

Buying your wedding gown

So many questions, so many details, so many emotions — it's no wonder even the most organized bride-to-be can feel overwhelmed and anxious about finding the perfect wedding dress. Knowing what to expect before she steps into a bridal shop can help put her mind at ease.

Bride's magazine polled owners of top bridal stores nationwide for their answers to the most common dilemma: How to buy a dress. The results, along with shopping information, appeared in a recent issue. Here, a sampling.

When should a bride start shopping for her gown? Begin the search six to eight months before the wedding, since it can take manufacturers up to six months to fill an order, with alterations taking several weeks on top of that.

What homework should she do first? Look through bridal magazines, marking the pages with gowns she loves. "Don't rip them out," advises Monica Bugmann Zentler of Boulevard Bridal in Birmingham, Mich. "We need to know the page and manufacturer to locate the dress number." Also keep in mind the time and cost of the wedding, since a dress appropriate to a garden ceremony will look out of place in a cathedral.

What should the bride bring with her for her first appointment? Although most shops offer sample undergarments for try-ons, a smart bride will bring her own lingerie and shoes, a strapless bra or bustier, a slip in a neutral shade, white hosiery, and shoes in different heel heights.

How much will she have to pay "up front"? Many shops expect a non-refundable, fully prepayable deposit the day or two before the fitting. The dress is ordered, with the balance due either three days later or when the dress is ready to go home. White

Engaging ways: then and now

is the preferred and suddenly everyone's got advice for you — your mother, her mother, friends and relatives, perhaps even grandparents. They all mean well, but as a bride of the 20th century, you have the freedom to do things your way. According to *Bride's* magazine, engaged couples of just a generation ago followed a church-ordered code of wedding "rules" that bride and groom might not know. Today, you can choose to follow the traditions that mean most to you, and take the rules to suit your style.

The proposal
 Then: The groom asked the bride's father for her hand.
 Now: The couple decides to marry, and the proposal may be dramatic — a diamond in a champagne glass, the words, "Will you marry me?" flashed across a stadium scoreboard. News of the engagement is FAXed to family and friends.

The invitation
 Then: Invitations were formal, engraved, and issued by the bride's mother.
 Now: Invitations reflect the style of the bride. They may be embossed on glass, have a hand-painted quality, or be collaged from memorabilia of the couple's courtship, stored on scrolls.

The bride
 Then: The bride's full-time job was to work on wedding details with her mother.
 Now: Career-minded brides don't let wedding planning disrupt their jobs. Weekends and lunch hours are prime planning time, and an increasing number of professional brides-to-be hire a

dress prices differ greatly, shop owners estimate that the average cost is between \$1,000-2,000, and alterations will average from \$50-200.

What about "moving up" the wedding date to ensure that the dress arrives in time? Many brides are tempted to try this, but the experts advise against it, pointing out that reputable bridal stores deal only with manufacturers they trust, and that trying to be counterproductive. For example, if the bride has to rush out on a gown that takes a long time to arrive, the store cannot make it out because the delivery date cuts it too close to the wedding. "That's when the customer suddenly starts to level with us," says Heidi Kleinfeld, Schachter of J. Kleinfeld & Son in Brooklyn, N.Y.

What if the bride is on a rush? Larger stores can often accommodate late-minute bridal shoppers, placing rush orders for gowns to arrive in three to eight weeks. But brides should expect to pay a surcharge for this service.

Are there any cut-corners that the bride-to-be can take to save money? Many stores will have sample dresses on sale, especially if a line has been discontinued, explains Barry May of Margery, a dress store chain in the Chicago and Milwaukee areas.

Another option: ordering a dress in a less-expensive fabric.

What if the bride's weight changes before the wedding date? Weight fluctuations (and brides do) are common, says Anne Karger of Anne Karger for Brides in Atlanta, Ga. Her advice: Don't buy a dress in a size you hope to be. If the bride gains weight just before the wedding and her dress no longer fits, she may be able to get extra material from the manufacturer.

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