

A wedding tuned to your budget, your taste

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Because of the sky-high price of receptions, a recent trend in wedding planning is not to let friends and family bring just any guest — they have to have dated the person for a certain length of time and the strength of the relationship must be verified before that guest can load up a plate at the buffet table.

It's one money-saving strategy that can backfire, according to Heather Perkins, 32, creativity consultant from Easthampton.

"So then everyone else is paired up," she said, "and you have no one to talk to."

That desperation to keep costs low is at odds with the joyous, celebratory, inclusive mood of weddings. It's also a good way to start things off on the wrong foot. So with a little resourcefulness — and mindfulness of what's most important — you can cut costs creatively, in keeping the spirit of the event.

The marrying kind

People you know and love want to help you with wedding preparation — so let them. Instead of having a member of



JENN KANE

Angela Hodgkins decorates a wedding cake in Atkins Farms bakery in Amherst.

Location, location, location

For just \$67, you can rent the pavilion in the Mount Tom Reservation off Route 5 in Holyoke and Easthampton. Bob Schwobe, 75, a Mount Tom Reservation volunteer, said couples hold receptions there and bring their own caterers and music. Right now the road to Mount Nonotuck is closed, but he said the state just earmarked \$2 million to fix it so that in the future, weddings may be held there. To make reservations, call Superintendent Robert Carr at (413) 534-1186.

Other parks — Look Park in Northampton, for example — offer similar inexpensive arrangements.

Another money-saving tip, depending on the venue you choose, is to get in touch with the couple to be married there on Saturday and see if you can reuse their decorations and flowers, by offering to share the cost.

Gown gleanings

Look for sales, check out www.freecycle.com or www.craigslist.com for free or slightly used ones, wear a tailored hand-me-down or make one. Amherst resident Kate Nicolaou, 33, said she bought her flower girl dress at an after-Easter sale, and a friend was nice enough and talented enough to sew a wedding dress for her.

Gathering the tribe

Marry in a campground and everyone can sleep in tents. Nicolaou's brother married at the Winona Camp for Boys in Maine. "It's like paying for a night

of camping," she said. "We had a great time."

Avoid the crowd

Have your wedding on a Friday or Sunday when banquet halls and other locations are cheaper. The busy season is between May and October, so marry in the off-season.

Bargain banquets

Order takeout food instead of paying for catering. It may not seem as elegant and worry-free but it'll be less expensive. Buy your own liquor and hire a bartender. What you don't use you can bring home. Another option is having an open cocktail hour or two, then switching to a cash bar. Or provide the beer and wine, but let mixed drinks be a cash option.

Festive favors

Give acorns or flower seeds attached to a small card so friends and family can plant them — it's meaningful and symbolic.

Photos for less

When considering the high costs involved in a wedding, photography comes in second only to the reception. According to the Cost of Wedding Web site (www.costofwedding.com), the average price that a couple in Northampton pays for a photographer can range from \$1,034 to \$3,101.

But photographer Jenn Burdick, 42, of Greenfield, offers a full wedding day for ♦ See YOUR



JENN BURDICK

Jenn Burdick's photo of a couple's joined hands tells a story from the book of love.

the clergy or a justice of the peace officiate at your wedding, for \$25, let a friend or family member do it. That person will know you better than anyone with whom you've had just a handful of consultations. To apply for a one-day marriage designation in Massachusetts, go to www.mass.gov and print out an application that must be mailed at least six weeks prior to the date of the wedding but not more than three months in advance. Completed applications must be submitted with a \$25 processing fee payable to "The Commonwealth of Massachusetts."

Virtual invitations

Send invitations electronically or on recycled paper stock to save money and trees, and you'll save on the fuel as well — the postal service's at least. Last year Brides.com estimated that approximately 33 percent of future brides and grooms in the U.S. are planning an eco-friendly wedding, and this is a cost-effective way to do that.

Who needs another microwave?

Ask your guests to make a money donation toward the cost of your wedding rather than give you gifts. If you have 100 guests, and they each give \$50, it represents a \$5,000 dent in your bill. This past summer a couple in Fall River received news coverage for collecting bottles and cans and cashing them in for their deposit to pay for their wedding. If you try that, friends and family could help out by saving some recyclables too.

only \$850 because she doesn't have an assistant, doesn't lug around lighting equipment and does offer fun extras like wedding books, posters and cards separately from the main package of digital photos she produces.

