

Wedding On A Shoestring

By Nadine Silverthorne

Tying the knot, but feeling strangled by the costs involved? Read on for some cost-saving tips that will ensure a debt-free wedding day.

So you did it — you decided to tie the knot. What now? Well eventually someone will burst your bubble by reminding you that you actually have to plan the main event. Then the panic sets in — "How are we going to afford this?"

In the past, the parents of the bride were willing and able to fork out the dough for a wedding. Today, the couples themselves are often the ones to invest in this enterprise, with some help from both sets of parents. I experienced this myself when I planned my wedding in September of 2000. At the time, my now-husband and I were starting out in our careers and couldn't afford to spend one of our yearly salaries for a single day of flowers and lace.

The last thing a couple should do is to start their life together in debt. Some things, like mortgages and student loans, cannot be avoided. We quickly learned to beg, borrow and bargain and managed to pull it off without devastating our bank accounts. If you are planning a wedding, but don't have the money saved to host a day that rivals that of British royalty, fear not. Here are some great ideas for weddings on the cheap that can maintain a level of elegance and reflect the couple's personality and tastes.

The Budget

The first thing you have to do is decide exactly how much you can afford. Factor in these items:

- Invitations
- Flowers
- Dress/Tuxedo or Suit
- Food/Drinks
- Cake
- Reception Location
- Ceremony Fee
- Transportation
- Take-home Gifts

These are the "musts". Everything else is icing on the cake. For example, we really wanted to hire a professional photographer to ensure fabulous photographs, but had a relative videotape the wedding to save costs. After factoring in all the costs, our budget was around \$10,000 — even though we hand made everything from the invitations to the take home gifts ourselves! It's amazing how quickly costs add up.

The Wedding Party

When you're getting married you want everyone around you to share in the fun, and before you know it you have 24 people in your wedding party. Keep in mind that it's as costly for your friends and relatives to participate as it is for you to ask them. For them it involves dresses, suits and shoes they may never wear again. For you it involves gifts and food at rehearsals and fittings, not to mention the stress of coordinating a lot of people. Keep it small.

The Date

The number one cost-saving wedding tip I can give you is to have your wedding on any day of the week but a Saturday. The cost of many wedding-related items can decrease by as much as 50% if you choose a Friday or Sunday instead. We decided that we would have our wedding on the Sunday of Labour Day weekend. That way, out of town guests had a weekend to hang back and see everyone before the festivities, without using up vacation days.

The other date-issue to consider is the time of year. Most weddings occur between May and September. Picking an off-season time, particularly January, can end up saving you the equivalent of a down payment on a house.

The Dress

From the time we first read Cinderella, we learn the importance of a fabulous gown. While there are some women who spend \$6,000 on a dress they will wear once, most cannot. Fortunately, once you have scoured every dress in the Canadian bridal mags and websites, such as [Wedding Bells](#), there are a plethora of options for us Bargain Betties.

Outlet Stores

Bridal outlet stores are popping up all over the country. They often carry styles from a few seasons ago, or have samples from designers. You can get some serious deals here. Shop around for the best price and service and give yourself plenty of time to avoid the May-August rush.

Dressmakers

If you like a style of dress and can manage to find a photo, or better yet, a pattern for it, you can hire a dressmaker to recreate the gown and fit it perfectly to your body. The price will depend on how labour intensive the design is, and what fabrics you choose.

The Non Wedding Dress

Many brides today are more casual and opting not to spend their day in 500 layers of chiffon. (Think Cindy Crawford's beach wedding and casual summer white dress.) If you want to boogie all night and not have to worry about getting your train dirty when taking pictures in the park, consider a simple, but glam dress that's not found in the bridal shop. I wore a gorgeous ivory empire-waist dress that was only \$200 and got a fab pair of Adrienne Vittadini shoes with the money I saved.

The Suit

Watch any Hollywood awards show and you will see many handsome stars in clever suits with a variety of coloured shirts and matching metallic ties. For a few hundred bucks you can have a classic suit that you can wear for years to come. Match the shirts and ties to the bridal party colours and you're off.

If you'd really like a tux, shop around for the best rental rates. Again, choosing to have the wedding off-season will drastically affect your ability to get a deal here. Another cheap option is to get vintage tuxedos. You can go really kitsch here and make it fun à la *Dumb and Dumber*.

The Reception

The reception will eat into the largest chunk of the wedding budget pie. How you choose to do it is entirely up to you. Here are some ideas you may not have considered.

Brunch & Lunch

By having your reception earlier in the day, immediately after the ceremony for example, the costs will come down considerably. The types of foods served earlier in the day are often not as costly as dinnertime options, and people are likely to eat and drink less during the day.

