

## Dangers of Breeding Merle to Merle

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Despite the efforts of many in educating others, there still are so many double merles showing up on the internet and in shelters needing homes. Why aren't people listening? Why are they continuing to produce dogs with blindness, deafness, or both? And for every dog that ends up in a rescue or a shelter, or in a home, there are so many more that are being killed shortly after birth for a crime they didn't commit. They didn't ask to be bred this way. People made the decision to take a gamble with their lives.

There are many breeds of dogs that carry the merle gene. Some of them are: Cocker Spaniels, Australian Shepherds, Pyrenean Shepherds, Border Collies, Cardigan Corgis, Catahoulas, Chihuahuas, Collies, Shelties, Dachshunds, Great Danes, Pomeranians, and I even recently saw pictures that people are developing merle lines of Schnauzers and Poodles! The merle gene is being introduced to more and more breeds (and mixes) due to the cool way it looks. I have to admit, I love the pattern of merle! It's very pleasing to my eyes. Breeding merles responsibly (a merle to a non-merle dog) gives us the cool mottled look and can give us healthy and sound dogs, while breeding merle to merle often produces puppies with severe impairments.



This photo shows an example of a blue merle-colored dog. Breeding two dogs with the merle gene together risks puppies being born blind, deaf, or both. Some of these merle to merle litters are accidental where people were not responsibly containing their dogs, and the two just got together. Some breeding is done intentionally by people who may truly love their dogs and want more just like them, but they have not taken the time to learn about genetics and responsible breeding. And still other merle to merle breeding is

done by long-time show dog breeders who are actually trying to create a double merle dog. They think a double merle dog may be wonderful to keep for their breeding program. They are fully aware of the dangers involved, but are willing to take that chance with their puppies' lives.

Yes, a double merle dog may produce more merles for them to sell. But a breeding program should be about developing the whole dog as a balanced individual. When something as significant as the dog's ability to see and hear is missing, that balance is thrown way off. That dog is a very lop-sided picture of what the ideal dog of that breed should be. Plus, the resulting impairments may hide other genetic disorders that will be passed along to future puppies.

Trying to develop a dog just for its color pattern is risky. The color may be easy to see, but the other traits that aren't being paid attention to can be stirring up trouble. I think it's extremely

unethical for a breeder to produce a dog that has a good chance of being blind, deaf, or even both, for the sole purpose of having puppies of a certain color - especially when there are other, safer ways of creating that same color pattern. I'm not going to get into the actual genetics and breeding practices here, because that is not the intent of this article.

The technical, genetic term for double merle is homozygous merle, which means that there are two copies of the merle gene present, one from each parent. Different breeds have various names for this phenomenon. Lethal white, double dapple, double dilute – they all mean the same thing. And I'm sure there are some I haven't included as well. The photo below shows a double merle that was born completely blind and deaf.



There are more and more double merles being produced. There are not enough homes out there for them all. Most people don't set out looking for a dog with special care requirements. They want a normal healthy puppy who can participate fully in their family life. And while double merles can certainly participate fully in family life, they don't fit the picture of what people are looking for. Those of us who have double merles know that they are just as wonderful as other dogs that can see and hear. But we often have several of them in our homes and simply cannot make room for them all. Yet more and more are being produced every day out of greed and ignorance.

Some breeders try to get more money for the white or mostly white puppies, claiming they are rare and more valuable. They may or may not make a new puppy buyer aware that the puppy can't see or hear correctly. Normally, they make no attempt to counsel the puppy buyer on ways to deal with those issues. A puppy that is deaf is not likely to be noticed by a buyer until they have gotten the puppy home and fallen in love with it. They are left with a puppy that they love, but perhaps they have no knowledge of how to begin to communicate with and train it.

A puppy with a slight visual impairment might not be noticed right away either. And many double merle puppies are being sold sight unseen from the internet now which exacerbates the issue. Add to this the fact that visual and hearing impairments can range from complete to partial, and it can be very difficult for a puppy buyer to know what they are getting into.

Some people may be well-meaning and take a puppy that they know is deaf or visually impaired, wanting to save the poor puppy. They may not be prepared for the amount of work that a dog entails. Or they may not have thought through some of the accommodations they would need to make for a dog's special differences. Although they love the puppy, they find themselves in over their heads. This can lead to dogs being dumped along the sides of roads or in shelters and rescues. Some dogs are killed outright once their differences are realized. In each different situation, though, the dogs are the ones who will suffer.

Unfortunately, many double merles are finding themselves homeless and unwanted. Please help to educate others about the dangers of merle to merle breeding! There are many internet resources out there right now. If you are a member of a breed club for a breed where merle is a known coat pattern, please make educational materials available to your members, breeders, and the public as they consider a dog of your breed. Tell them about the dangers of breeding merle to merle.

If you are a trainer, please educate yourself in techniques to train deaf, blind and blind-deaf dogs, so you will be available to help owners. There are many more people adopting these special dogs now, and they will need guidance to teach their dogs how to be wonderful family members. Training will keep them out of shelters and rescues and in their own homes!

If you are faced with the decision as to whether to adopt a double merle in need of a home, please don't pass them by. Consider carefully the dog's needs and whether you are committed to providing for those needs for the dog's lifetime. Remember that it is a dog first, and needs all the same things that any other dog needs. After that, there may be some other more specific needs for you to consider. If you have decided to open your heart and your home to a double merle dog, thank you!

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