

Belgian Shepherd Dog (Groenendael)



This is a breed which comes in four varieties. As far as the physical characteristics are concerned the breed standards are identical, with only one area of difference. This relates to the coat in respect of colour, texture and length. In alphabetical order the varieties are the Groenendael, the Laekenois, the Malinois and the Tervueren. The names refer to their geographic areas of origin within Belgium. These Belgian sheepdogs date back to the Middle Ages but began to be separated only in 1891 when Prof Adolphe Reul of the Belgian Veterinary School established the standards for the types.

A restaurant owner is credited with fostering the Groenendael; a brewer who first whelped a litter from a mating of two longhaired black-tipped fawns produced the Tervueren; the Malinois takes its name from Malines; and the Laekenois comes from Boom, near Antwerp, taking its name from the Château de Laeken, a royal residence of Queen Marie Henriette, whose favourite variety was the Laekenois.

It is not appropriate to detail the existing differences as these are covered in the coat and colour clauses, but the Groenendael is fundamentally longhaired and with a black harsh-textured coat; the Laekenois, as yet the rarest variety in the UK, has a pretty, short, wiry type of coat which is reddish fawn; the Malinois is possessed of a shortish firm-textured coat which may be red, fawn or grey with a black overlay; while the Tervueren, now the most rapidly increasing of the four, has the same range of colouring as the Malinois, but the outer coat is long, straight and abundant.

The varieties are described as both sheepdogs and guards. They are essentially graceful without being too refined. They give the appearance of being purposeful creatures, and their somewhat laconic gait clause, 'brisk, free and even', while being very economic in words, does not give the full flavour of a unique mode of progression which is one of efficiency above all, with a high style. It is always a debatable point whether we should take what is in truth a working breed and try to turn it into a family companion/pet, but it has been done in many breeds in the past, especially the recent past, this applies equally to the Belgian Shepherd. Provided owners do not lose sight of the fact that these are active animals requiring adequate exercise, both physical and mental, little harm is done. But, as in many other working breeds, we must never lose sight of their history of service, or we shall find ourselves with dogs whose basic temperaments have been changed for the worse and out of all recognition.

What about Health Issues?

You may be aware that some breeds of dog (and crossbreeds too) can be susceptible to inherited disease. Of course you want to be sure that the puppy you choose is as healthy as possible, and you would like to know that it has not inherited any undesirable disease-causing genes from its parents. There is some help in that DNA tests for diseases in purebred dogs are available for some conditions in some breeds, but there are not very many such tests just yet! There are also, however, a number of clinical veterinary screening schemes that dog breeders can use to increase the probability of producing healthy puppies.

Details of the various screening schemes, both veterinary and DNA, that are available to breeders in the UK can be found on the Kennel Club's website at:

www.thekennelclub.org.uk/doghealth

Puppy buyers should be aware that, at present, the application of various health screening results to breeding programmes is not always straightforward, and breeders may make choices for various reasons. A responsible breeder though, will always be willing to discuss relevant health issues with you. Breed clubs are often useful sources of breed-specific information.

And what health screening is relevant for the Belgian Shepherd Dog (Groenendael)?

Kennel Club Accredited Breeders must use, or are strongly recommended to use, the following screening schemes and/or advice for sires and dams:

- BVA/KC Hip Dysplasia Scheme
- BVA/KC/ISDS Eye Scheme

This list is not necessarily comprehensive and you should still ask breeders and refer to breed clubs about health issues in the breed.