Affectionate, wise, and on their best behavior: Older animals are teaching a growing number of adopters that they might just be the perfect companions

by ARNA COHEN
Carrie, a tubby 10-year-old tuxedo cat at the Maryland SPCA in Baltimore, stretches out on her back in an invitation to tickle her tummy, purring like a well-tuned sports car in her quest for nonstop petting and belly rubs. For matchmaking purposes, the shelter staff classify her as a “Pooh” personality: easygoing, laid-back, and tolerant, qualities that would delight a quiet bookworm, touchy-feely kids, or anyone in between.

Across the country in California, 12-year-old Karma displays perfect manners. Rescued from a hoarder, Karma was an unknown entity when Michaela Haas and Gayle Landes brought him home from the Pet Adoption Fund in Canoga Park a year ago. The couple expected to have to teach him everything, but within days they found that their senior citizen was perfect: housetrained, good-natured, and very well-behaved. “I can leave a steak on the … table and leave the room,” says Haas.

 Plenty of pet owners fall head over heels for the cute factor of puppies and kittens. Captivated by miniature features and adorable antics, they’re willing to overlook the demolition derby flip side, which often includes shoe chewing, furniture scratching, midnight toe attacks, and puddles on the carpet.

But if waking up for 3 a.m. potty breaks or plucking kittens off the curtains is not for you, then an older pet may be just the ticket. After all, kittens and puppies are much like Forrest Gump’s box of chocolates: There’s no telling if you’ll end up with the affectionate lap cat or laid-back therapy dog candidate you’d hoped for. With mature animals, on the other hand, what you see is usually what you get, whether it’s an independent feline who’s had years to develop meticulous litter box habits, or a calm canine who has come to love children and won’t grow to be the size of a small pony.

“Older pets are what they are and are less likely to become something else,” says Karel Minor, executive director of the Humane Society of Berks County in Reading, Pa.

More and more adopters are catching on to the special charms of the older set, whether motivated by compassion for a graying muzzle or attracted by the
promise of a housetraining-free lifestyle. In one online survey of 1,250 young adult pet owners, roughly 61 percent said they would prefer to adopt an older dog rather than a puppy, primarily because they were working multiple jobs or faced other time challenges.

Indeed, it was Karma’s zenlike nature that caught the attention of Haas and Landes. The pair, who live beachside in Malibu, were visiting the shelter in search of a young dog to enjoy the sand and surf with them, but they went home with the 12-year-old Akita-chow mix instead. “He was the first dog we saw,” says Haas. “He was sitting there with his paws crossed … observing everything calmly … following us with his eyes.”

Karma doesn’t care for surf-romping but loves walks on the beach, jumping excitedly when it’s time to go out. It’s Karma’s only puppy-like behavior, something that Haas, a writer who works at home, appreciates. “I lived with two puppies for awhile,” she says. “I was unable to do any work at all because they needed my attention all the time. Puppies are so cute, but … it was like having a baby.”

And as Karma’s oceanfront adventures reveal, being long in the tooth isn’t the burden it used to be. While cats and most breeds of dogs are physiologically considered seniors at 7 or 8 years old, today’s pets are living well into their teens and sometimes beyond, thanks to better nutrition and advances in veterinary care. “We’re still educating people that an 8-year-old cat is not an old cat. Cats can live to 20,” says Sherri Orner, associate director of Safe Haven for Cats in Raleigh, N.C.

In a Woodridge, Ill., backyard, Oliver shows that he’s still spritely at middle age. The 10½-year-old bearded collie started running agility courses at age 7, when owners Jeff Atwell and Chris Hardy-Atwell were looking for a way to keep the family healthy.

The beardie took to it like a duck to water. “When it’s set up, he gets all excited,” says Hardy-Atwell. “He stands on the deck and barks. … He just loves it. He doesn’t want to quit.” And the sight of a 60-pound Wookie wannabe flying through tires and racing up ramps has inspired other neighborhood dogs, several of whom...
Sweet Deals at a Shelter Near You

Despite the advantages an older pet can offer, homeless gray-hairs often have a tough time competing with cute youngsters. Their stay in animal shelters can last weeks or months, though they’ve likely arrived there through no fault of their own; most pets are relinquished because of human problems or lifestyle changes such as allergies, a new baby, or an impending move.

