

IS A LABRADOR RETRIEVER THE RIGHT BREED OF DOG FOR YOU?

By Kate Pradella

This article is designed to give you some information to help you make an informed decision about whether the Labrador Retriever is the right breed of dog for you. Most breeders have their own careful screening process to determine whether a buyer is potentially suitable to own and care for the breed.

But it is also useful for you to know the kinds of things that your Labrador will need from you if you are to have a long and happy relationship for the next 12 plus years.

It is well documented that the Labrador has always been loved and admired for its keen and biddable nature. He is what is often called a "people-dog" meaning that he is happiest around his family of humans. From the beginning this breed was used to "serve" man in the toughest of conditions. Helping fishermen in freezing conditions with minimal food or shelter the Labrador was reported to be durable, loyal, intelligent and ever ready to please his master.

Today's modern Labrador hasn't changed much and we have found the breed to be useful for a far wider range of tasks due to its inbuilt desire to please. Its versatility is further enhanced due to the fact that, unlike many breeds, it is not a "one-person" dog and can serve many people in many situations.

The Labrador Retriever is happiest when he is "working" because he can put his learned skills to good use - and he knows and expects that he will be well rewarded for a job well done. Put simply, he wants you to be happy with him.

As a pet/family dog he will happily fill any role you have in mind for him even if that is just being your loyal companion. Anything can be achieved if you commit to just love him, pat him and tell him he is a "good dog".

There is nothing more satisfying than watching your trained Labrador complete a task and then have him sit there eagerly wagging his tail, asking "did I do good?", awaiting his next instruction.

On the flipside, these inherent traits could make the Labrador Retriever unsuitable for some people and some situations.

An example:

Positive: *I love that my dog always lies at my feet, he never leaves my side and he is so loyal!*

Negative: *Why can't this dog give me some space, I can't do anything without him following me!*

If your ideal dog isn't one that follows you around all day, wanting to be by your side and looking for your approval, then the Labrador isn't for you.

If you aren't prepared to exercise your dog, train your dog, carefully monitor your dog's diet or are just looking for a popular "accessory" then a Labrador is not for you.

Some people have described the Labrador Retriever as being demanding and needy. I have read many stories of Labradors digging holes in their lawn so deep that they look like they will reach China. I have read numerous accounts from Labrador owners of their dog barking incessantly and stealing their owner's clothes from the clothes line.

These ARE NOT typical Labrador Retriever behaviours!

These behaviours and others arise primarily from loneliness, boredom and lack of training. Think about it! The things that people love the most about Labradors - their love of people - can also be their biggest problem. They will steal clothes from the line because they can smell their owner's scent on the clothes and, if that is the only way they can get close to you, then you can't blame them.

And remember too that Labs were bred primarily as a working retrieving gundog. What you and I may see as clean washing lying in the dirt will almost certainly represent a perfect retrieve and delivery to hand from your dog's perspective.

If you intend to have your dog housed outside permanently, where it cannot see you, cannot hear you or interact with you, then I don't believe this breed is for you. There are plenty of other breeds that are more independent that may suit your lifestyle. Labradors traditionally love children and other animals too. Therefore, they don't want to be locked away from all the action and noise of children because they can and will become depressed. This again leads to annoying and unsociable behaviours.

The Labrador is in my opinion the perfect pet for families. Most pet enquiries I have are from families who have children and believe that the Labrador is the best dog to have growing up around children. Perhaps the parents had a Lab as a child and have many happy memories that they would like their own children to experience.

If the Labrador isn't trained, they can also be very excitable around children and cause some problems, especially when the children are running around and making lots of fun noises. If the Labrador is allowed to run with small children without supervision, you will often find small children knocked over by the exuberant Labrador. Your Labrador must be taught not to jump up, especially for the sake of the kids. Being a heavy dog, they don't necessarily know their own strength.

The trainability of the Labrador makes it the perfect inside pet. You can train him with consistency, time, patience and reward to only go in areas of your house that you allow. For example, you may not want your Labrador to go on any carpeted areas. This can be done. I recommend that whatever your boundaries are in the house, you never let your dog on the furniture. Simply because dogs associate height with superiority and "order" within their pack, you need to make sure your dog is never allowed to be at the same "level" in the pack as you if you expect him to respect your authority and leadership.

There are unlimited resources already available in print and over the internet for inexperienced dog owners to gain the knowledge needed to train their dog so I don't intend to go into that here. The important thing is that you realise that if you don't train your Labrador from an early age, you may end up with a "monster". If your Labrador is destined to live inside, please be prepared for your vacuum cleaner to get a workout because they do shed a lot of hair.

A Labrador can make an equally happy pet if it lives outside the home provided that you spend time with him and he is still able to hear you and see you and your family. For example, I would never sell a puppy to an owner who has a small backyard with the only access to the house being a wooden door. The ideal situation would be a back patio with a glass/screen door to access the house where you will find your Labrador will spend his time. He will no doubt lie right in the doorway in an attempt to be as close to the family as possible and still be able to hear what is going on. Even kennelled Labradors can be very happy as long as they have plenty of contact and interaction with people. As long as they know they have a purpose and a role to fill that pleases you in some way, they are generally satisfied.

In summary, you may not want your pet to be an obedience star but a certain level of training is absolutely necessary for your Labrador Retriever if you want to enjoy a long, happy, workable relationship with a dog that you can be proud of for the duration of his life.

You really couldn't get an easier breed to train and he is just waiting for you to tell him what you want so he can give it to you. Enjoy the journey!

