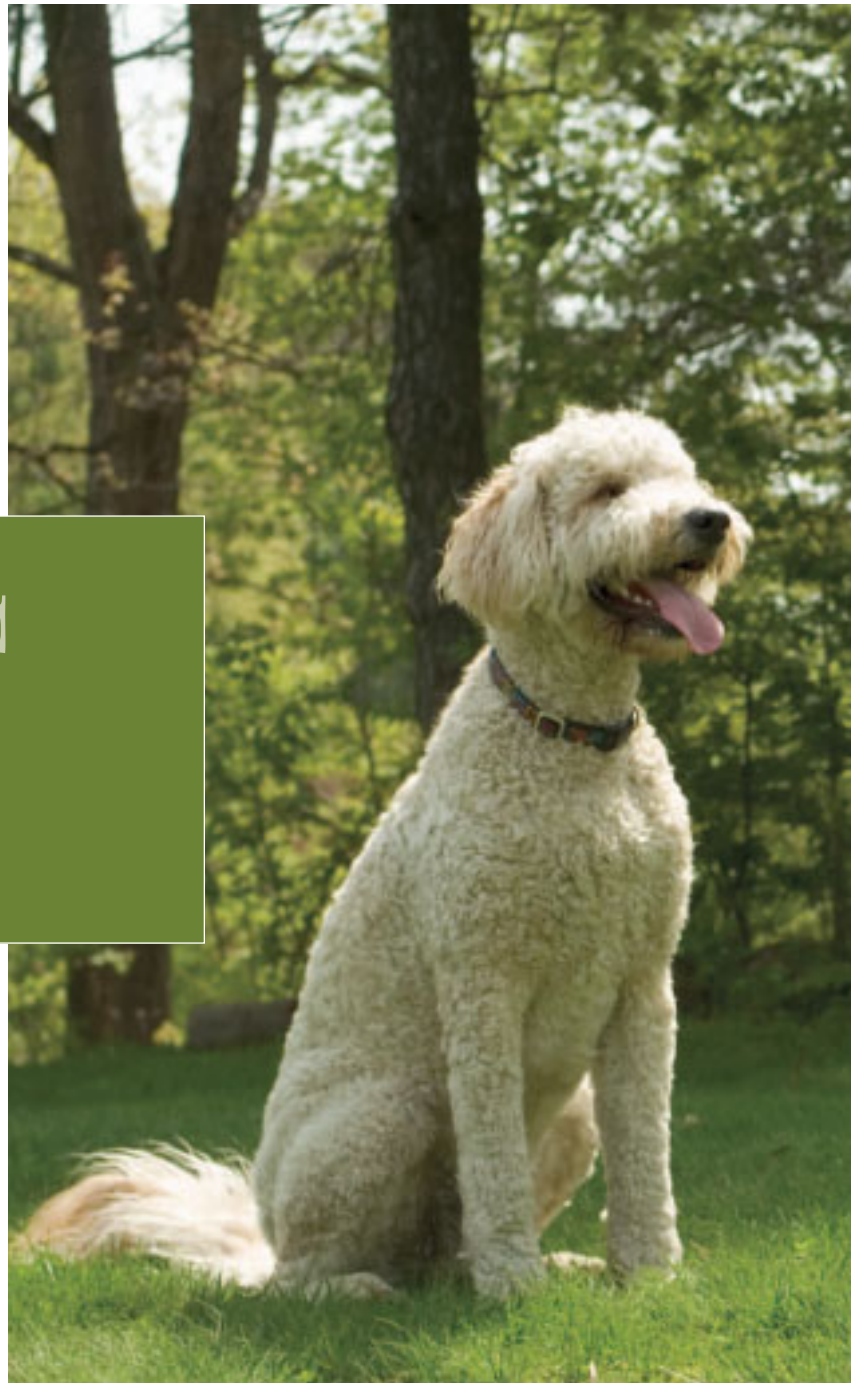


by Leslie C. Smith
photos by Kathryn Hollinrake

The X -Factor

DESIGNER BREED OR FRANKENLINE?



They're adorable dogs: cute, cuddly, with just enough craziness in their personalities to make them interesting. Their owners can't seem to praise them enough; their breeders boast of big waiting lists and even bigger payouts on each new litter of pups.

