

International Bergamasco Sheepdog Association

GROOMING AND COAT CARE

People who find themselves dealing with a Bergamasco for the first time, are generally worried about taking care of its coat. They are full of doubts and uncertainty: is it true that a Bergamasco should never be brushed? What should I do when large bunches of hair take form? ... etc.

In reality, things are not nearly so complicated as they appear to the novice who may also be handicapped by all sorts of prejudices most of which are incorrect.

In practice, the Bergamasco's coat needs little care, but applied at the right moment. To make things clear, we shall discuss the interventions which are required from time to time, dividing them into periods compatible with the dog's age.

We must, however, stress that these divisions are only indicative and may have to be modified according to circumstances. Not all individuals start growing an adult coat at the same age, but show variations depending on certain hereditary dispositions or on seasonal and environmental conditions.

All in all, however, we can generically divide the coat care required into three periods.

FROM BIRTH TO 10-12 MONTHS

During this period, the dogs have puppy coats, soft and short. This coat shows no felting tendency so that occasional brushing with a steel toothed brush is sufficient to keep it in order and remove dirt among the hairs.



DURING THE SECOND YEAR OF LIFE

(Click on the images to enlarge, then close the graphic window)

Around the 10th to 12th month (individual variations and seasonal variations are very common) the formation of hair with different texture begins, together with moulting of the puppy hair.

The first visible sign of this is that the coat seems to rise, as if it were blown up (Photo 1- right) due to the growth of the fine, abundant undercoat which blends with the puppy hair which is gradually moulting. Commencing at the rear of the body, on the croup and back legs, the woolly hair makes its appearance whilst, first on the tail and later in the withers zone, the goat hair starts to form. From the withers, it will successively extend over the whole saddle and, in slightly smaller proportions, over the rest of the body, mixing with the woolly hair.



This is the period during which the coat requires the most careful and concentrated attention. The soft puppy hair whilst moulting mixes with the undercoat and with the woolly and goat hair in formation. This creates shapeless clumps, often tangled and one must be very careful not to let them felt as this makes it more difficult for the adult coat to grow properly.



On the other hand and against ones natural instincts, one must limit brushing to a minimum, substituting it by opening up the clumps by hand. We must be careful not to open up the clumps completely because this period coincides with the initial formation of the typical maps.

During this manual operation, it is necessary to part the clumps right down to the skin, but not to divide them up too radically at the base of the future maps which, on the contrary, needs to be quite large and consistent. One should, therefore, divide the coat into strands of 5-7 cm in width (Photo 2 - left).

Only at this point should one use the brush and only to stimulate the hairs which stick out and which would otherwise rectangle with the maps so that our work would have been in vain.

If we have started our job too late and felting has already started, it could be difficult or even impossible to open up the clumps only with the hands. In this case, one can use a pair of scissors, but only in the direction of the maps i.e. from up to down. This operation should, however, be limited to an indispensable minimum (Photo 3 - right).



This work should be carried out all over the body except on the saddle. Since only goat hair is present there, the whole saddle requires brushing.

Here it could be the case that puppy hair mixing with the undercoat and the goat hair forms clumps, but the absence of woolly hair in the zone makes them different from those which form on other parts of the body and they are easier to disentangle, by hand or with the brush (Photo 4 - left) and, finally, the comb.

In any event, in this region the clumps must be opened up completely in order to reveal the goat hair which should be flat and orderly. (Photo 5 - right).

After we have carried out all this work, we must not be disappointed by the appearance of our dog. Bergamascos are not particularly attractive during this period. All the budding maps stick out in all directions, making the dog look messy and clumsy. We just have to be patient and wait for the maps to grow and assume their permanent form.



Only around the age of 3 years will the coat be fully formed and even if the maps are still relatively short, they will be capable of constituting a dignified "skirt".