A dog was definitely not part of my five-year plan. My husband, Alex, and I had two cats, a busy work life, a hearty helping of family commitments and no time for another mouth to feed. My confirmed dog lover of a husband always toyed with the idea of bringing home a pooch, but I didn’t want to deal with alfresco bathroom breaks every couple of hours, kennelling the poor beast every time we went on vacation or the nightmare of recriminations from our two cats when they realized a filthy, drooling alien had infiltrated their territory. But I eventually came to see the romance of having a happy, snoozing dog at my feet. We started visiting shelters, wondering if we could find a sweet, lovable dog of our own.

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT
One November afternoon, I searched the animal adoption website Petfinder.com for dogs in my area and pulled up a picture of an adorable mutt named Curly. The site said he was a three-year-old Doberman-Lab cross. I e-mailed Alex the pic. “Let’s go see him,” Alex wrote back. Uh-oh.

So we went. Alex and Curly took one look at each other and fell hopelessly in love. I panicked. But

They call it puppy love, but adopting a shelter dog can have its ups and downs. Here’s how we’ve mastered life with Artie – and we love him to bits!

BY CHRISTINA ANSON MINE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JO-ANNE M CARThUR

Alex and Tina are all smiles with their lovable handful of a pooch, Artie, who was adopted from an animal shelter.
two sets of pleading brown eyes was too much. We agreed to take Curly home and foster him for a week, “just to see.” I knew there was no way this dog was going back. We rechristened him Artie. That was one-and-a-half years ago.

**LEARNING ON THE RUN**

We adopted Artie from a dog rescue organization because we believe in adopting homeless animals. Our first cat was a stray, and our second came from the local humane society.

Our first frustration was that Artie’s records were missing. The mom-and-pop shelter we got him from told us that Artie came from Ohio, but his paperwork hadn’t made the journey.

About a week into Artie’s tenure at our house, we were wringing our hands over his behaviour. He was an affectionate, happy dog at home, but a nightmare on the leash. He lunged at everything – garbage trucks, teenage boys in hooded sweatshirts and especially other dogs. We didn’t take him for obedience classes right away, figuring that he needed some time to bond with us first. We could teach him at home, right? Mistake number 1.

Alex picked up some training books that focused on positive reinforcement. He worked with Artie every day, going over commands and rewarding him with treats. Artie knew the basics – Sit, Stay, Down – but his performance was entirely dependent on what was happening around him. If the room was quiet and he wasn’t distracted, he behaved. But if there was so much as a mosquito in the room, he turned into a raving delinquent.

Artie’s lack of focus was incredibly frustrating to us, but we couldn’t figure out why our training was failing. We knew if he didn’t learn to behave, we could have a problem on our hands. If he wouldn’t come when we called in the backyard, why would he come if his nose was following a scent down the block?

**TAMING THE BEAST**

By early spring, we had settled Artie into a routine with daily walks. He was calmer, but still snarky with any male dogs that were bigger than he was. We assumed he just had a wee Napoleon complex. What harm could it do? Mistake number 2.

When we brought Artie home, our cats, Mr. Tippy and Cocoa, looked at us like we’d slapped them. They hid for a month. But thanks to Artie’s paws-off-the-cats attitude, they roam the house again – even sharing the foot of the bed with their former nemesis in colder months.

When we brought Artie home, our cats, Mr. Tippy and Cocoa, looked at us like we’d slapped them. They hid for a month. But thanks to Artie’s paws-off-the-cats attitude, they roam the house again – even sharing the foot of the bed with their former nemesis in colder months.
One afternoon we stood in front of our house, chatting with our neighbours. Artie was on his leash beside Alex, sitting for a change. Another neighbour’s son came walking down the street with his family’s lovable golden Lab. Artie hunkered down, flattened out his tail and walked toward him — to say hello, we thought. How wrong we were. Artie sniffed the Lab’s ear, then grabbed his neck and bit down. The Lab squealed in pain, and everyone — Alex, me, the neighbours and the poor little boy — jumped in to wrestle Artie off. We realized, shakily, that this was a close call and that we were lucky that the Lab’s owners are incredibly understanding people. They could have read us the riot act. We felt overwhelmingly guilty. We blamed ourselves for not doing enough to train him and determined that we had to take him to an obedience class.

