

So Many to Choose From

Finding the Right Rescue Dog

By Susan Heard

Ming is a young adult Shar Pei. He was stranded in the house with his owner for three days after she died. Discovered hungry, thirsty, and confused, he was taken to the local shelter where he stayed for several weeks, becoming more and more withdrawn. He lost weight, his bristly black coat turned threadbare, and his infected ears hurt and itched. Irritation from in-turned eyelids blurred his vision. No one came to adopt him - the shelter workers said he was unfriendly – and his time was running out. Then, a Shar Pei fancier bailed him out and found him a place in a Shar Pei rescue two states away. That's how Ming became a rescue dog.

Most rescue dogs have sad stories – if their stories are known at all - about losing their homes through no fault of their own. Adopting a rescue dog like Ming has many positives:

- Rescue dogs are usually adults, so you know what you're getting into in terms of size, weight, appearance, and temperament.
- Many – up to 25% of dogs looking for homes – are purebred dogs. By adopting a rescue, you can get a pure bred dog without encouraging backyard breeders or patronizing pet stores.
- Each dog adopted from a rescue group or shelter frees a spot for another dog in need. Even if your dog comes from a no-kill shelter or rescue group, chances are, you're saving a life.

But is adopting a rescue dog right for you? Where can you find a rescue dog? How can you improve your chances of making a lifelong match? What are the special needs of rescue dogs? There are many considerations, but the first rule is never adopt a dog impulsively because you feel sorry for it. Don't risk being unable to keep your commitment to provide a loving home for life if pity doesn't translate into a true relationship. Instead, put your heart on hold for now and use your head. Your heart will get a big vote after you do your homework and you meet your ideal rescue dog.

Know Yourself

Adopting a rescue dog starts with the same process as the decision to adopt any pet. You need to know what you expect from a dog (a couch potato partner, or a jogging buddy?), the size and temperament you can accommodate (do you have room for a large dog? can you provide adequate exercise for a busy dog?), whether your landlord or significant other supports your desire to be a dog owner, and whether your budget and priorities can support a dog's needs. To help you with this exercise, obtain an adoption application to help you identify other important considerations. Many rescue groups have applications on line.

Decide on a Breed

Mixed breed dogs make wonderful pets and can be healthier than purebred dogs. Even if you aren't looking for a purebred, it's wise to become familiar with the traits and needs of various breeds since they can provide a general idea of what you can expect from a mix. You can use your breed preference to help you narrow down where to look for your rescue dog.

Find a Rescue Group

Most rescue organizations are operated by individuals or groups of volunteers. They may be dedicated to rescuing and rehoming specific breeds or may work on behalf of adoptable dogs of all kinds. They vary in experience, standards, and diligence in screening and placing dogs, so it's a good idea to get to look at several. You can find them on the internet (search for "dog rescue groups"), at pet adoption fairs, via newspaper advertisements, or by word of mouth. Ask your dog-loving friends – chances are, they'll know about a rescue group in your area. Another excellent resource is www.petfinder.com, a website sponsored by the ASPCA.

Shelters and rescue groups from all over the country list their adoptable pets with descriptions and photos. You can search by your breed preference, location, and other criteria. Links to the groups' sites can help you become familiar with their operations, rules, and philosophies.

"Interview" several dogs – and their rescuers

Take your time and visit with more than one candidate. Learn all you can about their histories, traits, and needs. Good rescuers will take the time to find out what you are looking for and guide you in your search. They have taken the time to get to know their breed and each of their dogs and can suggest one or more that might be a fit. They should be able to answer questions about each dog's health, temperament, ability to live with children or cats, and specific areas that will need attention. It's especially important to remember that some rescuers are better with dogs than with people. Don't be offended if they carefully scrutinize you and your experience and intentions for the dog. They have invested time and money in each rescue and care deeply that they find safe, loving, permanent homes.

Negotiate the adoption

Once you have found "your" dog, carefully review the adoption contract – are you willing and able to live up to its requirements? Most will want to visit your home and check references before you can adopt. They usually will expect you to return the dog to them rather than sell or give him to someone else, and may ask for periodic reports on his condition. Can you afford the adoption fee? Rescue groups usually charge \$100 or more to help with the cost of health screening when the dog arrived in rescue, treatment of any problems, and care for the time he stayed in rescue.

Bring your new dog home!

This is a happy and exciting time that may soon give way to doubt about your decision. Your new friend may begin to exhibit problems like lapses in house training, barking, shyness, etc. that were not apparent during the adoption process. This is when patience, love, and commitment come in. Remember that dogs love routine, and your new pet has experienced little but uncertainty during his journey from his former home to yours. He may still be grieving the loss of his family or recovering from the stress of life in a shelter or on the street. Gently make your rules and expectations clear – be patient and consistent. Be sure your dog gets plenty of exercise while you help him establish a comfortable routine. Contact his rescuer if you need help or reassurance, and consider support from a behaviorist if you need it. It can take weeks or months before your dog relaxes in his new surroundings and confirms your initial impression that he is a wonderful companion. Excellent reading while you are getting to know each other are any of Carol Lea Benjamin's training books, *Bones Would Rain From the Sky* by Suzanne Clothier, and *Choosing and Caring for a Shelter Dog* by Bob Christiansen.

Ming's happy ending

Ming came home to join our family about a month ago. He fits right in with the other dogs and our cats, but has a personality all his own. He has begun to put on weight, and his coat is thicker and glossier. His rescuer arranged for entropion surgery for his eyes, and saw that his skin problems and ear infection were under control when she listed him on petfinder.com where I first saw him. It seems like a miracle to me that at the time he was displaced for his home, I was beginning to think about adopting my first Shar Pei, and somehow we found each other. We are getting to know each other and I am looking forward to becoming good friends. In six months he will no longer look like a sad, homeless dog but like what he will have become, a healthy, cherished dog with a home all his own.

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