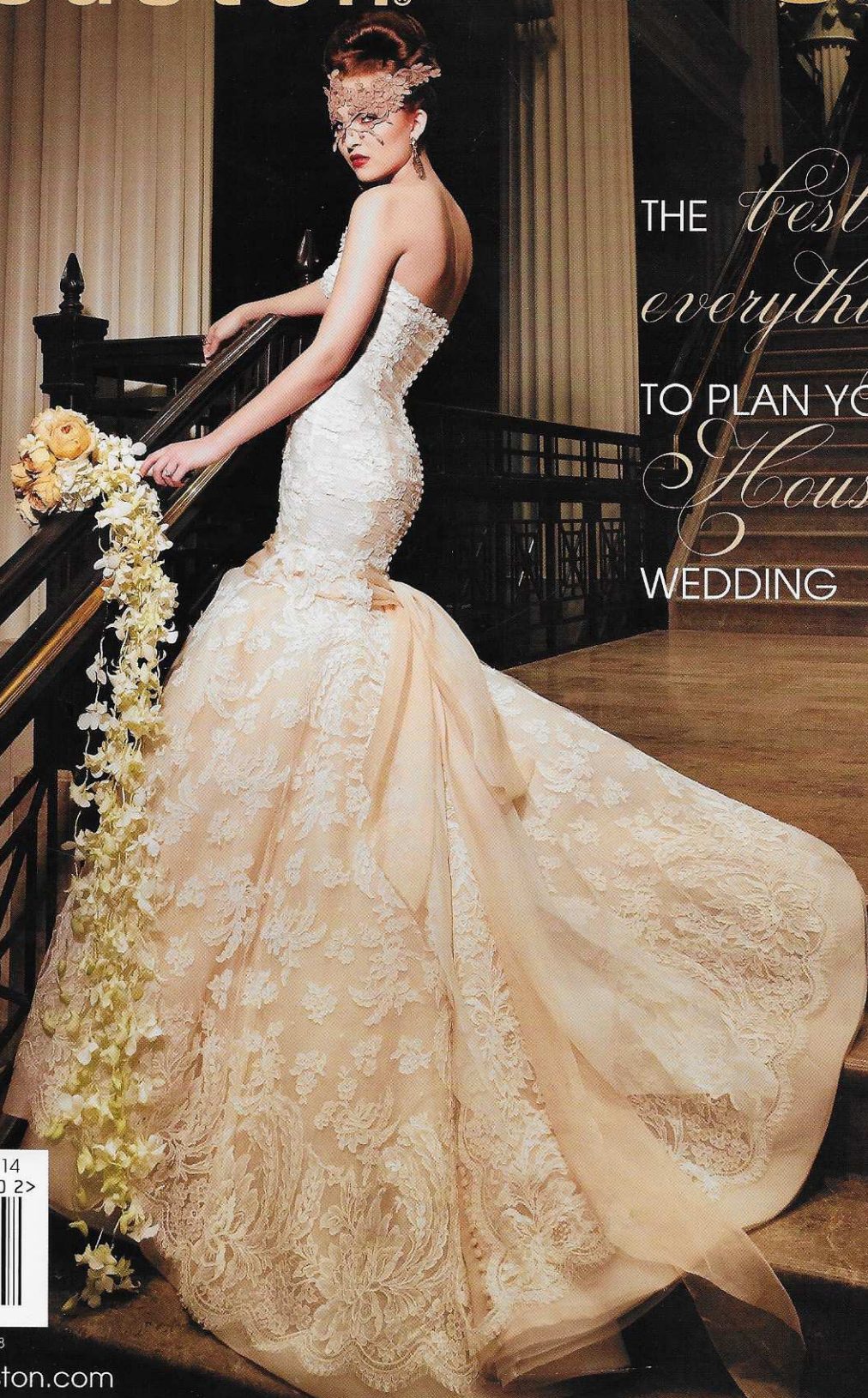


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WEDDING GOWN BUYING GUIDE

FIND OUT WHEN TO SHOP, WHOM TO BRING AND HOW TO CHOOSE,
STRAIGHT FROM THE PROS.

