**Are You Ready for a Dog?**

What do you think about when you picture your life with a dog? Games of fetch in the backyard, long walks in the country, lazy afternoons snuggled together on the couch? Maybe you want a friend for your children, a guardian for your home, or an athlete to train for and compete in AKC events. Or maybe you just like the idea of sharing your life with a devoted companion animal. A dog can be all those things, and more.

But before you bring a dog home, you also need to picture this: Veterinarian bills for routine vaccinations, checkups, illnesses and injuries. Housetraining, and the accidents that happen before training is complete. Losing your best shoes to chewing and your best rosebush to digging. Barking when you’re trying to sleep, begging when you’re trying to eat. Dogs do all these things too, and unless you’re prepared for that reality, you’re not ready for a dog.

Remember that owning a dog is a lifelong commitment with a variety of responsibilities; if you cannot meet those responsibilities, neither you or your dog will be happy. Consider the following list carefully, and honestly evaluate your lifestyle, your home, and your pocketbook before you decide that you really want a dog.

Food: In addition to your dog’s meals, you’ll want to supply occasional healthy treats. You may need to feed a special diet for puppies, allergies, weight management, illnesses, older dogs. You’ll need to train your dog not to beg for people food, and your family not to give in to those pleading puppy eyes.

Shelter: For indoor dogs, you’ll need a crate or other confined area to protect the dog and your belongings at night or when you’re away. You’ll want to keep a supply of carpet cleaner on hand, and provide a bed or mat. Gates to keep the dog out of certain rooms can also be helpful.

Outdoor dogs must have a fenced yard or kennel run. They will need a sheltered spot so they can stay out of the heat in summer, the cold in winter, and the rain. You’ll need to install creative fencing to protect your garden, and to protect the dog from toxic plants. You will probably have to do some obedience training to prevent nuisance barking. You’ll need a pooper-scooper to keep your yard clean.

Water: Fresh water must be available at all times.

Exercise: Your dog will need a couple of daily walks or romps in the yard. You’ll have to provide a leash, a pooper-scooper, and balls or flying discs to play with. You’ll need an umbrella, and dog sweaters or booties for small or delicate dogs in inclement weather.

Training: Housetraining is first. A crate is useful, but stock up on carpet cleaner and deodorizer and some puppy training pads.

Teaching basic good manners requires time and dedication. You may want to join a Puppy or CGC class. Advanced classes or behavioral training may be required for more difficult or spirited dogs.

You must be prepared to control your dog’s behavior at home, with guests, in the park, around the neighborhood, at the vet’s office–at all times.

Health Care: Your dog will need regular checkups, vaccinations and dental care. You must also be prepared to care for your dog during illnesses or after accidents–such as a sprain, a torn paw pad, consumption of a stuffed animal, or poisoning. Some dogs develop chronic diseases such as diabetes, arthritis, or hip dysplasia; older dogs also require additional care. The AKC Pet Healthcare Plan available in all 50 states can help you to budget sensibly and responsibly for the lifelong healthcare needs of your dog.

Grooming: You’ll need equipment such as a tub, brush, comb, shaver or nail clippers. Dogs with profuse or sculpted coats may require professional grooming.

Play: You can give your dog safe stuffed and rubber toys, bones, balls and other chewies. You’ll need to train the dog to distinguish its toys from your possessions.

Companionship: Your dog needs your attention when you’re home, and a secure place to stay when you’re away.

Some dogs require training to alleviate separation anxiety in their owner’s absence.

You’ll need a pet sitter or a good boarding kennel if you go away for an extended period of time.

Forgiveness: Your dog won’t apologize for having housetraining accidents, for digging, for barking, for chewing–for being a dog. You’ll have to forgive him his “mistakes” anyway.

Devotion: Don’t worry. You’ll get it all back.