So what's not to love about the goldendoodle, a.k.a. "dood" in the vernacular, the Golden Retriever/Standard Poodle mix that is the latest crossbred canine fad?

According to purebred breeders, lots.

"Any crossbred dog is a mutt," says Elaine Whitney, a respected international all-breed judge and Miniature Poodle breeder of some 40 years' experience. "New owners think they are getting the best of both breeds and, hopefully, they are. But unfortunately, they could

also get the worst of both breeds."

Whitney goes on to excoriate crossbreeders as people who perform "no genetic testing" on their animals, because "their reasoning is that since it is a 'new breed' it won't have any genetic problems. Wrong. They have, in fact, doubled up on many genetic problems."

Despite Whitney's assertion about the genetic testing, there is evidence that some Gen-X breeders do try to avoid pairing up parents with latent medical conditions. The problem is that this testing process is unregulated and spotty at best.

She is correct, though, in denying doodles "new breed" status. The kennel club definition of a breed is "a domestic race of dogs (selected and maintained by man) with

"Since [goldendoodles, left] can inherit the uglier side of genetics as well, they run the risk of being prone to more medical conditions than either purebred parent."



a common gene pool and a characterized appearance (phenotype) and function."

No Poodle cross, from the popular cockapoo that first started the craze back in the early 1970s, through to labradoodles (developed in 1988 for the Royal Guide Dogs in Australia) and goldendoodles (created in the mid-1990s) is capable of "throwing true," breeding terminology for a group whose offspring exhibit the exact same characteristics over successive generations.

Because these crosses do not share a common gene pool, their offspring – whether mated with another cross or a purebred – will all be different from each other. In a single litter of pups, coat colour can vary wildly, hair texture can come out curly, wavy or straight, propen-

sity toward shedding can be normal, low or absent, and hypoallergic status is always a crapshoot.

Veterinarian and Poodle breeder Joanne Reichertz, D.V.M., delves even deeper into the issue of these designer dogs in her article 'Oodles Of Poodle Crosses For Sale,' published in the July/August 2004 issue of *The Poodle Review*: "Goldendoodles are considered [by their breeders] a hybrid dog, a first generation cross between two breeds, and as such they are supposed to exhibit a quality called 'hybrid vigour'... more correctly called heterosis."

In truth, Reichertz goes on to say, "True hybrids are the product of breeding two different species. Domestic dogs are the same species."



(Left) Golden Retriever
(Right) Standard Poodle

While heterosis is occasionally beneficial to a cattle farmer, who may end up with a crossbred cow that grows faster and eats less, thus maximizing his profit margin, “it is not necessarily useful in breeding dogs,” Reichertz concludes.

None of this nay-saying, however, is preventing people from purchasing doodles in record numbers and at record prices (some reportedly go for as much as \$1,500) as evidenced by the sheer amount of golden-haired mopets to be found chasing each other around city parks.

If one did entertain doubts about the wisdom of obtaining a Poodle cross, there are literally thousands of web sites out there lauding the new “breed’s” attributes

and benefits. One self-described “country vet” expounds at length on the miracles of heterosis: “When unrelated breeds of any animal species are mated the offspring *in the first generation* [his italics] will be more healthy, fertile, and (in animals) mentally stable than either parent breed.”

Perhaps, if you are a mule (horse/donkey mix), a beefalo (cattle/buffalo mix) or a liger (lion/tiger mix), although these mixes are usually sterile. But Golden Retrievers – or Cocker Spaniels, Labradors and the legion of other dog breeds that have been mated with Poodles – are not, as Reichertz points out, unrelated. In fact, they are very closely related. And any slight health or temperament bonus you might get from a mixed breed would disappear completely in the second generation.

Other breeder web sites offer the same distinction about first-generation mixes. Most are also wary enough to hedge their, and prospective owners’, bets about any particular pup growing up to possess a non-shedding, hypoallergenic coat, which is the hallmark of the Poodle and the main selling point of the goldendoodle. They are quite aware that the chances of this happening are only 50-50.

Arguments over hybrid vigour aside, there’s another very good reason to be leery of crosses such as doodles. Since these mixes can inherit the uglier side of genetics as well, they run the risk of being prone to *more* medical conditions than either purebred parent.

