

The problem with Mame Shiba

“Mame” in Japanese literally translates to “bean,” as in a form of legume. The term “Mame Shiba” has recently become popularised to mean a smaller version of a Shiba Inu. However, the name “Mameshiba” in Japan is mostly synonymous with cartoon related Shiba Inu merchandise, the name is a pun on the Japanese word for “bean” (mame) and the merchandise company who use this name produces small stuffed toy versions of Shiba Inu, hence “Mameshiba”¹. Bean sized Shibas that are toys!

So what does this have to do with real life dogs?

In recent years it has become popular amongst a certain calibre of “breeders” to intentionally breed dogs that are “off standard” and are intentionally breeding dogs to be smaller, usually with a profit seeking motive.

Back in the early 2000s teacup breeding became very popular, especially due to the rise of popular culture with TV show stars showcasing their “handbag dogs” in magazines and at high profile events. The miniaturisation of dogs breeds suddenly became a very profitable business, and unfortunately in recent years it seems our own beloved breed has become a target for this trend, as smaller dogs are seen as “cute” and “harmless”.

For ethical and reputable preservation breeders and breed lovers this is something of a concern, as breeding smaller Shiba Inu does nothing for the preservation or promotion of the breed. This is intentionally going against the breed standards set by the Japanese Preservation Society (NIPPO) established in 1928 to protect these ancient and treasured breeds, which has been followed worldwide by Kennel Clubs around the world. Not only this but the Shiba Inu is a hunting breed, they have a function in some countries still, and even where they no longer have designated job roles the breed should still be “fit for function”, which is seen in countries where dog sports such as barn hunt and fastCAT are popular with Shiba excelling in these hunting trials for fun. This is a dog that is designed to run up and down mountains, and through underbrush (try telling one of my Shiba that, but still the point stands!). Dogs that don’t hunt or don’t get given a “job” will usually look to satisfy this need in other ways. Some dogs from top kennels see conformational training and exhibiting at shows as their “job”, which is why they love it so. Others end up finding niches with their owners such as agility, training or scent work. Not all Shiba Inu are so driven or in need of a job, so some people who end up with particularly driven Shiba and don’t do as much training or activity work in place will even find their Shiba destroying the home or garden, which is often* their outlet for their need to perform a role.

*(*not always sometimes they’re just loveable rogues who like to test our patience!).*

¹ Mameshiba world: <https://plus.tver.jp/mameshibaworld/>

Breed Standards

Size of a Shiba² (height at withers – which for those of you reading who don't know this, the withers is the point just behind a dog's shoulders on the top of their back);

Males - 14.5 – 16.6 inches (weight 23 pounds average)

Females – 13.5 – 15.5 inches (weight 17 pounds average)

The preferred size is the middle of the range for each sex.

Individuals aiming to breed Mame Shiba have set out a standard for official recognition to be obtained³ and the height range in this standard is stated to be 25 ~ 34 cm (9.8 – 13.3 inches), which is up to 39% smaller than a Shiba Inu. Meaning that if this worrying trend takes hold and gains popularity that these dogs could be as small as 25 cm (approx. 9.5 inches) at the withers, which is about the size of a Bichon Frise or Affenpinscher, which are both toy group dogs.

Worryingly the suggested standard from the cited reference at “Kawaii shiba.com”, includes a remark to clarify the size parameter which is, “*the dog's height if less than 25cm is **accepted** if both mind and body is healthy, no crosses with other breed and it is approved as Mame Shiba*”.

A size reduction of approximately 39% or perhaps more than a normal Shiba body size would mean these dogs would not be “fit for function” as at this size they could not fulfil their original intended purpose as a hunting breed!

