mill, the issues they cause and possibly produce are very similar.

The bigger issue in my opinion is the breeder that doesn't do the required testing listed above. They may have any number of reasons why they don't do the testing. Some they wouldn't dare say out loud such as the high costs associated, or the fact that if a dog fails a test and shouldn't be in a breeding program, they have spent 2 years raising that puppy that can't now be bred. All us reputable breeders have had that happen no doubt, but if you aren't testing.....no need to worry about that happening at these puppy mills, those dogs will still be bred and the unsuspecting new puppy family may have to deal with that puppy which may develop a whole host of issues that could have been avoided with proper testing.

What excuses do puppy mills use? I have heard a whole range of excuses as to why the puppy mill doesn't do the required testing from the fact they have bred dogs for so long that they know theirs are healthy to the dog ate the test results, yes that was actually used and that their dogs see the regular (non specialist) vet. Even though the two best and health tested dogs can still produce offspring that have issues, the testing helps to identify those animals so that they aren't used in the breeding program going forward.

But the breeder has a health guarantee? Well what does that cover? A health guarantee is the last thing you want to have to rely on as a new puppy owner. That means your new cute puppy has developed something serious which is likely requiring significant costs at your veterinarian or specialist and is possibly going to alter their quality of life or change their life expectancy. Once again possibly something that could have been avoided with proper testing and generations of health tested dogs.

So how to tell if the breeder is a puppy mill? The intent of this article is to help educate the public. I realize it isn't that easy to identify the puppy mills as some have much fancier websites than I do but here are some hints that you are dealing with a puppy mill that should be a red flag and a sign to walk away.

- At the very minimum the puppy should be registered with the Canadian Kennel Club (CKC) but many of the puppy mills register their puppies as well so it's not an absolute test to determine if you are dealing with a puppy mill but a bare minimum requirement.
- If the breeder isn't doing the proper testing listed above then they are a puppy mill. How can you tell if the proper testing has been completed, one of two ways, the breeder should be able to provide you with the clearances (hips, elbows, eyes, heart and genetics) or you can search the registered name of the parents on www.ofa.org
- The puppy mills breed dilute coloured Labradors such as silver, charcoal and champagne. Reputable breeders specifically test to ensure that their dogs do not carry the dilute gene which comes from labs that were intermixed with Weimaraners in two kennels around the turn of the century (1900's).
- Puppy mills don't show the pedigrees of the parents. Reputable breeders are proud of the lineages that they produce whereas the puppy mills may be breeding non-descript dogs, with no titles etc. The conformation titles help show that the dogs are worthy representatives of the breed and are put together correctly which hopefully means to the pet families that their Labrador won't develop any orthopaedic issues later in life from poor conformation.
- Breeding dogs shouldn't be the sole source of income in Ontario as costs have increased drastically over the last 10 years. If it is, you are likely at a puppy mill since breeding Labradors is rarely a profitable endeavour if done correctly including proper health testing. My employment as a chartered accountant allows me to finance my love of Labradors.
- A reputable breeder will take any puppy they produce back, no matter if it had left an hour ago or 12 or more years ago. Puppy mills rarely, if ever, develop a breeder/client relationship or support you once you have paid your money and taken possession of your puppy. Reputable breeders offer 4 weeks of free pet insurance, a bag of high quality dog food to go home with your puppy, health records from their local vet among other things.
- A reputable breeder belongs to and is active in breed groups.

In closing, the few hundred dollars you may save by going to a puppy mill or back yard breeder that doesn't do the correct testing may very well cost you significantly down the road that could have been avoided with proper testing or selective breeding practices that reputable breeders complete. The biggest take away is that puppy mills and back yard breeders exist because the public support them, willingly or unwillingly and I hope this article has helped you make an informed choice when picking your next breeder.

Please feel free to contact me to discuss this article or if you are considering a new Labrador puppy in your future.

Brent Spurr

Westmeadow Labradors

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