

PET *Personalities*

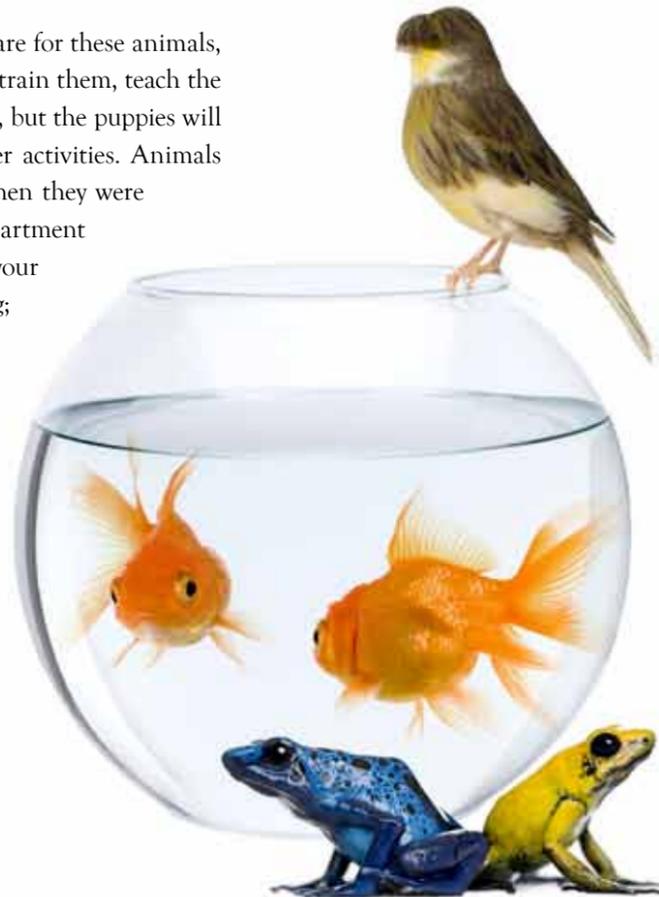
Do you have what it takes to be an animal's companion?

BY VANESSA SALVIA

FOR SOME PEOPLE, THERE'S NO QUESTION of whether they're a "dog person" or a "cat person." But what about gerbils, horses, lizards, or birds? Each type of animal brings a new level of love and fun to our lives, but each also comes with its own unique set of pros and cons. Whichever type of animal you choose to bring into your home, there are things to think about, even if you grew up with animals and believe you know everything there is to know, says Denise Brittain, community outreach manager at Greenhill Humane Society (88530 Green Hill Rd., 541/689-1503, green-hill.org).

"You've really got to think about who is going to care for these animals, who is going to walk them, get their food and water, train them, teach the rules of the house, exercise them. Kids want a puppy, but the puppies will grow up, and the kids get more involved with other activities. Animals still need that same time and attention they had when they were young." Think about the setting of your home (apartment versus country farm); your financial resources and your ability to cover those vet bills you weren't expecting; and who will care for the animal when you want to go on vacation.

Animals bring so much pleasure to our lives, but it does take some adjusting to welcome one into our home. On the following pages, we share advice from local experts about some specific things to think about when you are considering getting an animal.



HORSES

If you don't have experience with horses, think twice before getting one. Linda Lay, veterinary technician at Del Oeste Equine Hospital (90238 Prairie Rd., 541/689-0205, deloosteequine.com), acknowledges that most people don't decide "out of the blue" that they want to try out a horse. "If someone decides that they want to try a horse and they have no background knowledge, then they're going to need to hook up with a trainer who can guide them," she says.

Naturally, one consideration with a horse is its size and strength. They are large animals and they live in social groups, Lay says, so the relationship is not the same as one you'd have with a dog or cat. "If you're new to horses, the trainer will try to find a horse that's laid back or maybe a little older," Lay says, "rather than a young horse that lacks training, that could hurt a person if they don't have any background."

Many horse owners live within the metropolitan area and don't have their own accommodations for a horse at their home. Lay points out that we have a lot of stables in our area offering opportunities to observe horses or take lessons to ride and handle them. Plus, you can find stables offering different styles of horsemanship—a focus on your favored riding discipline, such as Western or pleasure, for instance, or whether you're jumping, or you're just a laid back type of rider. "If you show the horse a lot, you may want to stable your horse at a bigger facility that hosts a lot of shows or events," Lay says. "Or if you just spend time grooming and brushing the horse and going on the occasional trail ride, then you might want the smaller, private barn with just a few stables."