The Orthopedic Foundation for Animals, a U.S. institution dedicated to collating and disseminating information on orthopaedic and genetic diseases of animals, lists dog breeds in order of their at-risk status for a wide range of inherited problems.



Goldendoodle

Golden Retrievers, for instance, rank number 29 for hip dysplasia, 21 for elbow dysplasia and 19 for congenital cardiac disease, while Poodles are ranked, respectively, 68, 57 and 41 in the same categories. On the other hand, Poodles rank higher than Golden Retrievers in patellar luxation (number nine, compared to 15) and are more at risk for skin problems and eye diseases, including corneal dystrophy.

With the cards thus stacked against the success of the Gen-X dood, will their flame finally flicker out and die? There is a good likelihood this will happen; and sooner rather than later, given that most trends come to a quick end.

Helping spur matters on is the legion of get-rich-quick backyard breeders who are spewing out doodos

to meet the demand. Poor-quality stock, haphazard kennel conditions, lack of appropriate nurturing and socialization will all tell over time.

In the fashion business, you know a trend is over when it turns up at Wal-Mart. For dog breeding, the same holds true when local humane societies start getting flooded with hoards of rejects.

Buyers may be shelling out big bucks now, but ultimately it is always the unwanted pups that are forced to pay the price.

Award-winning writer Leslie C. Smith is a frequent contributor to a number of national magazines, and her byline has appeared in virtually every major Canadian newspaper, including the National Post and The Globe and Mail.

First of all, full disclosure: I own a Standard Poodle. I got 'Tally' nearly four years ago, just before the goldendoodle fad took off. Otherwise, who knows? I might have fallen for a dood myself.

There is certainly not much to distinguish between the woolly, cream-coloured guy I ended up with and his good buddy 'Fulton,' an attractive Poodle/Golden Retriever cross. Physically, they are as alike as brothers; mentally, though, I have to give my dog the edge.

Yes sir, Tally has brains, beauty, athletic ability, a charming personality, plus an inherent dignity that is at odds with his also-inherent propensity towards clowning. He was easy as pie to train and was actually able to walk off-leash at just two months of age. Add in the fact that his hair is hypo-allergenic and he doesn't shed, and you can see why Poodles have been called the perfect dog.

So why are people scrambling right now to buy Poodle crosses, instead of the real thing?

Ask them the reason they got a dood and they reel off a list of every trait Tally possesses. When you get down to brass tacks, the only element preventing them from embracing Poodles is the name.

Unfortunately, Poodles are, to many people's minds, the doggy equivalent of Richard Simmons: fluffy, frou-frou and effete.

Their very name has become a byword. When the British press wanted to twit Tony Blair for his obsequious support of the Iraq War, they billed him as George Bush's "attack Poodle." In a recent *National Post* article on goldendoodles, a woman shopping around for a dog was quoted as saying she and her boyfriend "don't want a straight Poodle. We want a dog."

Useless to explain that the very name of Poodle comes

from the Low German *pudeln*, meaning "splash in the water," a tribute to these dogs' sublime retriever instincts. Or to point out that Poodles at play are some of the roughest, toughest hombres around. Or that they do not emerge from the womb with their coats already sheered into prissy little pom-poms.

It's not the dog but the damn fey haircut that is the root of the problem with Poodles. And for this, Poodle people – both breeders and exhibitors – have only themselves to blame. It is they who can't resist playing My Little Pony with their dogs' flowing locks, they who razor and tease and spray the hair into those dreadful English Saddle or Continental Clips, they who are responsible for setting dog-show standards for these same haircuts, when all other canine contestants are at least allowed to somewhat resemble themselves.

They have even seen to it that kennel clubs rank Poodles as a "Non-Sporting breed," when in truth they are one of the original sporting dogs.

I love my Poodle and hope that he – naturally shaggy haircut and all – will continue to act as an ambassador for the breed. I just wish the Poodle people would wake up to the harm they have caused and try to rectify it before the doodos and their ilk drive them out of business altogether.

But then, that just may be the Poodle cross they will have to bear.

– Leslie C. Smith

Dood, where's my dog?

