

It is a busy time of year. As I sit here and write this, I hear the sharp clicks as the Mason jars of pears seal. It is a pleasant and welcome sound after the work of peeling, cooking, and canning them. There are several food-related tasks ahead of us before winter. Now, we have an added complication.

Rather, it is more accurate to say that we have two added complications. Their names are Blue and Kate, and their picture is on the home page of our web site this month.

Our old border collie, Fly, died this spring after a long and happy fifteen year life. Even during her last day, before she suffered what appeared to be a stroke, she had been trotting around the hay barn, looking for interesting things to investigate.

We had not wanted to get another puppy while Fly was alive. She was not particularly friendly to other dogs, and we did not want to complicate her last years with a rambunctious pup. Fly helped us move sheep even last fall, at more than fourteen years of age.

But, we knew that we needed another dog. Our sheep move happily and quickly from paddock to paddock without any canine assistance. But, there are periods when the ewes and lambs are in larger pastures. During those times, we herd them into a “night pasture,”—a small area fenced in by portable electric netting. A dog is very helpful then. And, when we sort sheep for breeding or selling, a border collie saves us a lot of time and steps.

When we were on the way to pick up our puppy—the one we had selected when she was two weeks old—we talked about the possibility of bringing home two pups. It might actually make it easier for us, and certainly, the dogs would be less lonesome in the beginning. As it turned out, there were four or five blue-eyed puppies of the white/black mixture that is called “merle,” though I think of it as a “blue roan.”

One little pup caught our eye. This litter—from an unwanted breeding of the grandmother of the black and white youngster we had chosen—was a week younger. So, we brought home Kate and Blue.

They settled in quickly, trying to terrorize the cats, pull rugs around the room, use their sharp little teeth on sheepskins, and attempt to make puddles about every ten minutes.

They have a nice log dog house in an enclosed pen outside, and after the first night, they have slept there and stayed there during part of the time each day. We want them to have good “house manners,” so they are inside part of the time, too. And, we have discovered that a good place for them to entertain themselves and tire themselves out is the garden. With all delicate crops now frost-killed, they can’t hurt anything there, and we have a good chicken-proof fence around the entire garden, so the pups have a big area in which to play. They are safe and happy there.

If we leave them in the garden for a time, we usually discover them in the raspberries or under the rhubarb leaves. But, they have the run of the entire area, and they make good use of it.

For us, the number one lesson for any new dog—besides the vital housebreaking (though I read that now it is more polite to call it

“housetraining,”) is the absolute necessity for staying at home. A dog that runs off at will is no good to us and harmful to wildlife, a nuisance to other people, and is liable to be hit on the road by a car, bicycle, or buggy.

When we can depend on Kate and Blue to come when called, sit, stay, and lie down when told, they will be able to move to training more specific to the sheep flock. But, that will be months away.

When we have bought the last three puppies before these two—a span of more than thirty years—I have said that I was too old for a puppy. My view has not changed, but we will persevere, and they will grow up— if we are smarter than they are— into good sheep dogs. The problem with border collies is that they are often more intelligent than we are.