

The Maremma Breeder's Responsibility

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rewritten with permission by C. Williams

The MSCA recommends spaying and neutering of guardian dogs not used in a breeding program. If you are not going to breed, we also recommend spaying and neutering at 6 months (MSCA NOTE: Recent studies have determined that juvenile and early spaying and neutering can be detrimental to a dogs health. One year of age is the earliest recommend age to spay or neuter your dog). There is some evidence that spaying before a female's first heat will help reduce the incidence of mammary tumors. Neutering is a good solution to sexually originated problems, yet we have seen no diminishing of guardianship. He (or she) may even be better, because he/she can concentrate on the job at hand instead of on raging hormones.

Our primary responsibility to our dogs is to keep them in good health and body condition, and to allow them the "time off" to breed and raise puppies. There is some controversy as to whether or not we should allow "back to back" breeding. Some of the current research supports the theory that this is actually beneficial to the reproductive life of the female. The MSCA however, currently does not recommend breeding a bitch more frequently than 3 heat cycles in a two year period. Having a family takes time away from the bitches primary role of guarding the flock. Rearing a litter of pups is also time consuming and expensive. Mom and pups need to be regularly de-wormed and given the appropriate vaccinations. Ideally, they should also be examined by a licensed Veterinarian and any health potential problems reported. Maybe not all puppies will be sold by 8 weeks of age, (our optimal target), so bonding of the remaining pups is essential for them to become successful guardian dogs. For this to be accomplished, a great deal of time and energy must be spent in preparing facilities to accommodate the remaining pups until they are sold. This can quickly deplete any profit that otherwise might have been realized. It may also require having to spay or neuter the remaining pups, not to mention the added cost of vaccines, food, etc.

Restraining an intact Maremma dog from breeding a bitch in heat is not an easy task. Unlike wolves, in which only the Alpha male breeds the Alpha female in the pack, a domesticated canine will breed any female in season. It is therefore essential to provide an escape proof pen or other means of controlling the activities of the stud dog, as well as the bitch. If you want to keep intact dogs, be prepared for sudden challenges in pecking order. Your dog, male or female, may become unfriendly to livestock that wander near the feed bowl, even if it is empty. Interaction with other dogs may become more threatening, especially if you have females in heat. When females are in heat, it is extremely difficult if not impossible, for the intact male to focus on anything else. An intact male may even challenge human authority. Be prepared to remain in control of the dog; don't let the dog get away with dominance tactics, innocent as they may seem. It will come back to haunt you when you have a bitch in season. An intact male is much more likely to roam in search of females.

Our second responsibility is to the breed. Not every Maremma is suitable for breeding stock. Conformation and physical attributes are important, this is true. But perhaps more important is whether the dogs are good guardian material. Are they working well for you? If not, please don't breed! Remember Ray Coppinger's trio of traits: Protective, Attentive, and Trustworthy. Another important consideration is temperament. We no longer live in a forgiving society. It has been said that it is far easier to win a lawsuit than win the lottery. Are your dogs or their offspring likely

to be the subject of a lawsuit? If so, please don't breed! Do you have a 5-generation pedigree on your breeding animals? Are you certain they are unrelated? The original gene pool was quite small. Albert Huber, Ray Coppinger, and Sue Drummond brought in unrelated blood lines, and a lot of breeding has taken place since then. Several dogs have been imported since this article was first written, but we still have a very limited gene pool and find people are unknowingly breeding very closely related dogs. A responsible breeder will be aware of the lineage of his dogs. If you're not, Don't Breed!

Our third responsibility is to our customer. Do we have the time and expertise to advise new puppy owners? If not, Don't Breed! Most people purchasing guardian dogs are not familiar with their characteristics, and will need a lot of guidance. The MSCA does provide a list of resources, but it is also essential to keep in contact with our customers, especially the "newbie's". First time puppy buyers will be the most in need of help, but even so-called experienced guardian dog owners can make mistakes. As a breeder, we should be prepared to rescue any pup which we bred or raised, who winds up being relinquished regardless of the reason. Sometimes it may be due to a lifestyle change, behavioral issue, or perhaps we just plain made a bad choice in selling to a particular individual. If you are a responsible breeder, you will maintain contact with your 'family' of puppy buyers, to be sure that all is going smoothly. Usually, no news is good news, but it is wise to do an annual 'check' to be sure there are no unanswered questions. Some buyers require weekly or monthly advice. This is a heavy time commitment, but well worth the effort if our participation results in dogs who excel.

Our fourth responsibility is to our puppies. Perhaps we don't need a degree in marketing to sell guardian dog puppies, but we do need to have one; a basic understanding and knowledge of the breed, two; a marketing plan, three; advertising savvy and budget and four; a reputation. For the first criteria, knowledge, you need to be informed about your product: the Maremma breed. If you are brand new to world of livestock guardian dogs, this may be a stretch. You must first educate yourself about the breed; it's temperament, style of guardianship, possible health problems, behavioral issues, and be prepared to share this with potential buyers. For example, we know that Maremmas aren't suitable as pets, and you get a call inquiring about the purchase of a pup. Quiz your buyer as to what his expectations are, and determine whether or not this person would be a suitable owner. As a responsible breeder, you make the decision to sell or not to sell. It is important to ask as many questions of the potential buyer as they do of us, perhaps even more! If we determine that the situation will be unsuitable for a guardian dog, tell them so. A responsible breeder should never be afraid to turn down a questionable customer. Why doom that puppy to failure, when you have a choice between being responsible or seeing a return on your investment in the puppies? Keep in mind always, the welfare of the puppy, not the welfare of your pocketbook.

Lastly, if you have made an active decision to breed, remember that sheep numbers in America have declined significantly since the Wool Act was written out of the Farm Bill. Marketing opportunities are still available, but in lesser numbers. The number of Maremma owners indicating an interest in breeding has also increased considerably. This has the potential to spell disaster to the guardian dogs, as more and more desperate breeders sell their pups to pet homes or puppy dealers who may sell them as pets. Is this the fate you wish for your pups? If not, are you prepared to keep all unsold dogs? If not, please don't breed! Assuming that you have unsold dogs after 5 or so months; what plans have you made for their confinement and training? If you don't have a plan, you will be begging people to literally take

them off your hands for very little money. With a plan and management system, a responsible breeder will be prepared to pre-train and start dogs for future owners, which will command a comparably higher price. When you prepare yourself for this sort of a situation, you need to consider your facilities and management practice. Are you able to contain the puppy and start him the way he should be started? Confinement, bonding, training and management are all factors which need to be considered as you embark on your breeding career.

A reputation as a responsible breeder is difficult to build and easy to lose. Being sure that you are selling the right dog into the right situation will help to ease the formation of your reputation. To make choices for buyers will necessitate your informed knowledge about the buyer's needs and the puppy's personality. Sometimes this is difficult at 7 weeks of age, but we do our best. Oftentimes, buyers will want to choose their own pup based on a photograph or video of the pups. This is never a good idea. As breeders, we know our pups far better than any potential buyer. Personality, temperament, guarding instinct are equally important when choosing the right pup. Your buyer cannot determine this from a photograph. Having a reputation as a respected breeder of livestock is conducive to being recognized as a breeder who will stand behind dogs as well. It is our goal and responsibility as breeders to maintain the inherent qualities of the Maremma breed. Do your homework; have a good knowledge base of the breed, and reproduce only animals that meet the criteria outlined in our breed standard.