DOGS

Greenhill's Denise Brittain suggests a few basic considerations for those people interested in dogs. "The first major thing to think about would be, do you have children involved in your family?" she says. "That would make a real big difference in the decision to get a dog or a cat. What age of an animal are you looking for? Of course, everybody wants puppies and kittens because they're warm and fuzzy, but puppies or kittens require a lot of time and patience and training, especially with a child involved." Really get at the heart of what you want the dog for: personal



protection, a family pet, or a dog that's going to hunt or herd. "Sometimes people really like a certain dog but we may find that those dogs are herding dogs, and they may have a tendency to herd kids or other animals," she says.

Brittain goes on to note that there are breeds that animal experts recommend more highly than others, particularly to be around children. "Some breeds do come with a bad reputation, and there are going to be more safety things you will have to consider," she says. Unfairly maligned or not, pit bulls, make some people leery, especially when it comes to having your dog around their kids, and finding an amenable rental home may be tougher.

Brittain says that Greenhill does try to encourage people to adopt adult dogs 2 years old or older, especially if they're thinking about getting a companion for their child. "Animals require a lot of time, energy, and socialization, they need to be exposed to new things and people," she says. "By looking at an older animal that may already have that training, you can move right into a home situation." For a family dog, consider those that are able to tolerate more noise and activity. "Some breeds are better than others, such as Labradors—they're much more family-oriented dogs." But, she makes the case that people tend to over-generalize the temperament of dogs. "You may think that a Lab is great, but you need to consider that individual dog's temperament," she notes. "Just because they are a Lab doesn't mean they are going to be a good family dog."

Sometimes people go to Greenhill certain they want a small dog, because of the perception that these pets may require less time for exercise and are easier to manage physically, but that's not necessarily a wise decision. "Smaller dogs can be barky, nippy, more protective," Brittain explains. All dogs rely on you for everything, throughout their whole life. Be prepared to provide daily care for the next 10 to 15 years.

CATS

There's not much in the world that's cuter than a tiny kitten, but they don't stay small for long. Kittens can be as destructive to items in the home as young dogs, until they learn where and how to go potty and are trained not to scratch on the furniture. "Kittens require supervision around kids, as the kittens are fragile creatures and may scratch," points out Brattain. Plus, kittens can get into a lot of mischief if they are left at home alone.

Many of the considerations for getting a cat are the same ones that Brattain encourages people to think closely about for dogs: financial responsibility for food, litter, toys, medicine, and vet bills; your home environment (I once had a cat that refused to stay indoors and would scratch out window screens in order to get outside) and if you have children in the home or not; and the temperament of the individual cat (some cats really don't like to be petted on the head or picked up, for instance). Older cats may not want to play as much as kittens do, but they come already trained to use a litter box and are often happiest just to curl up in a comfortable lap.

Cats are more independent than dogs, which is one thing that makes them appealing. They can manage at home unattended for longer periods of time than a dog can, but they still need a comfortable place to sleep, protection from the elements, fresh food, and water. It may take several days for a new cat to adapt to your home, so provide them with a closet or some other "safe room" to retreat to. Male cats do tend to mark their territory, and this tendency is lessened if they are neutered—which is always a good idea anyway, as unaltered cats of either sex can be difficult to live with: Unneutered males are very territorial and will fight with other cats they meet outside, and unsprayed females will "yowl" terribly and unstopably while they are in heat. Scratching is an undesirable but necessary behavior for cats; minimize destruction by providing your cats a suitable place to scratch, then reward them with a treat whenever they use it, just like you would with a dog for behavior that you want to encourage.



BIRDS

Colleen Christian operates Colleen's One Stop Bird Shop (260 Greenleaf Ave., 541/461-4397), a store that's "just for birds," and she's been a bird breeder for 30 years. "Before anyone buys a bird, they should research them and take into consideration the person's age," Christian says. "Is it for a child or for themselves? A big bird could live 50 years, so really think about the age of the person and how much time they want to spend with the bird." Christian says people come to her shop who have never had a big bird before, and they want a macaw, for instance. "That's not practical," she says. "They're big, they bite, they have attitude. The first-time bird owner, unless they're very knowledgeable about the bird, they're going to have problems."

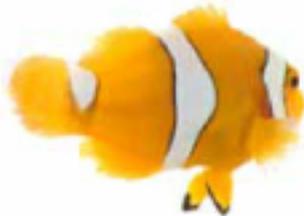
Macaws are also expensive, so you may want to start with a bird that costs \$50 rather than \$5,000 (some macaws could cost even more than that, but the average price is \$1,500 to \$3,000). Some birds talk, some birds sing nicely; some birds are content to stay in a cage, and some aren't.



