

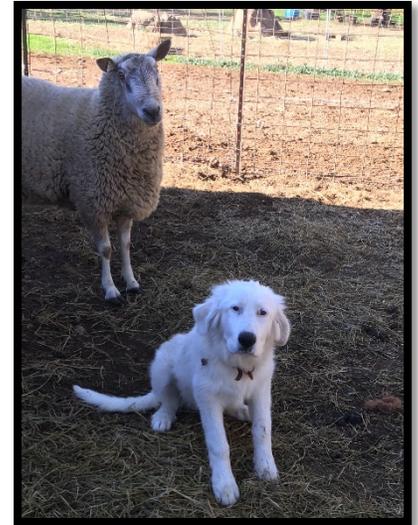
Selecting a Livestock Guardian Dog Puppy

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Adapted from "How to Select an LGD Puppy" by Bill Constanzo, *Livestock Guardian Dog Research Specialist, Texas A&M AgriLife Center*

Overview

Puppy selection is often the critical first step towards successfully using livestock guardian dogs (LGDs) in a production setting. While appropriate bonding during the first 12-18 months of a dog's life is important, pups with an inherent genetic predisposition for guarding livestock are more likely to become successful adult LGDs. Furthermore, physical traits (like hair coat, color, mature size, etc.) are preset by a pup's genetics. Keep in mind that LGD behaviors are greatly influenced by how they are treated during the first year of their life. This fact sheet will help you select an LGD pup that will most likely fit your particular needs.



- ❑ **Buy a Pup from Reputable Genetics:** Purchasing a pup from working parents will increase the likelihood of success. A knowledgeable breeder (who may also be a livestock producer) will know the pedigree of his or her pups, as well as the individual behaviors of the parents. While observation over time is generally more reliable than puppy aptitude testing, you should still try to observe the pups, as well as the parents, in their working setting. Were the pups whelped where they could hear and smell livestock before their eyes were open? What kind of production system (e.g., open range, farm flock, extensive pasture system, etc.) do the parents work in? If you cannot observe the pups in person before purchasing, ask the breeder for photos and/or videos, and ask them about the behavioral traits discussed below.
- ❑ **What Breed is Best for My Operation?** Common LGD breeds in the U.S. include Great Pyrenees, Akbash, Anatolian Shepherd, and Maremma. Breeds that are relatively new in the U.S. include Kangal, Karakachan, Gao de Transmontano, and Central Asian Ovcharkan. Current research suggests that there is as much variation between individual dogs as there is between the common LGD breeds, and many working dogs are crossbreeds of these common breeds. Do not buy a pup that is the result of a cross with a non-LGD breed! While there are some differences in hair coat and color between LGD breeds, most producers find it is far more important to select pups from working parents.

How big will the pup grow up to be? If possible, check out the parents or siblings from previous litters. They will provide a good indicator of the mature size of your pup. Also, as with most pups, foot size is often an indicator of mature size. If you have larger predators such as lions or wolves, a bigger dog may be able to better defend against those predators. However, larger dogs require more feed (and more money!) to maintain. Unusually large pups may suffer from orthopedic problems as adults.

- ❑ **Healthy Pups:** Healthy pups are a combination of good genetics and good management. A healthy pup will be the proper weight, have a smooth coat (with no hair loss) and will be free of internal and external parasites. While these things can be resolved, it will cost you time and money. If a pup you are looking to purchase has more than three defects listed below, you may want to reconsider your choice.

Puppy Health Checklist

- ✓ Eyes are clean & clear, ears are clean, dark pigmented nose, straight forward feet, bright pink gums, straight teeth alignment and a proper gripping bite.
- ✓ The pup should look wide at the hocks with angulation in the legs and feet pointing forward. This will help to ensure the pup will be able to move correctly as an adult.
- ✓ Ectropion eyes (saggy eyelids) are not recommended in LGDs. Check the parents' eyes. Dogs with saggy eyelids may easily get seeds and other debris caught in their eyelids.
- ✓ Avoid sick, lame, or unusually lethargic pups.
- ✓ Incorrect markings for its breed type, may indicate the pup is crossbred with a non LGD. Check out the breed standards online to make sure and ask to see both parents.
- ✓ Dark pigment on the pup's lips, nose, and eyelids are preferred. Unpigmented areas can lead to repeated sunburns and could result in early onset cancers.
- ✓ Ask if the pup is current on vaccinations and a parasite control program. The breeder should provide a list of the products used and dates given.
- ✓ If you have questions, considering asking for a veterinarian-certified health check.

