

Pets Not Always The Best Christmas Gift Idea

The scene of a wide-eyed puppy emerging from a brightly colored gift box cleverly placed under the tree on Christmas morning to the joy of the children nestled around is an image ingrained in advertisements and art during the holiday season.

After all, the innocence and joy a pet provides seems perfectly in tune with the sentiments expressed during this time of giving and sharing.

But pet experts say that giving a pet, primarily a puppy or kitten, as a Christmas present is not in the best interest of the animal. What happens after the new owner finds a mess made on the carpet?

Did anyone consider that a pet can live in upwards of 15 years for some breeds? There are many factors that play into the consensus that it's probably smart to skip the pet as present this year.

1. Between the ages of 7 and 12 weeks, the time when most puppies and kittens are allowed to leave their litter and be adopted or purchased, is an important time of development.

At this stage an animal learns fear and avoidance, and can be traumatized if the conditions aren't calm and quiet when being introduced to a new family.

The chaos of Christmas morning, replete with flashing cameras, cheers and hordes of people, defi-

nately isn't the right environment for welcoming a pet, and could cause lasting anxiety issues not easily remedied by training.

2. What happens to holiday gifts come February or March, when the lights and tree are a distant memory? Many kids lose interest in the latest and greatest toys opened, and most are stored away, forgotten. If a puppy or kitten is relegated to "gift" status, he or she might also fail to enthrall a child once the realization of responsibility sets in.

3. Which brings to mind the next point ... responsibility. An animal is not a toy that can be shut off at the end of play. It has very real needs that must be met.

Many gift-givers fail to consider whether the gift recipient is financially capable or mentally ready to care for a pet, which can take a considerable amount of time and effort.

Dogs, particularly, require daily walks and lots of exercise. Cats may require a little less care, but need attention nonetheless.

Cats can live from 12 to 15 years. Many dog breeds have an average lifespan of 10 years. In the heat of the moment, a pet may seem like the ideal gift.

But who will be caring for him or her several years down the line? Will your eight-year-old be available to play fetch when the dog is 12 and

your "child" is now 20?

4. According to statistics kept by the Humane Society of the United States, the majority of puppies and kittens born in the United States never reach their second birthdays, even though their natural lifespans should be many times that length.

They die from being hit by cars, euthanized by owners, starving tied up in the yard or being fatally injured in fights with other animals.

Many run away or are taken to shelters, pounds or vets, where they are "put to sleep," usually before the age of two.

Veterinarians are very familiar with adoptions and gifts gone bad. This reality is often the result of a pet owner not comprehending the responsibility involved in owning a pet. Consider this fact from the Humane Society of the United States: Within six months of the release of Disney Studio's "101 Dalmatians," relinquishment of these dogs to animal shelters and Dalmatian rescue organizations had increased by at least 25 percent; preliminary statistics indicate a similar trend following the release of the sequel, "102 Dalmatians."

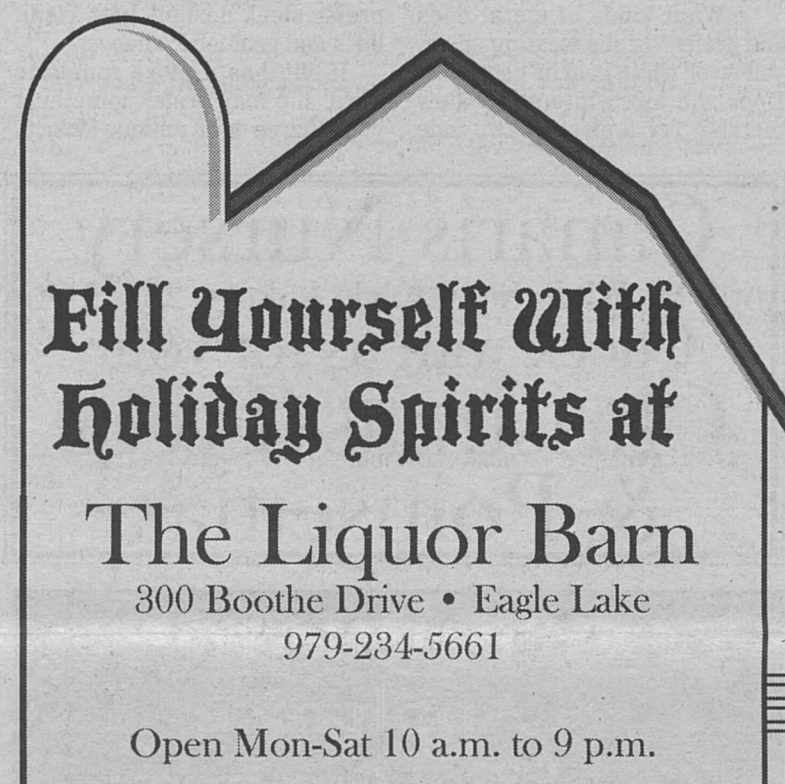
This dalmation statistic indicates that pet purchases or adoptions should not be made impulsively based on trends or with heightened emotion during the holiday season, but rather when careful consider-

ation has been given to welcoming a pet into the family.

In fact, most reputable breeders who care about the animals they raise will not send a pet home with a person for Christmas morning.

5. If you have your heart set on getting a pet for the family, wrap up a leash, feeding bowls and a book on choosing the right pet under the tree.

Once the recipient opens the gifts, he or she will realize your intentions. Then, together, the entire family can decide if it's the right time for a pet and choose a loveable companion that will be the right fit for all or choose to make a donation to a local shelter to provide care for an animal while not taking it into your home.



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Make Your Christmas Tree Safe

What would Christmas be without the family gathered around the tree to open presents?

Christmas trees are a symbol of the holiday and a major focus of seasonal decorating.

Not only do they fill your house with an inviting pine scent, Christmas trees act as a focal and gathering point for the family.

When you purchase your Christmas tree from a vendor or cut your own, heed the important advice to keep it well watered.

This will help maintain its fresh fragrance and deep color through the holiday, as well as prevent it from becoming a fire hazard.

According to the U.S. Fire Administration, a department of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Christmas trees account for more than 400 fires annually, resulting in deaths, injuries and millions of dollars in home damage.

Typically these fires are started by shorts in the electrical system of tree lights, candle flames, or matches and lighters ignited near tree limbs.

Well-watered trees can fend off a fire. Dry, neglected trees have the

propensity to go up like a torch. It takes only seconds for a tree fire to spread to uncontrollable levels.

To prevent the possibility of fire in your home, play it safe with your tree:

- * Keep the pine tree stand filled with water, daily.
- * Inspect electrical lines for shorts or frayed wiring.
- * Do not use lit candles on your

tree -- you're asking for trouble.

* Keep open flames, cigarettes and other fire-inducing objects away from the tree.

* Place your tree away from radiators, heaters or fireplaces so it won't dry out as quickly or catch fire.

* If your tree already shows signs of dryness, remove it from your house.



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