

Breeders won't woo 'Marley' business

If you own a television or go to the movies, you've seen it: The trailer for "Marley & Me," a film about life with "the world's worst dog," which opens Christmas Day.

I'm a sucker for movies about dogs, from "Lassie" to "My Dog Skip," but my husband says I'll have to find someone else to warm the theater seat next to me for "Marley & Me."

Why? Because he can feel it coming... the wheedling and pleading for a lovable, fluffy Labrador retriever puppy. It's the same begging that no doubt will be heard around the nation as moviegoers revel in the adorable antics of the dozen or so Labs used to portray Marley in different stages of life.

One of the pups used in the film has a local connection: It is the grandchild of Trinity's Titus, a dog owned by Kerrville Lab breeder Stacey Green. Green is braced for an increase in demand for Labs as the result of the movie, but neither she nor another Kerrville breeder I spoke to — Robin D. Hood of Hill Country Labradors — plan to capitalize on it.

Both Green and Hood agree that, as reputable breeders, they have a responsibility to their dogs. In fact, both women subject buyers to detailed suitability tests designed to determine whether their homes and temperaments are deserving of a Lab puppy. For example, neither will sell a

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pup to an apartment dweller or to someone without a fenced-in yard — and neither approves of puppies as Christmas presents. The price tag for their Labs is enough to weed out impulse buyers: \$1,200.

You may be asking yourself what kind of Lab you get for \$1,200. According to Hood, you get a lifetime companion that is bred for health, temperament and quality. Her dogs come with a two-year guarantee of health and their hips, elbows and eyes — which, genetically, are trouble areas for Labs — are examined thoroughly.

"Experienced Lab breeders, as opposed to someone out to make a quick buck, know a dog is a 12- to 15-year commitment," Hood said. "Some people will see 'Marley & Me' and decide they want a Lab. But when you get a dog, you are creating a lifetime, two-way relationship. It's not something that should be done on the spur of the moment."

When speaking to Green and Hood, it's clear that breeding puppies is not a traditional, money-making business venture like, say, selling clothing or cars or Christmas t-shirts. When the item being sold is a living, breathing puppy, the responsibilities are many.

Green hopes "Marley & Me" doesn't spur Lab mania because Labs, the most popular dog breed in the United States, already populate too many cages in area animal shelters. She encouraged potential Lab owners to remember there is no perfect dog because even the most genetically superior puppies require attention, training and love.

"A Lab or any dog needs human contact and care to reach its full potential," Green said. "Labs are social dogs; they need to be with people, to be part of a family."

Green encouraged potential dog owners to do their research before investing in any breed. For example, there are two kinds of Labrador retrievers: American Labs, which are sleek, built for endurance and have the energy it takes to be hunting dogs; and English Labs, which are stocky, sturdy and enjoy lolling around a television set with a family and kids.

MARLEY AND YOU?

Who: Stacey Green, owner of Trinity Labradors, trinitylabstexas.com; and Robin D. Hood, owner of Hill Country Labradors, www.hillcountrylabradors.com.

What: Kerrville-based Lab breeders with no plans to capitalize on the expected boom in demand created by the Lab-centric new movie, "Marley & Me."

It's a fact: After the release of Disney's "101 Dalmations" in 1996, thousands of Dalmations purchased as Christmas gifts were rejected, let loose in streets and on highways or brought to animal shelters and dog pounds, according to CNN.



GREEN



HOOD

There won't be a new dog in my household anytime soon — my husband says I can plead all I want, but it's not happening. If you're determined to add one to your household, Green has some advice: Don't introduce a puppy to the family on Christmas Day.

"If you have a child that really wants a puppy for Christmas, wrap a leash or a

dog bowl and put it under the tree, then bring the puppy into the household after the excitement of the holiday has diminished," she said. "Puppies are impressionable. Christmas Day, when there is so much activity and excitement, isn't the

right day to welcome one home."

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