For children, Christian recommends a cockatiel. "They're not a lot of expense, they like to come out of their cage and be on your shoulder and hang out," she says. If you want your bird to talk, consider a smaller conure, or for a bigger bird, an African gray parrot. Quakers (a type of parrot) are also good birds for a young person. Canaries, Christian says, talk a lot and play with their toys, but aren't a bird you can handle and interact with. "So they can entertain you and not be hands-on," she says.

Assess your general life circumstance before committing to a bird. "Are you married, single, home a lot, gone a lot?" Christian explains. "Birds are kind of like another child: They make demands on you. They don't want to be alone. They're flock animals by nature so they want to be with their flock—which is their people."

Christian started making her own bird food (called Breeders Choice deluxe seed mixes) in the late 1980s, when there weren't specific foods available for birds—people often fed their pet birds wild bird food or cat or dog food. For those who already have birds, Colleen's One Stop Bird Shop offers bird sitting, wing and nail trimming, and all kinds of bird products, including Christian's own inexpensive bird toys, because of another thing to keep in mind about birds: They have strong beaks and like to chew things up.



FISH

Shaun Mangan, saltwater specialist at Aqua Serene (2836 W 11th Ave., 541/302-9073, aquaserene.com) recommends fish for a number of reasons: Fish tanks are an easily cleaned, self-contained unit; no litter box, food bowl, water bowl, and fleas to worry about. “Some people enjoy the peacefulness and serenity of the fish and some people enjoy the husbandry of it, watching the fish grow and growing their corral and plants to the highest level,” Mangan says. “We say that people ‘get the fish bug’ because one tank usually leads to more tanks. The care involved is outweighed by the enjoyment. And for people who have allergies, a fish tank may be the only way to get a pet into the house for their kids.” Having a tank at home or in a classroom also introduces a means for kids to learn about basic water chemistry—even if they don’t realize they’re learning at the time.

Of course there is some upkeep and care, and electricity—“You don’t have to plug your dog or cat in,” Mangan notes, “but moving the water (to clean the tank) isn’t as great a task as people think. People often think you have to change out 50 or 100 percent of the water, which is a lot of water to move if you have a large tank, but we recommend replacing 15 to 20 percent at each cleaning, so it’s often not as much work as people think.”

Mangan says that thanks in part to movies such as *Finding Nemo*, more people are interested in basic saltwater tank setups, which has pushed down the cost of aquariums and fish. The way fish are collected has also improved, Mangan says, so people don’t have to feel bad about that. “Fifteen to 20 years ago, people used to collect fish by means that were not acceptable, and damaging to the environment and to the fish populations. But as of the last five or 10 years, regulations have become a lot more stringent, which is a great thing to preserve the fish for the long run for everyone to enjoy.”



NOT SO CUDDLY PETS

Turtles, spiders, snakes, lizards

One thing snakes (and spiders, turtles, and lizards) have going for them is their “cool factor.” And in most circumstances, snakes may only eat once a week, maybe less. Zany Zoo Pets’ Nate McClain notes that large or adult snakes can go two or even three weeks between meals. “If you have a bowl of water and put your light on a timer, you can go away on vacation and not have to have a pet sitter,” he says. “They’re very low maintenance. It doesn’t need to be loved on, it doesn’t care if you’re there or not—which seems, on the surface, to defeat the purpose of pets—but it’s always there when you need it, so long as it’s acclimated to people or socialized.” Eating once a week means it only goes to the bathroom once a week, so cleaning a cage every day is not a concern. Snakes are also compact: a standard 30-gallon tank has a small profile yet can hold up to a 4-foot long snake.

Many of these advantages also hold with other

reptiles. “With lizards, like a leopard gecko, you can put their lamp and light on a timer and heating element on a thermostat,” McClain says, “so just make sure they have fresh water and throw some crickets in now and then.” But, snakes are generally more hardy and handle-able. “Tarantulas, for instance, are very fragile,” McClain explains. He says he almost never let anyone hold tarantulas, not because of their venom (they are venomous, but it’s in the category of a bee sting), but because they are as delicate as a water balloon. “That’s a look-but-don’t-touch category of pet,” he says. “A snake, though, will coil on your neck, or on your wrist. You can go to the park and it will sit with you.” ■