Outdoor Weddings

Sometimes this option costs more time, effort and money than having a banquet facility do everything. If you have your heart set on doing it outside, keep these factors in mind:

- The weather - Will you rent a tent, or have a plan B for the unpredictable?
- Bathrooms - Can you accommodate all the guests with the existing bathrooms, or will you have to rent portable toilets?
- Rentals - Tables, chairs, plates, glassware and cutlery are all extra costs involved with an outdoor wedding.
- Bar - Is it legal to serve alcohol at the location? Will you have a bartender?

An outdoor wedding can still be an affordable option if you host it like any old backyard barbecue, make it really casual by using disposable plates, cups and cutlery, and keep your guest list small (under 60 people).

Cocktail Reception

Most wedding guests want to drop off their gift and pick up a glass. After it's all said and done, people rarely remember the food. What they do remember is whether there was cash or open bar and if the music was

good. So why not host a cocktail reception with hors d'oeuvres, drinks and dancing? Serving finger foods and snacks will save you a heap of dough. An added bonus: people get tipsy on less and keep the cost of booze down too!

Banquet Halls and Restaurants

If you want the traditional wedding without the traditional price tag — surprise — you can have it! What you can't have is an elaborate seven-course meal. We had appetizers for cocktail hour, and for dinner: salad, chicken and vegetables followed by Baked Alaska and an open bar. With our Sunday discount and my mother's haggling: \$55 a head. Ask lots of questions and work out a simple menu that is satisfying, but not excessive.

Everyone got to chat while they were served in a comfortable atmosphere. I didn't have to worry about food, drinks, or cleaning up afterwards. Every little detail was taken care of and it was a blessing to relax and know that everything was in professional hands.

The Music

If you don't want to splurge on a DJ, consider purchasing compilation discs in a few genres to mix it up and bring a stereo — preferably one that can hold three or more discs at a time. That way you won't have to play DJ all night yourself.

Budgeting for a DJ is worth it. DJs provide peace of mind and ambiance. They set the tone of the wedding reception and can make or break the party. It helps if you happen to know a DJ, but if not, shop around for someone who seems to understand what you like and offers reasonable prices. Among other features, they will provide lights for the dance floor and microphones for speeches. The more extras you want, the more the price goes up. If you are on a tight budget, you may want to skip the frills and go for a basic package.

The Guest List

With banquet halls and restaurants charging anywhere from 30\$ to \$200 a head, this is where your costs can really add up. Couples often get so excited when they are planning the wedding that they want to invite everyone they have ever known and share their joy with them. This is fine if you can afford it — the more the merrier, as the saying goes. With a budget wedding, however, you have to be extremely careful when deciding who's on the list.

Start by having each side — bride and groom — make a list, and then edit it down. Does your coworker/grade school teacher/yoga instructor really have to be there? If you haven't seen or talked to someone in over a year, they can probably be scratched off. For example, we looked at our budget and realized that, at 55\$ a plate (not factoring in invites, gifts, cake, etc.), we could only have 100 people for dinner.

After relatives and close friends, we realized that many lifelong family acquaintances and schoolmates would not make the cut. This will probably put you in an awkward situation so be careful how you choose. Use the all or nothing approach — if you invite one member of a group of friends, relatives, schoolmates, or coworkers, then it is proper to invite the entire group or face offending someone. If you can't afford to do this, consider inviting large groups for drinks after the dinner, or limiting the reception to family and best friends only.

The Invitations

In the world of colour printers, scanners, do-it-yourself shows and websites, and crafty scissors that make fancy edges, there is no reason why you can't make your own invites. Invitations are important since they contain all the pertinent information: date, time, location, maps, etc. They are also the medium through which you will set the tone for your wedding. A formal wedding should have a more traditional invite, and a casual wedding can be as fun as the couple would like.

Desktop Publishing

Many office supply stores now carry precut cards and envelopes, as well as software to design your cards. We purchased these inexpensive card packages and printed the design onto them with a colour printer and novice skills.

Evites

The cheapest way to send out invitations is to do them online. Though the etiquette mavens may frown, you can't beat "free". If your design skills are up to par, or you know a graphic designer, you might choose to design a printable invite and email it to all your guests. For the rest of us, there are a few websites, such as www.evite.com, that offer an invitation service online. They will keep track of RSVPs and deliver them right to your inbox along with guest comments.

Crafty Cards

Choose any gorgeous cardstock and print the info directly onto it. Add some onion paper as an overlay, punch two holes in the top and ties together with ribbon. Use glitter, sequins and other craft supplies to jazz it up. Cut the bottom with craft scissors for a neat patterned effect. Play around and find a style that suits you.

Transportation

Can't afford a limo? Be cheeky and show up in a cab. Have a friend or family member with a nice car drive you. Rent a convertible for two. Breeze in on a motorcycle. The options are many. Remember that those who love you don't care how you get there - they just want to be there when you walk in on your special day.

For more wedding advice and information, be sure to check out www.WeddingBells.ca, the ultimate Canadian wedding resource.