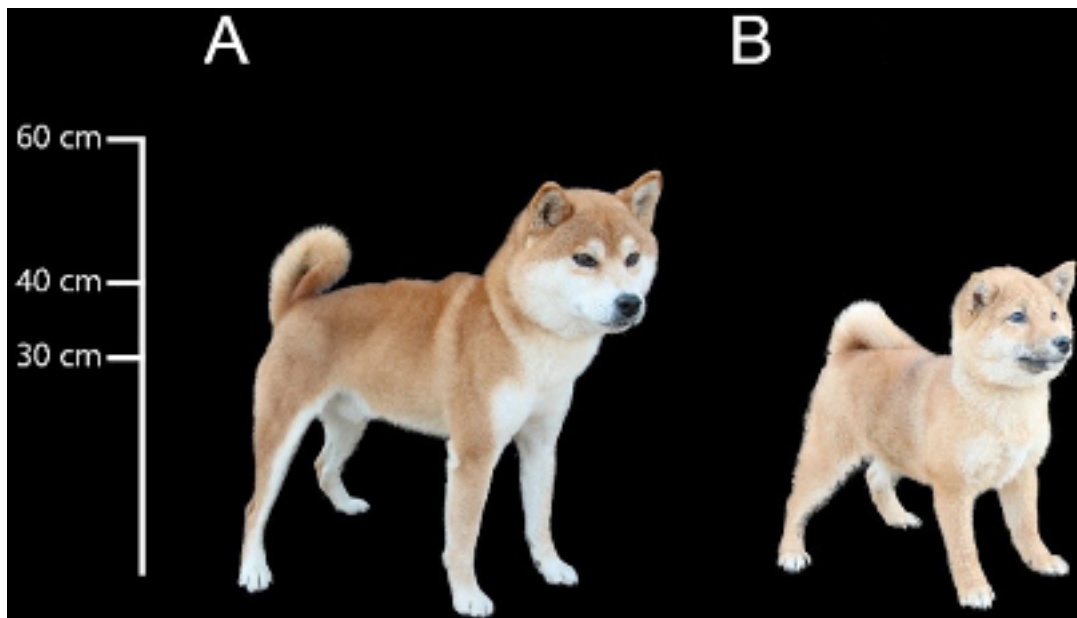


Figure 1. Body Size of Shiba Inu and Mame Shiba Inu. (A) Shiba Inu. (B) Mame Shiba Inu⁴

² <https://images.akc.org/pdf/breeds/standards/ShibaInu.pdf>

³ <https://kawaii-shiba.com/mameshiba/>

⁴ Guanggi et al (2021). Frontiers in Genetics. “Whole Genome Sequencing Reveals Signatures for Artificial Selection for Different Sizes in Japanese Primitive Dog Breeds”.

Lastly, it is worth noting that currently the Mame Shiba is not recognised by any official Kennel Club Governing Body within Fédération Cynologique Internationale (FCI), the American Kennel Club (AKC), the Royal Kennel Club of the UK, or most importantly by the Association for the Preservation of the Japanese Dog (NIPPO) which is the original Japanese registry for the six native breeds. The Japanese Kennel Club is separate to this and was formed in 1949, with official recognition by FCI in 1979.

The Mame Shiba enthusiasts and individuals that are creating this breed try to portray that Mame Shiba is recognised, and use the name the Kennel Club of Japan (KC Japan), this is not to be confused with the official Japanese Kennel Club which is FCI recognised. Bogus Kennel Clubs and organisations often pop up, usually to try to portray some air of legitimacy to breeds, or off-standard breed colours, that are otherwise not recognised elsewhere. The KC Japan page⁵ proudly states *“we, KC Japan, are the first in the world to officially recognize Mame Shiba as a fine dog breed”*.

Please do not fall into the trap of thinking this is a legitimate breed, there is no official standing outside of this organisation for Mame Shiba, and with no official standing or recognised breed standards the breeding of these dogs becomes something like the Wild West. Full of cowboy breeders, and rogues and a lawless disregard for huge issues such as the health and thus happiness of the dogs, and their puppies’ future guardians.

Health

One very worrying thought about dogs being bred purposely small for financial gain often means there is not much care or thought going into the physical or mental wellbeing and health of the dogs. A Mame Shiba will still have all of the same breed characteristics if they’re only being bred for size, leading to very frustrated small dogs that have all the same primitive prey driven traits and aloofness one might expect of a Shiba, but without much ability to channel this drive, leading to a frustrated dog who may or may not lash out in other ways.

