

Want a designer dog? Check the pound

Puggles, maltipoos are pricey — and essentially mixed-breed mutts



Puggles, a mix of pugs and beagles, sure are cute but they aren't cheap.

Ever hear of a floppy-faced Jujitsu? How about a King Daley shepherd? A Germox retriever? Those are just a few of the creative monikers that clever dog owners have come up with to label their all-American dogs — mutts, to people with less imagination.

When Steve Dale, the syndicated talk-show host of "Pet Central" on WGN Radio, and his wife decided to get another dog recently after the death of their 15-year-old Brittany, Chaser, all the Brittany's they saw brought tears, so they took their search to PAWS (Pets Are Worth Saving) Chicago, the city's largest nonprofit humane organization. There they found Ethel, a patchwork puppy who resembles the wild "painted dogs" of Africa.

"People stopped us on the street and asked what kind of dog Ethel was," Dale says. "They seemed disappointed when I'd say she was an Australian shepherd mix."

Since people seemed to want Ethel to "be" something, Dale began calling her a King Daley shepherd, referencing Chicago's longtime mayors.

Janice A. Biniok of Waukesha, Wis., has been creating "breed" names for her mixes for years. Currently she has what is probably a Labrador/boxer/German shepherd.

"He's absolutely gorgeous. He looks like a brindle Labrador, so everybody wants to know what he is. I've been thinking of calling him a Germox retriever," she says.

Why can't a mutt be just a mutt?

Everybody wants something unique, says Stanley Coren, a professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia and author of "Why Do Dogs Have Wet Noses?"

People who seek out the dog du jour — which these days is a crossbreed such as a maltipoo (Maltese/poodle) or goldendoodle (golden retriever/poodle) — like the idea of having a dog that not very many people have. And don't mind paying \$1,000 to \$2,500 or more for one.

Best of each breed?

Pet lovers are also attracted by claims that hybrids are hypoallergenic or have fewer health problems or will carry the best traits of each breed.

“The argument people make is that by crossing a purebred Labrador and a purebred poodle, it's going to be nonshedding and intelligent because poodles are nonshedding and intelligent, and it's going to have the work ethic and playfulness of the Lab, making it the perfect family dog,” Coren says. “It's a nice story, but when you tell it, geneticists laugh.”

Genetic characteristics sort out randomly. So no matter what its breed or mix, an individual dog may be more or less allergenic, intelligent or healthy than another.

“When you cross two things it doesn't necessarily mean you're going to optimize what you're trying to achieve,” says veterinarian Patricia Olson, president and CEO of Morris Animal Foundation, a group in Englewood, Colo., that funds research on pet-health issues.

“You can't just say if I take this and this I'm sure I'm going to have a healthier dog; it doesn't work that way. That's why a lot of these crosses become fads and then go by the wayside, because people have experimented with them in the past and it hasn't always been what they had hoped for.”

Biniok says the mutts she has adopted from the shelter have never had the hereditary health problems that affected her two purebreds, a Great Dane and a Boston terrier.

While mixed breeds as a class have more variety of inherited diseases than any single pure breed because of their broader gene pool, the frequency of any given disease among mixed breeds is likely to be lower because the population is more diverse.

But because designer dogs are purposely bred from dogs of specific types or breeds, they may have a higher incidence of certain diseases, such as breathing difficulties, cancer or hip dysplasia, depending on the breeds used to create them. The Xolo (or Mexican Hairless) mixes have as many if not more health problems as the purebreds, says Amy Fernandez of Forest Hills, N.Y., who is president of the Xoloitzcuintli Club of America, for people with this scrawny, hairless breed.

Not always a glamorous picture

Plenty of hybrids are well-loved pets, but the ones that outgrow the “cute” stage can face an uncertain future.

“Right now we are dealing with Xolo/Jack Russell mixes, Xolo/pit bull mixes, Xolo/

Chihuahua mixes that we cannot find homes for,” Fernandez says.

“People are happy to fork over big bucks to buy these dogs as puppies, but once buyers realize that what they have is a complicated, demanding dog, many of these hairless wonders end up in shelters or worse,” she says. “At least once every winter we hear of hairless dogs intentionally abandoned outdoors to freeze.”

When you want a dog that’s one of a kind, there’s no need to spend big bucks to get it. Visit your local shelter instead and come home with your very own roughcoated Malibu griffon, Golden Gate Chiwienie dog or North American mottled shepherd.

Whatever you choose, and whatever you call it, the dog will be just as unique and special as a pricier pup.

Kim Campbell Thornton is an award-winning author who has written many articles and more than a dozen books about dogs and cats. She belongs to the Dog Writers Association of America and is past president of the Cat Writers Association. She shares her home in California with two Cavalier King Charles Spaniels and one African ringneck parakeet.