**STAR PUPILS**

We enrolled Artie in basic obedience at a reputable dog-training school in Ajax, Ont., where we live. The school taught clicker training, in which the dog is rewarded for performing a command correctly with a tasty tidbit and a click from a little metal device. The idea is that eventually the click replaces the treat and the dog works for that sound reward just like he would for a treat.

The class instructors were wonderful. When Artie misbehaved, they gently took us aside and helped us calm him down. But it happened really, really often: Artie reached his saturation point about 15 minutes into each hour-long session. The other dogs, their constant movement, the unsure territory — these multiple stimuli were too much for him to handle, and he reacted by whirling at the end of his leash. The instructors gave us a mercy pass at the end of the course and told us that maybe Artie would benefit from some one-on-one training — or a session with a certified behaviourist.

And so, even more disheartened, we met Dr. Gary Landsberg, a veterinary behaviourist in Thornhill, Ont. We showed him a video of Artie’s manic behaviour and told him about the dog-biting incidents (by now, he’d also bitten another dog at the vet’s office). Landsberg diagnosed Artie as hyperreactive. Rapid movement — a darting rabbit, another dog rushing up to greet him — drove him to react explosively. To manage this problem, Artie would have to “learn to earn,” said Landsberg. We would have to teach him that nothing — affection, food, treats — came without a price. He’d have to show us that he could focus and behave calmly before we gave him any rewards. By doing this, we’d reinforce our roles as pack leaders and Artie would learn to listen to us, even in stressful situations. It was a hard philosophy to follow.

Then Landsberg said something that floored both of us. “Sometimes a dog has limitations; you have to accept that certain things just aren’t possible given the dog’s personality. And that’s OK. You may never be able to walk him off leash. But he’s still a good dog in other situations.”

In our zeal to “parent” Artie properly, we’d never considered his limitations. We always believed that he wasn’t the perfect dog because we weren’t trying hard enough. And we assumed that he had to be the perfect dog. We never considered that he could just be our wacky, high-strung mutt.

After that session, we switched to a head halter, which fits around the nose and head. Alex worked hard to get him comfortable with stimuli at a distance — he started by getting Artie to sit quietly 15 metres away from something exciting, then gradually decreased the distance as Artie behaved. Artie is now able to sit less than a metre away from a strange dog without going nuts. He can even greet some unfamiliar dogs, though we usually practise another of Landsberg’s rules: end on a positive note. As soon as Artie greets someone with a friendly tail wag, we say goodbye and move on.

Though Artie is mellowing with age (as are we), there continue to be challenges. He’s still high strung and still hates the golden Lab down the street, but despite the headaches, he’s our dog. We’ve learned to love him just the way he is.

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**FINDING THE PERFECT MATCH**

Look for a reputable shelter that will work with you to find the right pet for you and your lifestyle, says Christine Arnett, director of marketing and communications at the Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Expect the following.

- **Any relevant health-related information the shelter received about the animal when the animal was first surrendered**
- **Any matters that shelter staff have observed, such as separation anxiety**
- **Specific behavioural or health information, such as whether the animal seems to be good with children or other animals**
- **They should ask you plenty of questions about your lifestyle to make sure the animal is going to an appropriate home**

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**A WALK IN THE PARK?**

A dog requires daily walks — regardless of the weather — so take a walk every day before you bring one home, says Dr. Karyn Jones, a veterinarian at the Ajax Animal Hospital in Ajax, Ont. If you’re still excited after a few weeks, go ahead and bring a furry friend home. If you’re glad to stop, think twice.