

A New Leash on Life

Giving an unwanted dog or cat a home can be both personally rewarding and practical. Here's what you need to know about **ADOPTING FROM A SHELTER**.

UNLIKE HUSBANDS and hairstylists, a good shelter pet isn't hard to find. "It's a misconception that there's something wrong with pets in shelters," says Adam Goldfarb, director of the Humane Society of the United States' Pets at Risk Program. "Most dogs and cats in shelters are surrendered for people reasons, like moving, allergies, or financial problems." If your household is ready, you'll find a pet without much difficulty.

WHAT'S THE BENEFIT?

"You're giving a homeless animal a new home and family, and in some cases, saving its life," Goldfarb says. Plus, the cost of an adopted pet is lower than one from a breeder or a pet store. Adoption fees are \$50 to \$300 and usually cover a health check, a behavioral exam, and often vaccinations, spay or neuter

charges, and postadoption support services, says Joanne Yohannan, senior vice president of operations at North Shore Animal League America, in Port Washington, New York. Best of all, shelters offer a cross section of breeds, ages, sizes, and temperaments. Most are owner-surrenders or strays, but private shelters and adoption agencies might also have animals seized from puppy mills or rescued from natural disasters.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Yohannan suggests that you give yourself a range of options, by looking online (at *adoptapet.com*, *animalleague.org*, and *petfinder.com*) and visiting several shelters. Make sure the shelter shares whatever information it has about the health and temperament of the animal you're considering. (If the animal was a stray or received from a cruelty case, there may be nothing to give you.)

TAKE YOUR TIME

You may be looking at a 15-year commitment, so it's important to think with your head, as well as your heart. First-time adopters often head straight for the animal with the cutest or most forlorn face, instead of figuring out if it's a smart match. So arrange for quiet time with the pet you're considering. Be realistic about your needs and those of the animal. The best match may turn out to be bigger

or older than you wanted, but if the personality fits your family's, it's worth compromising.

Experts suggest bringing the whole family to meet the pet. The goal is to balance the needs of both the animals and the adopters. To that end, you'll see an adoption counselor and complete an application form, with details of your housing, lifestyle and activity level, experience with pets, and expectations for the new animal.

Expect to spend at least three hours at the shelter. Choosing a new animal to join your family is a major decision, and you don't want to rush it. Some shelters will let you take your pet immediately. Others may ask you to wait for the pet to be spayed or neutered, or for the shelter to verify your information or conduct a home visit.

If you don't find a pet right away, check back regularly, try other shelters, and look online.

NURTURE YOUR NEW FRIEND

Many shelters have follow-up help, training classes, and behavior hotlines for families whose new pets have minor behavioral issues (barking, jumping, housebreaking, and leash-pulling for dogs; inappropriate scratching and use of the litter box for cats).

These problems usually disappear if you devote the time and patience that every pet will require at some point. The result? A companion for life.

WHAT'S A BREED RESCUE?

If you are set on a specific type of dog, contact a breed-rescue group. These groups often have dogs from owners who gave them up, shelters that need space, and municipal animal control. "Rescue volunteers are experts in a breed, sometimes even breeders themselves, so they're equipped to evaluate the dog's temperament and pair it with an ideal owner," says Lisa Peterson, a spokeswoman with the American Kennel Club.

The volunteers will interview you thoroughly, asking about your ability to care for a dog and your pet experience. A house visit may be required. The groups work with vets, some donating their services, to provide checkups and vaccinations (many clubs ask for a donation to help cover these expenses). To find a group near you, visit akc.org/breeds/rescue.cfm.



NEW PET? NOW WHAT?

Learn how to keep your new family member happy and healthy, at marthastewart.com/petkeeping.

