

THE BEST FAMILY DOG THERE IS

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The Newfoundland dog is my breed of choice, and has been for more than a quarter of a century. I've owned as many as seven at a time and I cannot imagine not sharing my home with at least one. They were in my life long before my son was born – he's six foot two now, and still finds it easier to lie on the floor than dispute who has the right to the couch.

They are, in general, a kind and forgiving breed: not snippy, nippy or quick to anger. They are loyal, intelligent and beautiful to look at.

They are not, however, Nana out of "Peter Pan" – it's a dog, easier than some breeds, but nevertheless, a dog, and anyone thinking of buying a Newfoundland as an ideal child's companion should think again.

A fully-grown Newf can easily weigh eleven stone, and while he may not mean to knock your small child over as he charges up the hallway, he will. Kickabout games with the football in the garden aren't that much fun when your opponent not only has twice as many feet as you but is also three times your weight when it comes to the tackle. As for taking the brute for a walk – all I can say is that I've seen fully-grown men red with embarrassment as their show-trained dog decided it has had enough and it's the wrong end of the lead that assumes the "sit" position.

Like all other dogs Newfs are also instinctive thieves: my son didn't manage to eat a whole biscuit till he was about four – they were very gentle about it. After that age he learnt that holding his biscuit above his head helped – I note though, with some amusement that he is the only person who NEVER shares anything with the dogs even now. Not only that –he's the only person the latest generation don't try it on with.

If there is a keen gardener in your family, this isn't a breed I'd readily recommend for you either. Apart from Newfs I've owned a Lab, a Dachshund, a Basset, a Lurcher and several mongrels (there is a difference between the last two!).

I've also owned boarding kennels. And I've never come across a dog that didn't like digging holes. The problem with a Newfoundland is that it digs really, really big holes. And I'm not sure that I should go into the size of the nasty brown patches left on the lawn after your bitch has squatted a couple of times for a quick pee.

If you are determined to mix gardening with a Newfoundland then I'd advise you to avoid strawberries and espaliered fruit trees. They enjoy the delights of pick-your-own! They are also intensely curious about where you've been and what you've been up to – so each new line of bedding plants you carefully put in will be checked out – one by one. Pity about the large and heavy paws...

Then of course, there is this season's garden favourite: the water feature. The breeder didn't mention that water affinity wasn't confined to the sea?

Doesn't matter where it is, the beach, the loch, the burn or in amongst your prize Koi carp. Its what webbed feet are for, chum.

Which brings me to the houseproud. The water bowl is usually the first place that webbed feet get tried out in. Time and time again. Its great fun. Still, it gives you a head start on washing the floor. That's about the only advantage of owning a Newfoundland I can think of for someone of your temperament

Have I put you off? If I have, I'm glad, because in my view Newfoundlands don't belong just anywhere. If I haven't, then read on, and I'll try harder.

No matter how well trained your Newf is ,it will, if you allow it to live life as it should and exercise it properly, frequently arrive home in a muddy state. Unless you intend it to live in kennels – in which case why on earth have one – you'll have to accept that not only floors but walls will get manky to a height of 30-odd inches. The walls will be greasy too, because Newfs have oily coats.

Puppy Newfoundlands are adorable but they are just as destructive as any other pup and they do have sheer size, and in my view, determination, on their side. I've lived most of my life in pre-Victorian houses and the damage that a Newf pup can do when bored is quite astonishing – solid wooden doors scratched halfway through, plaster ruined and new cork tiles eaten from the floor. And that's when they've been shut in for 90 minutes.

You are, I trust, remembering that this is being written by someone who knows and loves the breed. I've more than once had inexperienced and unwarned owners phone me in tears to itemise depredations on carpets, furniture and curtains.

When they get past the cute puppy stage you'll have to forget using that coffee table: it's the perfect feeding height for a Newf, doesn't matter if its morning coffee, afternoon tea or pre-dinner nibbles. Even when you've got him trained not to pinch the food, the dribbles on the polished surface will dissolve the wax.

You may have been told or read that Newfoundlands are a calm, stolid and reliable breed, and mostly they are when adult. However, like any other dog they can and will go awry in the wrong place/hands. A giant breed is not suited to a flat, a small house or a pocket garden – if you buy one as a status symbol you'll end up regretting it and the dog won't like you either.

A quiet word of warning now about the calm, stolid bit. There are Blacks, Browns and then there are the Landseers. I've specialised in the latter and can only say they are the joker in the pack – but they smile when they are up to mischief – and you won't really know what I mean till you've owned one.

If you're still keen, Good Luck, and welcome to the Pack.

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