



First Steps to Developing a Breeding program

Everyone has a different reason for deciding they might like to become a breeder. It may simply be that your bitch has given you so much happiness and joy that you would like to breed yourself another just like her. Perhaps her breeder introduced you to conformation showing, dog sports or other breed activities where she has performed well and is now encouraging you to breed her, or maybe you have friends or family who have expressed interest in having a pet like yours.

Regardless of the reasons, you will have already realised that breeding dogs comes with quite a bit of responsibility, and plenty of hard work. Even if your initial ideas were to breed a litter and give them away to family and friends as pets, you now realise that it might not be as simple as that – there are government requirements, local council requirements, and legal obligations extending well beyond the time the pups head off to their new homes.

You are going to be responsible for the puppies you produce, and you want to do it well – both to maximise your chances of breeding a successful litter and to minimise the risks of producing puppies with heart breaking health or temperament issues. Although at this stage, you may only be interested in breeding one litter to see if breeding dogs is for you, it is a good idea to have a bigger picture plan and to do your homework thoroughly before that first mating occurs.

What are you trying to achieve?

When starting out breeding, your goals may be relatively simple – you want to breed the bitch that you have, and you want to produce puppies who are healthy and happy for yourself and others to enjoy as companions and pets. These are all excellent goals.

As you learn more about breeding and your breed, your goals may become a little more specific. Your understanding of what makes an excellent example of your breed, and what your bitch is likely to produce may make you a little more discerning. You will begin to understand your role as a 'guardian' of your breed and how choices you make may actually impact your breed, both now and into the future.

Your goal should always be to strive for improvement – each generation healthier and more sound than the one before – regardless of whether it is your first litter or your fortieth.

To do this, you will need to learn everything about your breed that you can and develop a critical eye so you can identify areas where individual dogs excel and where they could improve. All of this knowledge will form the basis of your breeding program.

Developing a breeding program - where to start

A good idea is to start by documenting the things you would like to achieve within the breed. Are you looking at producing dogs with an excellent working ability or an aptitude for a specific task? Are you looking to produce a top winning show dog? Or are you looking to breed dogs with temperaments that make them ideal as family companions? Maybe all of the above?

It is unlikely that all of these goals will be achieved in a single generation. Rather, they may take several generations to reach. Even if you did happen to achieve your initial goals in a single generation, the challenge is then to continue to produce dogs of a similar standard and make improvements on each subsequent generation – remember no dog is perfect, there is always something you could improve!

Next, you need to critically look at your bitch and be honest about how close she is to your ideal, and consider what you would need to improve on her to achieve your goals.

This can be the hardest step – you may not have the knowledge just yet to be able to do this well, and because your bitch is a member of your family, your friend and companion, it may be hard to be critical.

This is where surrounding yourself with good mentors can make all the difference. You need knowledgeable and honest mentors who can help you identify your bitch's virtues and areas that she may need to improve to achieve your breeding goals.



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When evaluating potential breeding stock, one strategy is to create a spreadsheet or chart that breaks down all of the physical, health and behavioural attributes as individual items. You can then list what your breed standard requires, and what your ideal would be. Working with your mentor, you can then work through each attribute one at a time, looking at the animal in front of you.

Although your immediate plans probably involve breeding the bitch that you have, if she has a lot of areas or attributes that could do with improvement, you may find yourself spending many generations trying to get to the point that you could have started at had you have waited until you had a bitch of better quality.

Hard as it may be, you may be better off waiting until you have a bitch that is closer to your ideal to start your breeding program.

Setting long term and short term goals

Your goals will direct your breeding program. You need to be clear about what you want to achieve or what you are aspiring to produce.

Your short term breeding goals should be the things you are trying to achieve in your next litter.

'I would like to breed "xxx" with the plan to enhance/improve the following physical, health, and behavioural characteristics....'

Your long term breeding goals should address the things that you hope to achieve over a number of litters or generations.

'I would like to take steps to produce a line of 'insert your breed here' that excels in that is free from.....'

Once you have written down your goals, you will need to spend time studying your breed both here and worldwide. You will be looking for individual animals that have the attributes you are aiming to produce. Or those that appear to reliably produce them in their progeny.

You will want to become familiar with kennels and breeders who have similar goals to you, who are relentless in the pursuit of healthy and sound examples of the breed and look at the breeding choices they make and the progeny they are producing.

By learning as much as you can, you will be able to make better choices in trying to attain your goals.

Your breeding decisions should be well considered

Now that you have documented your breeding goals, it is time to start plotting out your breeding program. Your breeding program will include your plans for your first litter, the one after that and into the future.

Most good breeders are always planning a few litters into the future, or even a generation ahead. There should never be a time where breeding decisions are made on the spur of the moment because your bitch has come into season a little early.

You will want to find the male that best compliments your bitch – the one that excels in the areas she needs improvement in, that has all of his health clearances, and who has the required temperament.

You will need to have approached the stud dog's owner and come to an agreement regarding any potential mating. You will also need time to complete all of your bitch's health clearances and veterinary checks.



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Be prepared to change your plans

No doubt as you progress, your breeding goals may change – sometimes quite significantly.

In terms of your breeding program, you may find that new opportunities arise that you had not considered, or your plans may be dashed when unexpected events occur. Breeding is certainly challenging.

After every litter, you need to reassess your breeding goals and critically evaluate the success of your litter:

- » Did you achieve what you were hoping to?
- » Did you encounter any unexpected outcomes?
- » Would you breed your girl again, and if you did, would you change your plans now that you have seen what she produces?
- » Have your long or short term goals been met?
- » Do you need to change your priorities and selection criteria?

Breeding Programs need to be fluid and adaptable. Along the way, there might be health or behavioural issues that crop up that need to be addressed within your breed, or within your breeding animals, or you may find that you have to take a step sideways to move forward.

Don't be fooled that breeding to a goal is easy.