Many shelters promote their older denizens to senior citizens who may not be able to deal with the physical demands of high-spirited youngsters. Now adoption programs are expanding beyond that market, using creative strategies to showcase that the more-settled natures and lower energy levels of these elder statesmen can make them a good fit for a range of lifestyles.

Animals 7 years or older are members of the Gray Whiskers Club at the Loudoun County Animal Shelter in Waterford, Va. Adopters get a discount on the adoption fee and a subscription to the Gray Whiskers News, a newsletter about caring for senior pets. At the Humane Society of Berks County in Pennsylvania promotes its crew of elders through regular newspaper ads; adoption fees are waived for dogs over 8 and cats over 11. Lisa Poper of Fleetwood, Pa., has adopted five senior dogs from the shelter, seeking animals who, because of age and health problems, are least likely to find homes.

Her new family members have included a 17-year-old beagle who’d been used for breeding all his life, a 15-year-old chow mix overlooked by other adopters because of a benign mass on her side, and a 10-year-old Labrador retriever who’d been left outside the shelter, tied to a tree in soaking rain. “They’re housebroken, love to lay around and be rubbed and brushed, and seem to get along with everybody,” Poper says. Though they may have months with her rather than years, she says the shortened time is worth the rewards of giving these once-forgotten animals a second chance: “I really do think they appreciate it and know that they’re loved and just enjoy that they can have a home to relax in.”

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are seniors, to give agility a try. The regular activity keeps the dog’s mind and body stimulated, says Atwell. “Oliver’s a poster boy for senior activity. ... The vet can’t believe what great condition he’s in.”

Even four-legged Methuselaths can surprise their owners with unexpected energy. When Sherry Milchick of Laureldale, Pa., adopted a 19-year-old cat from the Humane Society of Berks County, she thought his age would limit his mobility. The first time Milchick took him outside for a walk, she assumed the old guy wouldn’t need to be leashed like her other cats. But he took off like a shot, and she had to run to catch up with him.

Having been around the block a few times, senior pets can also impart valuable life lessons to their human companions. “They’re extremely grateful for second chances,” says Deborah Workman of the Sanctuary for Senior Dogs in Cleveland, Ohio. “They seem to understand that they’ve been through bad times and have
If you’ve adopted an older pet or are thinking about joining the club, consider these tips for a positive adoption experience.

▶ FEELING AT HOME: To ease your kitty’s transition to your home, keep her in one room for the first few days with a litter box, food, and water. And don’t worry if she hides under the bed for days after arriving; it’s normal for cats to take awhile to warm up to a new place. You should also make slow introductions to your other pets. For a new dog, create a retreat space such as a dog bed or crate in an out-of-the-way spot. Also, maintain regular potty breaks to reinforce his housetraining. If your pet shows signs of stress, talk to your veterinarian or consult an animal behavior specialist.

▶ HARMONIOUS BEGINNINGS: Shelter workers often hear concerns that an older animal won’t bond with the family. Not a problem, says Teri Goodman, founder of the online information clearinghouse Senior Dogs Project. Bonding could take anywhere from 20 minutes to a couple of days, “but ultimately, the dog wants to be a member of your pack, and the dog is going to connect with you.” Deborah Workman agrees: Older dogs are “almost instant perfect companions,” says the executive director of the Sanctuary for Senior Dogs in Cleveland, Ohio. “It’s almost no exaggeration to say they walk in, look around, and say, ‘Is anyone sleeping on this dog bed? No! All right.’” Most older cats, too, will settle in easily, especially if they’ve lived in a home previously. “They already … know what life is all about,” says Pat Lukes, who fosters cats and kittens for several rescue groups in the Los Angeles area.

▶ MODEL STUDENTS: Don’t buy into the cliché that you can’t teach an old dog (or cat) new tricks. If anything, older dogs are calmer and better able to focus on what you want them to learn, says Goodman. Many adult dogs have already had some obedience training and just need a little refresher. And most cats need no training in litter box usage; just show them where it is and instinct will kick in. They can also learn to walk on leashes and respond to clicker training.

▶ AGING IN PLACE: Even if your older pet is hale and hearty when you adopt him, some physical changes are unavoidable as he ages. Senior pets often develop arthritis, for which joint supplements, a soft bed, and a heating pad are a great help. Place ramps on stairs he uses frequently, steps near his favorite piece of furniture, and litter boxes on every level of the house. And take your old friend to the vet every six months to check for early signs of disease.

Find more tips on bringing home a new pet, housetraining, and other topics at humanesociety.org/pets.