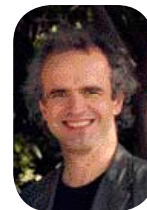


Choosing a pet

Pete Wedderburn advises on how to choose the perfect pet for you.



Pets are good for people. Recent research has proved that there are real benefits to be gained by sharing your life with a pet. Children who grow up with pets in the home are more confident, with better social skills than children who grow up without pets. The recovery rate of patients who have undergone major heart surgery is significantly higher if they have a pet animal. And elderly people living alone need dramatically less assistance from paid carers if they share their life with a pet.

Before rushing into pet ownership, you need to think very carefully. A pet is not a toy or a piece of equipment. You cannot put it away in the cupboard when you've had enough. When you buy a pet, you are buying a living being which cannot look after itself without your help. You must accept the responsibility of ensuring that your pet is fed, housed

and cared for properly every day for the rest of its life. If you do not look after the pet properly, it may suffer discomfort, hunger and disease. Before you buy a pet, you must be certain that you are willing and able to ensure that your pet remains happy and healthy. Once you've decided you want to get a pet, how do you decide which type of pet is for you?

Dogs



A dog is many people's idea of a 'real pet', and there is no doubt that a contented canine lying by the fire can complete the image of an ideal family household. However, dogs are social creatures that are very dependent on humans so you need to have plenty of time to share with a dog. You can choose to buy a pedigree animal, in which case the 'final product' is more predictable, but this will cost you from €300 upwards. Many cross-bred dogs are healthier, equally adorable creatures. Dogs can be fed tinned food, but many people prefer to use complete dry pelleted mixes - these are economical, convenient and are good for the teeth. It is best to train a dog to be a calm, obedient animal, and this is not always easy. There are plenty of professional dog trainers who run classes to help you do this.

Cats



Cats are independent creatures that don't need humans as much as dogs. A cat is a better pet if you do not want to be so tied to your home - you can go away for the weekend and



ask your neighbours to call in twice a day to feed the cat in your absence. Pedigree cats (such as Siamese or Persian) can cost €400 or more, and they can be very exotic, unique individuals. However, most people choose plain moggies, and kittens are widely available for free. Cats can also be fed tinned food or complete dry biscuits. It is worth paying more for so-called 'premium' biscuits, available from pet shops and vets. These are better quality products, and cats can be fussy eaters, so they are more likely to enjoy them. You do not need to train cats - in fact, they are more likely to train you!

Reptiles



Snakes, lizards and tortoises are exotic creatures who live in heated glass tanks called vivariums, and are fed specialised diets depending on their needs (e.g., tortoises may be vegetarians, but some snakes need to be fed frozen whole bodies of newborn mice). Reptiles are not cuddly, but they are fascinating to watch.

Birds



Budgies and canaries are easy-to-keep pets - especially good for elderly people who cannot manage a bigger animal. Bigger birds like parrots are more exotic and have more specialised needs - consult an expert before getting involved!

Rabbits



Rabbits are the 'in' pets of the 21st century. They are intelligent and cuddly, and they can be house-trained to use a litter tray. They eat

hay, pellets and vegetables, and they can make excellent city pets. They do not need much space, and friends can easily look after them if you go away.

Other small mammals



Guinea pigs, hamsters, gerbils, rats and mice are similar types of animals but each with distinctive characteristics. They are small, furry creatures that make great pets for young people. They are easy to keep and do not take up much space. You should visit a good pet shop, look at each different type, and choose whichever you - or your child - prefers.

Pete Wedderburn is the resident vet on Ireland AM and is a partner in Brayvet veterinary practice in Bray, Co Wicklow.



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