

# Ruff Stuff

## Choosing the Right Farm Dog



A good herder. A watchdog. A hard worker. Protection from predators. Loyal. Gentle. A playmate. A companion. If your farm dog wish list seems unattainable, you need to know about English Shepherds.

*By Marilee Peters, with Zbigniew Wierzbicki*

Once a fixture in farmyards across the eastern United States and Canada, English Shepherds are intelligent, high-energy dogs with a strong work ethic. Also known as American Farmer Collies, a century ago the English Shepherd was the small farmer's indispensable best friend, keeping livestock in order, scaring off predators, even keeping a watchful eye on young children while parents were busy with farm chores.

But as small diverse family farms gradually became as rare as those proverbial hen's teeth, so did this hard-working, affectionate breed of dogs.

Now, with small family farms experiencing a rebirth, farmers are rediscovering the merits of English Shepherds and the breed is emerging from decades of obscurity. Here in BC one small organic farm has led the way in re-introducing English Shepherds among farmers.

A few years ago, Aileen Collings and Zbigniew Wierzbicki of Elderberry Lane Farm and Vineyard on Lasqueti Island decided they needed a good herding dog, to help keep their rarebreed mulefoot hogs in order. They started researching, looking for a breed fast enough, smart enough, and determined enough to

round up their herd of mulefoots (notorious escapees known for their ability to break down fences) but also gentle enough to trust with young animals, and companionable.

Eventually they discovered English Shepherds, only to realize that there were no BC breeders. They knew they wanted to locate a dog from a working farm, not from a backyard breeder raising dogs intended as urban pets. So they put themselves on a list with a breeder in Antelope, Oregon, and they waited.

Before too long, they got the call that a puppy from the latest litter was on its way to them. And just like that, Lassa entered their lives. A female, Lassa is a beautiful sable with white markings. From her earliest days at Elderberry Lane Farm, Lassa eagerly took on the job of livestock manager. Zbigniew recalls doing the rounds of the farm with Lassa when she was still a puppy (a twice-daily habit that both Zbigniew and Lassa never break), when one of the cows decided to let the dog know what she thought of her.

“She was a nasty cow who didn’t like dogs,” recalls Zbigniew. “And she snorted and spit to scare off Lassa. I heard this ruckus and I looked over, and there was little Lassa, not scared at all, just sitting and growling at the cow. And do you know, that cow backed down.

Just a few weeks later, Lassa was chasing the cow and herding her.”

Although Zbigniew made it a habit early on to take Lassa along every time he did the rounds of the farm, she had little formal training. “These dogs are so intelligent, they learn just by spending time with you, and by watching you,” he explains. “Even as a puppy, Lassa knew what to do on the farm, instinctively. I think she reads my mind sometimes.”

Part of knowing the job is realizing when they’re not needed, and because English Shepherds are non-aggressive, they’re able to “turn off” when the job at hand is completed. Zbigniew has seen his dogs sleeping companionably next to the livestock that they have just herded, although at the same time keeping a watchful eye on the sky for birds of prey that could be a threat to their charges. “If I’m not around, they’re able to make decisions about what needs to happen,” says Zbigniew.

As Lassa approached maturity, Zbigniew and Aileen decided to acquire another dog, a male. Their intention had always been to breed the dogs, and having learned just how invaluable the English Shepherd was as a farm dog, they wanted to make sure that other farmers in BC had a chance to experience these won-



**SOUTHERN  
IRRIGATION**  
Intelligent Water Solutions

VIEW OUR CATALOGUE ONLINE:  
[www.southerndrip.com](http://www.southerndrip.com)



**CHILLIWACK  
LETHBRIDGE**

44160 Yale Road West  
511 - 41 Street North

**1.800.663.2615  
1.877.663.2615**

[www.southerndrip.com](http://www.southerndrip.com)



## Fast Facts on the English Shepherd

Size: range in height from 19 - 24", weight between 40 - 70 pounds.

Notable Qualities: Intelligent, Reserved, Territorial, Devoted, and Bossy.

History: Descended from Shepherds' dogs of England and southern Scotland

Is An English Shepherd Right for You?: The breed organization, the English Shepherd Club, cautions that you should identify your needs and expectations to be sure that an English Shepherd is the right choice. "English Shepherds thrive in an environment with clear, consistent rules and a confident leader. Lacking those, an English Shepherd just might decide to take over and run things himself!"

Source: English Shepherd Club

 [www.englishshepherd.org](http://www.englishshepherd.org)

derful dogs. Max, their next dog, came from working farm in Texas (its an indication of how rare the English Shepherd is that Zbigniew and Aileen were forced to go so far afield to find a dog unrelated to Lassa), and before long there was a litter of puppies at Elderberry Farm.

Those puppies found homes on organic family farms across Vancouver Island and the central Interior. "It was our idea to send them to organic farms where they'd be with animals and children," says Zbigniew. After the birth, Lassa had to be spayed due to complications, so there are no plans for a further litter, but Zbigniew and Aileen hope that some of the farmers



who received puppies will continue breeding English Shepherds.

Asked to sum up the qualities of the English Shepherd, Zbigniew says simply, "They have a natural instinct for herding, and they respond very intelligently to praise. And they're the most gentle dogs on earth." 

*Zbigniew Wierzbicki and Aileen Collings own Elderberry Lane Farm and Vineyard on Lasqueti Island, Certified Organic and Bio-dynamic (Demeter) Certified by the Bio-dynamic Agriculture Society of BC.*

*They raise heritage breed cattle, goats, and rare heritage breed Mulefoot pigs, all overseen by Lassa and Max, their rare breed English Shepherd herding farm dogs.*



**EATMORE**  
SPROUTS

**Organic Sprouts & Greens**

**Grown in the Comox Valley Year Round!**

**Look for our sprouts & greens at your favourite grocer or restaurant.**

2604 Grieve Rd., Courtenay, BC V9J 1S7  
250.338.4860 | [www.eatmoresprouts.com](http://www.eatmoresprouts.com)