Then also consider the physical health, recently I had my attention drawn to an advert on a well-known pet advertisement site. A “Mame Shiba” was listed for sale recently as such a rarity that the price tag was set at over \$6000! The rest of the litter was priced considerably lower meaning that this pup was a litter mate to full sized Shiba Inu. Many comments on the thread pointed out this pup as a “runt”, however the term runt is a misnomer with no widely accepted definition in veterinary medicine⁶. There is often nothing wrong with a “runt”, they’re usually only smaller at birth as their implantation and attachment site in utero was less favourable than that of their littermates. Pups we call “a runt” can and do often catch up and exceed the size of their littermates. However, this was not the case for this pup, it was considerably and noticeably smaller than the littermates and the facial features did not seem right for a Shiba pup in comparison to the rest of the litter, which leads me to suspect that this “Mame Shiba” has a very rare form of dwarfism, which has been utilised previously by unscrupulous breeders to produce “Mame Shiba” to bypass the years of selective

⁵ <http://www.kcj.gr.jp/?fbclid=IwAR3ZCaQfvrTTm2Ucihxcu5xaLiHMNeBGfvG92UzDy0KNzkkzi6AzMtHp3Pg>

⁶ <https://www.hepper.com/runt-of-the-litter-meaning/>

breeding that might otherwise be required to achieve the same results. This rare form of dwarfism could be “pituitary dwarfism”, which is caused by a recessive genetic mutation. Life expectancy if indeed this is the condition, at around only 4-5 short years, and dogs that have this condition should not be bred from at any costs since the deficiency of this growth hormone can also lead to underdeveloped kidneys leading to renal failure, underactive thyroid glands, and dwarfism can also produce curved lower limbs which can cause orthopaedic concerns. Thankfully dogs with pituitary dwarfism are usually sterile.

The other form of dwarfism to consider is “achondroplasia”, which is more common and in dogs will cause a shortening of the limbs, and the affected genes will impact on the dogs bones and cartilage⁷. Achondroplasia does not tend to lead to a significantly shorter than average lifespan as pituitary dwarfism does, however the disease can still limit a dog’s mobility, comfort level and overall quality of life and as such under no circumstances should ever be bred from.

The true extent of health problems in Mame Shiba is very likely unknown mostly due to the backyard breeders and puppy mills who breed these dogs not caring much about the health of the dogs, more about the desirability and uniqueness of an even smaller Shiba Inu. When individuals only focus on a single desirable trait that makes them money it is not uncommon to see dogs in poor health.

Conclusion

Even if you are tempted by their appearance, you will not find an ethically bred Mame Shiba for sale. In short whether an individual who breeds “Mame Shiba” is doing so selectively from naturally smaller dogs, or aims to take a short cut using dogs suffering from dwarfism, both are morally wrong. Breeding smaller Shiba Inu purposely, with an intent to profiteer from this trend goes against the last near 100 years of Preservation Breeding, the same would be said of those intentionally and consistently breeding ABOVE the height standards as well. This type of breeding also goes against all ethical and reputable practices as well by either breeding and promoting sickly animals, or ones without health testing. For those individuals who may at least be health testing Mame Shiba really should ask themselves why are they doing that? To meet demand from the public? Yes, but then there is a profit seeking motive as the Shiba Inu does not need to be made smaller, it is not adding to the preservation of the breed, it is not helping the breed, so therefore it should not be done.

My final point is that Shiba Inu are a wonderful uniquely full of character breed that are designed to hunt and work long days, they are perfect as they are and need no radical changes. Shiba Inu are a National Treasure of Japan, their culture and heritage as such should be protected, nurtured and above all RESPECTED. If you want a Mame Shiba make sure it is of the Kawaii stuffed toy variety, which is extremely popular in Japanese claw and vending machines. If you want a real life Shiba, please do the breed the honour of recognising its cultural heritage and find yourself a reputable preservation breeder.

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⁷ <https://www.hillspet.com/dog-care/healthcare/understanding-dwarfism-in-dogs?lightboxfired=true#>