After graduating from MassArt with a degree in fine arts photography, she worked as a photographer at the Daily Hampshire Gazette for eight years; then years later, was an advertising photo editor in New York City. For \$850, couples get her professional, photo-journalistic style of shooting for an entire day — from preparation to reception; a CD packed full of high-resolution images, royalty-free, without watermarks; and two 8-by-10 enlargements. She still has plenty of dates open for 2008 and 2009.

"I absolutely love doing this," she said. "I'm a designer and a storyteller, and I help couples show the story of their wedding day — from the funny stuff like shaking your butt to the formal. The nicest thing anyone ever said was a groom who told me I didn't even know that you were there." For more information, call Burdick at (413) 320-7718 or email photojenics@yahoo.

Other photographers may offer similar deals. And you may have a talented family member who'll do the job for less.

Taking the cake

Angela Hodgkins, 52, has been the head cake decorator at Atkins Farms in Amherst for 24 years, with her sister and brother-in-law working beside her, turning out pastries, for 21 years. When it comes to cakes, Hodgkins has frosted all sizes, recently winning the 2008 Dr. Seuss' 104th Birthday Cake Decorating Contest.

"Getting a three-tier wedding cake or a sheet cake helps when cutting back costs," she said. "People come to us, because a lot of places in the area don't do sheet cakes."

They bake the sheet cake, which serves up to 40-50 people, frost it and let you take it home and decorate it. Another big thing now, she said, is cupcakes. Frosted and piped little cakes cost \$1.25 each; cupcakes with an intricate flower are \$2.75. Again, a family member who's a great baker might be your answer, or a friendly local bakery with special deals.

Rent it all

If you want to hold the reception in your backyard or in another location that doesn't have existing tables, chairs, linen, glassware, flatware, etc. then call a rental outfit. Northampton Rental Center employee Donald Miller, 49, said there are barely noticeable corners to cut when renting:

order stainless steel utensils instead of silver; choose Samsonite folding chairs instead of white padded ones.

Couples usually do a lot of money saving before they get here, Miller said. Catering can be something low-key, maybe using plastic cups for beverages. Everything for rent is priced in a booklet in the store, at 59 Service Center Road; delivery is free in the Northampton area.

Just plan early and get a good guess of how many you want: you can always lower the amount, he said.

Longtime DJ's advice

"Something I love about this area is that it is so laid-back," said Dana Collins, owner of Dedicated Disc Jockey and part owner of Whatever You Need, a personal assistant business.

"This area is unique — we want to throw anything remotely related to clichés out the window. I have friends who DJ in New Jersey and New York, and people there are spending between \$50,000 and \$70,000 on their weddings."

When people call Collins and say they're working on a budget, he encourages them not to look at bridal magazines.

"Those full-page ad centerfolds are for things that are horrendously expensive," he said. "I like to do a little bit of problem solving and encourage them to make their day theirs and not the one I DJ'd the night before. I want it to reflect the bride and groom."

He said couples have a number of options when it comes to music at their weddings: no music at all; try to pull your sounds off iPod, boombox, or CD; get a disc jockey; get a disc jockey with shenanigans; find a band; or find an expensive band.

Some tips this 10-year DJ gives for keeping the cost low for hiring DJs: don't make them drive far, because you'll have to pay for travel, and have the venue play piped-in music during social hour and dinnertime, with the DJ coming in after dinner for dancing.

"I DJ enough 10-hour weddings to make up for three-hour ones," he said. "You need someone to keep the mood going, be an emcee, but so many times I'm there I'm playing background music, and for those people music just might not be necessary."

Something else to keep in mind, he said, is that not all weddings need a DJ. "My family doesn't dance, so my sister didn't have a note of music played except a fiddler at wedding. She knew our family.

Collins has his own Web site.



The creative couple will certainly come up with their own ideas and resources for eliminating unnecessary expense and ostentation. The key is to keep what makes you happy and let the rest of it slip away.