



From:

weddings

10 Steps to Choosing Your Best Dress

You've probably heard about the heady moment when you realize you have found The Dress. Your pulse quickens, your hands quiver, your eyes (and your mother's) mist with tears. What you may not realize is that there can be tears of frustration, too, when you're shopping for a wedding gown. That's why it makes sense to start out well-informed and well-prepared, taking time to plan and strategize so you can concentrate on the task at hand. "This is a major investment, like buying a car," says Mara Urshel, owner of the famed New York City bridal salon Kleinfeld. "You

have to know what you're getting into." Follow the pointers here, and chances are it will be the silk sheath or duchesse-satin ball gown of your dreams.

1. Think Location, Location, Location

Knowing the place and time of your wedding will help focus your search. Will you be having a daytime ceremony on the beach? You can rule out ball gowns with long trains, and details such as silk flowers or ribbon trim will look fresher than fireworks of crystals or rhinestones. Exchanging vows in a candlelit cathedral? Avoid short slip dresses or anything that looks like it could be worn to a cocktail party. Most fabrics are suitable year-round, but some, like linen and organdy, are more appropriate for warm weather, while velvet and brocade are best left for winter.

2. Know the Lingo

It's not every day you see terms such as basque waist or Watteau train or try to differentiate between three shades of white. Pore over bridal magazines, books, and websites to learn about fabrics, silhouettes, and the lexicon so you can better convey what you're looking for. Start a folder with pictures of dresses or details that appeal to you, and take it with you when you shop.

3. Set a Budget

Figure out how much you want to spend, and tell the salesperson before she starts bringing out gowns. That way you won't lose your heart to a dress you can't afford. Typically, a wedding ensemble, including veil, undergarments, and any other accessories, accounts for 10 percent to 15 percent of the total cost of the event, says Urshel. Be sure to factor in extras, such as alterations -- which can add a few hundred or a few thousand dollars depending on how involved they are -- and shipping fees. Once the dress arrives, it may require professional pressing or steaming, a service that can tack on a hundred dollars or more.

4. Start Early

Begin shopping six to nine months before your wedding. It takes about four months for a manufacturer to make a dress and another two months to complete the alterations. Very elaborate gowns will take longer. Short on time? Many shops do rush orders for an additional fee, but your choices will likely be limited. They also may have a sale section with samples you can buy off the rack. "If you're lucky, you can get one that needs just minor alterations," says Julia Lichtman Kepniss, co-owner of Hitched, a couture bridal boutique in Washington, D.C.

5. Come Up with a Game Plan

Decide where you want to go: Call stores ahead of time to find out which designers they carry, the price range of their dresses, and if they sell accessories and provide alterations. Most salons require that you schedule an appointment. If possible, shop on a weekday (Saturdays are mayhem) but not during your lunch hour when you'll be rushed. And don't shop till you drop -- limit yourself to two stores a day. "You'll probably try on at least eight dresses per visit, and that can be exhausting," says Sarah Fordham, manager of Anne Barge Atelier in Atlanta. "You want to be able to remember what you've seen." Carry a notebook and jot down dress descriptions (photos are usually prohibited until you buy a gown). And take anything you know you want to wear, such as a special necklace or your grandmother's veil. Boutiques will often provide bustiers, strapless bras, and shoes, but you may want to bring your own. You'll also need the advice of a few trusted confidantes, but not too many: An opinionated entourage can be confusing and frustrating. Invite one or two people "who know your taste, will be honest with you, and whose judgment you trust," says Urshel.

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6. Find a Dress for Less

You don't have to spend a million bucks to look like it. Besides having sale racks, many salons hold big sales once or twice a year to clear out "gently worn" or discontinued samples (usually in sizes 6, 8, or 10). To find out when these are, call stores, go to designers' websites, and sign up for mailing lists. Also register for trunk shows, where designers debut new lines. Sometimes boutiques offer discounts if you buy on the show day.

7. Keep an Open Mind

This is the mantra repeated over and over by bridal consultants. So take their advice, even if what they urge you to try on doesn't seem like your style. "We have what we call 'hanger dresses' that don't look like much on the hanger but we know they look great on," says Fordham. On the other hand, never let yourself be talked into purchasing a gown you're not in love with.

8. Focus on Fit, Not Size

Bridalwear often runs smaller than ready-to-wear; if you normally buy an 8, you may need a 12. "You have to forget the numbers," Kepniss says. And don't insist on a smaller size because you intend to lose weight before the wedding -- order the one that fits now. A gown is easy to take in, but difficult and costly to let out.

9. Get It in Writing

Before putting down a deposit (usually 50 percent), go over the contract with your bridal consultant. Find out when the gown will be ready, the estimated fee for alterations, if it can be shipped out of state (or country), what the cancellation policy is, and what recourse you have if the dress is damaged or comes without the requested modifications. Finally, double-check that the manufacturer's name, style number, size, and color are correct.

10. Make the Most of Each Fitting

It usually takes two or three fittings to adjust a gown, but don't be shy about asking for more if you think tweaks are needed. The first appointment occurs about two to four months before the wedding, at which time you need to have your undergarments, shoes, and accessories. You may also want to get your hair done in the style you will wear. Decide: Can you lift your arms easily? Do the straps

stay up? Do any seams pucker? The last fitting takes place a week or two before the event. Bring your mother, an attendant, or whomever will be helping you into your gown. And prepare to be wowed. Your fantasy dress will finally be a reality.

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