



Adopting a Dog

Conservative estimates are that four to five million (yes, that's million) dogs and cats – half those that enter animal shelters – are euthanized as surplus every year in the United States. So, if you're considering adopting from a shelter, you are part of the solution to this national disgrace. Before you adopt, however, be aware those shelter dogs were probably originally acquired by well-meaning people rather like you who just didn't think it through. So be sure you've considered the full ramifications of a dog.

All That Biology

The very best dogs on the planet urinate and defecate several times a day, make noise, need arrangements when you go out of town, cost hundreds, maybe thousands per year in food, gear and medical care, shed up a storm, won't do anything you want unless you invest in training, and regurgitate grass on the carpet, usually just after it's been cleaned. Lots of people in our techno world, understandably, aren't ready for this much biology.

Dogs are Time-Intensive, Not Space-Intensive

Most dogs are not space intensive - that's a myth - but they are extraordinarily time intensive. If you're sure that over the next fifteen years you've got time for daily exercise (being put in the backyard doesn't cut it, unless you want to end up on "Animal Cops"), training and cleaning up all that biological waste, then you can start the "okay, WHICH dog" quest.

Selecting the Right Dog

Find out on what days your local shelter is less busy, so you can get more personal attention. Bring everyone in the household. If the shelter keeps records, scope for information on how the dog was in a home environment. Breed or breed mix info is sometimes illuminating though one must be good at deciphering breed standard euphemisms to get the full import. "Loyal," "aloof" or "discerning" usually translates into "fearful or aggressive to strangers," and "profuse double coat" into "dog hair on everything."

One of the huge benefits of shelter adoption is the fabulous selection of young adult animals, dogs in the one to three years or so age range. Not only is what you see what you get size and appearance-wise but also the dog's personality – especially his gregariousness - will be pretty evident. Look for a dog that is friendly – approaches wagging, with ears plastered back and on a mission to lick your face, and one whose exercise requirement – the shelter staff can help you here – is a realistic option for you.

If a prospect emerges, take him for a test drive: a walk in the neighborhood. How does he react to kids? To other dogs? Handle the dog all over his body. Is he handleable? You'll quickly notice that the cliché of shelters being full of problem dogs has little truth. People relinquish dogs for people-related reasons, rarely dog-related reasons. If you find The One, don't balk at any possible sticker shock. Most shelters do not give animals away. Not only do they need the money to do their good work, a non-trivial adoption fee is a means and seriousness filter. Anyone blanching at the initial fee of a hundred or so dollars is also likely to blanch at routine maintenance costs. Plus, there is usually massive value added at most shelters. Spay-neuter surgery alone is worth more than the adoption fee. Combine this with vaccinations, micro-chipping and training class discounts, and a shelter

adopter is way ahead of someone acquiring a dog from another source. A good shelter will also quiz and counsel you a fair amount. This is a good thing.

When You Get Him Home

For the first several weeks, confine the new dog to one well dog-proofed room (e.g. no shoes, rugs, chewable furniture etc.). Pet gates are great for this. Put in a comfy bed, water and a large variety of chew toys. Dogs differ in how much they chew and what they like to chew, kind of like how we differ in how much we read or watch TV and which kinds of books or programs we like. Set up a bathroom routine (dogs that have been kenneled often need a refresher), walking and feeding schedule. Come and go a lot in the first days to teach the dog that when you leave, it's no big deal, you always come back. Many brief absences is best. Before the first few long (2+ hour) absences tire him out with hard exercise, a long walk or a training session. Give him more of the house once he's proven himself housetrained and chew-trained.

Enroll in a well-run dog training class. Do this even if you think you know what you're doing and even if the dog seems to have reasonable manners. The dog training profession has come a long way in the last twenty years and you'll pick up valuable tips and insights. Avoid classes that emphasize jerking the dog around on some sort of collar or have stale concepts like "dominance" prominent in the promo literature.

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