

Being a Good Steward For Your Breed

Adia's wonderful piece about "understanding the depth of responsibility that comes with breeding" really resonates with my philosophy of breeding. I believe that successful breeders are those who have long-term goals, and who truly understand and are ready to take on the work that comes with becoming a "good steward" for your breed of the heart. It takes time learning to develop that critical eye for the living standards for your breed, and being willing to NOT become "cattery blind" in the process. Can you take every cat you bred or own, and write down its strong points and "could-be betters"? Do you study the various lines and written standards to try to see what the breeder was striving for in her cats? Do you know those various lines well enough to suggest in your mind where to go to improve upon a feature that isn't as good as you would like?

Great breeders can be winnowed from the chaff, in my opinion, by their willingness to care MORE for the long term improvement and future of their breed, than for individual wins. Oh, don't get me wrong, I like winning as much as the next person, but my goals in my breed were to insure its genetic diversity without sacrificing type, and to breed TO the standard, not sacrificing health or temperament along the way. Winning is fun, but being a good ambassador for my breed is just as important, because those precious minutes you spend being nice to a person admiring your breed might spark a lifetime interest in that person to carry on the work you have done with your breed. Our task is not done merely by breeding a great line of cats, we must also pass along that now wonderful line to the next generations of breeders to carry on the good work.

***Adia's statement also bears notice:
"Could you sustain an ethical breeding program only as long as things progress problem-free, but be wiped-out or over-your-head dealing with a cattery-wide outbreak of infectious diseases, complicated surgeries, etc.? What happens if your spouse or family feels forsaken and delivers an ultimatum? What fate awaits cats in your care should something unforeseeable make***

you unable to care for them? It matters - as it should - to the breeders you approach."

In other words: Do you have an effective plan to design your physical cattery to accommodate breeding cats' nasty or dirty/messy habits so that it is bright, easy to clean, and accords pleasant surroundings to your precious cats?

It is very important to also design your cattery to minimize the potential of health problems, to provide plenty of isolation spaces for "just in case" situations, and to remember to have a minimum of two doors between any male and access to the females.

Just as important as the physical cattery set-up is the new and experienced breeder's resolve to NOT buy every cat that is offered and end up with a cattery FULL (or perhaps, too full) of semi-decent cats from a hodgepodge of cattery names, none of whose lines "work" particularly well with each other. You also need an effective back-up plan for how to handle the bad times, and they surely DO come during the course of breeding! Are you being as realistic as you can about how you can handle the financial, spiritual, ethical, and stamina aspects of breeding and showing?

Do you INTERVIEW breeders to determine whether their lines deliver kittens easily, have "good" mothers who successfully nurse their kittens, have males who aren't too testy to keep whole for long? Are you asking for and insisting upon receiving pedigrees for cats you are contemplating adding to your cattery? Are you sitting down with breeders at the shows and soaking up all the information you can about their lines, and breeding experiences? Are you asking breeders to indicate their most influential cats in their pedigrees, and what features made them so very valuable to their program? Are you asking about the potential for genetic problems in the lines you are contemplating incorporating into your own? If you are too afraid to ask these kinds of questions of the big name breeders you have contacted, then maybe you need to re-think your desire to breed as not being serious enough.

What marks a rank new person when they contact me for a "top show cat" is how very few questions they ask me about my lines, breed characteristics, and what other lines work well with them. I have seen people spend more time researching and investigating the next car they plan to buy than about asking the right questions of the breeders whose cats they say they are interested in breeding. They focus mostly on WINNING, not on how I built my lines on the foundation of other good lines to produce a distinctive look that makes my heart sing, whose pet owners report that the kitten they bought from me became their "heart" cat who lived a long happy healthy life, and whose cattery produced other great catteries who are also producing beautiful, typey, healthy, happy cats.

In Adia's words, "Reflect on your limitations and, for the sake of the breed, work within them. Perseverance is key. (Heck, I even had to be patient learning patience "

Breeding cats often is a grueling marathon: when you haven't had a decent night of sleep in the last week, because you are feeding orphaned kittens round the clock or supplementing them because the Mom cat isn't able to feed them herself, when you show and come home to find that your cat sitter quit sometime during the weekend, leaving YOU to do all the feeding and clean-up, when you just got home from an eight hour drive through the blizzard, you grit your teeth and start into doing the ENDLESS work of cleaning a now dirty cattery, and get through it somehow, and then have to drag yourself in to work the next morning on little sleep. Then you know whether you have it in you to become one of those persons who will truly stick around long enough to make a positive mark improving your breed!

So think hard about being realistic about the rigors of being a breeder, and about presenting yourself as a person willing to roll up their sleeves and dig into the work of research, effective planning, the value of NOT getting in over your head, and who has back-up plans with redundancy built in, so that above all else, at least the CATS are taken care of!

People who present themselves as being prepared and knowledgeable, always go to the top of my "A" list. People who also have done their homework and who are being effectively Mentored, also get a break in my book, and be sure that I WILL ask the Mentor all about what kinds of questions and self-research the Protégé has been doing on their own, as well as an assessment about their ethical habits.

I want to inspire the highest standards of personal behavior in my Protégés, and expect the same from other's Protégés when they come to me for kitties. That's what it means to me to be a "Good Steward" for your breed, and I can wish no higher purpose or goal greater than attaining that role in your breed for all our precious new breeders and exhibitors!

Best of luck to all of you!

Candice Massey

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