❑ **No Prey Drive:** Prey drive is the instinctive inclination of a carnivore to find, pursue and capture prey. In LGDs, this instinctive drive has been bred against for thousands of years; instead, LGDs have been bred to guard and protect livestock. An LGD pup that stalks, chases or bites livestock should be avoided; however, these traits may or may not be exhibited in younger pups. Older pups and yearling dogs should not be exhibiting these behaviors.

❑ **Submissive Reaction to Livestock:** If you can quietly watch the pups interact with stock, look for a pup that may be curious but is somewhat cautious. Avoiding eye contact with livestock is an excellent indicator of a good instinct. Some LGDs have this instinct naturally and others need to be trained by livestock and/or owners. LGDs need to tolerate pokes and prods by livestock, so you should avoid a pup with a low sensitivity to pain. Avoid pups that bark, jump, or bite stock even if they are accidentally stepped on. Pups with this behavior can inadvertently injure livestock or cause them to fear the guardian dog. Older pups should be submissive and calm around stock. Look for behaviors such as walking up to stock rather than running, dropping to the ground or rolling over, lowering the head and tail, licking at the mouths of stock, and choosing to sleep next to stock – even through a fence.



- ❑ **Calm Temperament:** Look for a pup that is interested in you but not overly aggressive, fearful, shy, or clingy. The pup that runs up to you first or insists on being “in your face” is not the best choice for a livestock guardian dog. Full time LGDs used on large ranch operations should be more independent-minded problem solvers who are not dependent on human companionship. Pups that walk off by themselves after meeting you are often good choices. Look for calm, thoughtful pups and those that do not accept new things or loud noises. Pups should be alert and exhibit guardian behaviors such as barking at new things or noises. Avoid pups that chase balls, growl, bite, or struggle when you handle them. Correct human socialization before 14 weeks of age will ensure that the pups have formed a positive relationship with humans.

- ❑ **Male or Female?** LGD research has shown that both sexes guard equally well, especially if they are spayed/neutered. If you plan on keeping more than one LGD, neutering/spaying will make it easier for you to place dogs together to work. In addition, intact bitches may be distracted from their duties when in heat or raising a litter. They may also attempt to steal lambs or kids from their dams. Intact males are usually slower to mature, distracted by female dogs in heat, and more likely to be aggressive to other dogs when they are grown. ***(Note: appropriate canine aggression may be desirable in certain settings. For example, some producers who are concerned with protecting livestock from wolves prefer intact male LGDs).***

- ❑ **Age:** Pups need to stay with their mother and siblings until at least 8 weeks of age. By weaning (7-9 weeks of age) pups learn to play and interact with parents and siblings which develops proper bite inhibition. If your pup is receiving good livestock experience and you are a first-time owner, consider extending this time through an arrangement with your breeder. However, if your pup is not with stock, you should bring it home and begin the livestock bonding and human socialization process immediately. In general, the bonding process should be started by 8 weeks of age or the dog will not properly bond to your livestock and may have issues later staying with your livestock.

- ❑ **Roaming Behavior:** A well-trained LGD respects fences. It’s important that LGDs stay with their stock in the pasture that the owner places them in. Roaming is one of the leading causes of LGDs being replaced; in Texas, nearly half of the LGDs purchased are lost within 6 years. Make sure to ask your breeder if the puppies have ever gotten out of their pen. Do their adult dogs leave their charges on a regular basis and if so, how far do they usually travel? Look for signs such as yokes or drag lines on the adult dogs. These are a good indicator that the adult dogs are roaming. Finally, proper bonding is critical; dogs that have a strong bond with their livestock are less likely to roam as adults.



□ **Questions to Ask Your Breeder:**

- ✓ Is the pup purebred? If not, is it crossed with any non LGD breeds? **Do not buy a pup crossed with a non LGD breed!**
- ✓ If the pup is a crossbred, why did you cross those particular breeds of LGDs?
- ✓ Do you offer a guarantee? If so, what does it cover?
- ✓ Do you offer guidance to new owners?
- ✓ Do you have both parents and/or siblings to see?
- ✓ Which pups do you feel would be the best fit in my operation?
- ✓ Why do you feel these puppies would be good with livestock?
- ✓ What makes the working parents good livestock guardian dogs?
- ✓ What type of livestock are the puppies raised with?
- ✓ Have the puppies been able to escape their pen?
- ✓ What are the strengths and weaknesses of your dogs?
- ✓ How old is the mother? LGDs mature slowly and may not be reliable until they are an adult. A young female (under the age of 2) may still be developing her guarding skills. Buying pups from an unproven female may lead to problems guarding stock.
- ✓ Have you seen any health defects in your older dogs?
- ✓ Can you provide a reference to someone else who recently purchased a dog from you?

Further Reading

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