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Getting an Irish wolfhound isn't a snap decision. Once you're sure you're ready for one, the search for the healthy puppy you want to bring home for years of joy instead of heartbreak can take two years or longer. The good news? It's more than worth the wait.

Heart problems and cancer are the two biggest banes of this giant breed, whose future lies entirely in the hands of a few breeders in the U.S. and internationally. But how do you tell the reputable breeders from the rest? Some tips:

They don't advertise.

They don't have to. Producing a litter of wolfhound puppies is an event the best breeders sweat over well in advance. They have specific goals for their line in addition to ensuring it's free of health issues. By the time they find the right male for their female to advance their aims, they have a list of vetted homes for all their puppies. Their hounds are in high demand.

You'll feel like you're joining a secret society.

To find a reputable breeder, you'll have to network. Join an Irish wolfhound group on Facebook and haunt dog shows. The Irish Wolfhound Club of America (<https://www.iwclubofamerica.org/index.html>) is another good place to start. Compile a list of suggested breeders. Look for health and vigor. Ask your contacts why they think the breeder they recommend is outstanding. The best have produced puppies for fanatical supporters for generations.

And know that while you're searching, wolfhound owners will be sizing

you up, too. They love the breed and protect it. They network, too.

It's like being grilled by Homeland Security.

If a reputable breeder agrees to meet you (and not all will), be prepared. You're asking to take one of their grandchildren. This is not a business, it's a legacy. You're requesting to join the extended family. It's okay to sweat, but be prepared to convince the breeder that you're as crazy about wolfhounds as he or she is. You do this by honestly answering all questions about lifestyle, daily work habits, living arrangements, your finances, who shares the home with you and much more. During the process you may also gain a life-long friend.

They don't stress size and they don't finance.

Plenty of on-line Irish wolfhound ads boast about the height and weight of their hounds. Move on. It's no secret that wolfhounds are huge. Mass is not a reason to seek one. It's their huge hearts and personalities that hook people. If they advertise size, they're broadcasting to the general public, not to someone like you who has done their homework and are serious about the breed.

A reputable breeder also doesn't offer to finance your purchase. It's not snobbery, it's making sure you have the means to properly care for an Irish wolfhound for its entire life. The \$2,000 to \$3,000 payment for a puppy is only the start. There are inevitable medical bills for routine care, not to mention emergencies. The right food for wolfhounds can be expensive. You may need a bigger vehicle. The list goes on and it's extensive. And expensive.

They're always ready to take a puppy back.

As much as you love your new puppy, you can't forecast the future. Your health or marital status may abruptly change. You may lose your job. Your wolfhound may not be accepted by your other dogs. If you're

the person your breeder thought you were, you'll know if you can no longer raise your wolfhound and are ready to make the agonizing decision to let them go. In this sad event, the breeder may not only agree to take the puppy back, they'll likely insist on it. They know their hounds. They know someone who would be an ideal fit. As heartbreaking as it would be should that day come, you'll know your beloved hound is going to the best home possible. Because you trust your breeder.

You trust your breeder because once you took that puppy home, they were constantly in touch with advice on teething, socializing, exercising and caring for your puppy. They're involved because they love your puppy as much as you do.

A respected breeder is like gold. Once you live with your first wolfhound, this will become clearer and clearer. As much as you may be tempted to rush, once you get your healthy puppy home after running this gauntlet, you're in for a joyful experience.