So many important decisions go into your wedding day, but the most personal of all of them is choosing your wedding dress. Though it is a dress you will wear only once, that one occasion is like no other in your life—it is the day on which you pledge yourself to your beloved, your partner in life. Finding the right gown for your body, soul and sense of style is not an easy task, but it should be a joyful and exhilarating one. This expert advice will help ensure it is.

1. START SHOPPING EARLY

Tori Armstrong of Winnie Couture Bridal Salon urges brides to start shopping as soon as they get engaged, in order to allow plenty of time to find, alter and take ownership of the perfect dress.

“Begin your dress shopping about a year in advance of your wedding, purchasing your gown no later than nine months before your big day,” she says. “Many designers make their dresses to order, so

WRITER JULIE LEMEROND | GOWN SAREH NOURI



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it may take six to eight months for your gown to arrive."

Robyn Lounsberry, owner of Houston Bridal Gallery, agrees. "We recommend ordering as early as possible, about eight to 12 months before the wedding. Our brides who start early are usually more calm and collected as their wedding date gets closer, but the brides who wait until the last minute are frantic and stressed out. You should enjoy your wedding planning and enjoy being engaged," she advises.

2. COLLECT GOWN IDEAS—BUT NOT TOO MANY

Magazines like *Weddings in Houston*, and online gown galleries, are great places to start getting ideas about the kinds of gown silhouettes, fabrics, styles and designers you like.

Lounsberry recommends using websites to "create multiple boards and collect ideas of the style and look you want for your wedding."

But at the same time, keep yourself from going into system overload, with too many options and not enough vision. "Social media and the Internet can help you, but they can also confuse you," cautions AJ Ruley of *Weddings by Debbie*. "Use them as a springboard for shopping, but not as the only platform for your ultimate decision."

3. KEEP AN OPEN MIND

Stylists generally recommend finding two or three silhouettes that best fit your frame—but still keeping an open mind when you attend your salon appointments. After all, how many brides have gone into the salon certain that a sexy fit-and-flare was the style they coveted above all others, only to say, "Yes," to a classic ballgown-style dress?

"Remember to be open to what you may think doesn't look that good on a hanger; it may look fantastic on you!" Ruley says.

Also, remember that salon consultants are in this profession because they are passionate about helping brides achieve the wedding-day look of their dreams, and they may have ideas and suggestions that you wouldn't have thought of on your own.

"We always advise brides to stay very open when it comes to the style of their gown because what they are aesthetically attracted to in magazines may not be what they feel happiest in," says Jessica Dodson of Ivory Bridal Atelier. She adds that, many times, brides will come in for an appointment having in mind exactly what they want, but then will be pleasantly surprised to fall in love with something completely different.

4. DON'T BRING YOUR ENTIRE WEDDING PARTY TO YOUR SALON APPOINTMENTS

Of course all of your close friends would

love to sip Champagne while watching you try on a bevy of beautiful bridal gowns. But be mindful: "Everyone has an opinion, so it's very important to only invite the people who know and understand you the most," notes Kim Vo of Now & Forever Bridal Boutique. "Definitely do not bring an entire entourage. They likely will confuse you and make it more difficult for you to express yourself."

Adds Jill Nelson of Mia Bridal Couture, "Ever heard the saying, 'Too many cooks in the kitchen?' We recommend bringing an intimate group of no more than three guests for your appointment. Extend an invitation to only your most valued family members or friends, whose opinions are crucial to your decision. If a family member or friend doesn't fall into this category, include her in other ways, like when selecting accessories or during a gown fitting."

And if you feel that any of your friends or family members are focusing more on their own style or opinions than what you envision for yourself, don't be afraid to remind them that this is your dress, and your day. It can help to ask them to offer opinions on specific gown elements or accessories ("Do you prefer the bodice on this gown, or the other one?" "What do you think about this belt—is it helping the gown or distracting from it?"), rather than simply asking for their "yay" or "nay."

5. ALLOW AMPLE TIME FOR ALTERATIONS

Alterations are a major part of gown shopping and preparation, and you should expect to have several fitting appointments before they are completed. "When going to an alterations appointment you need all of the undergarments that you are wearing on the day of the wedding, including bra,

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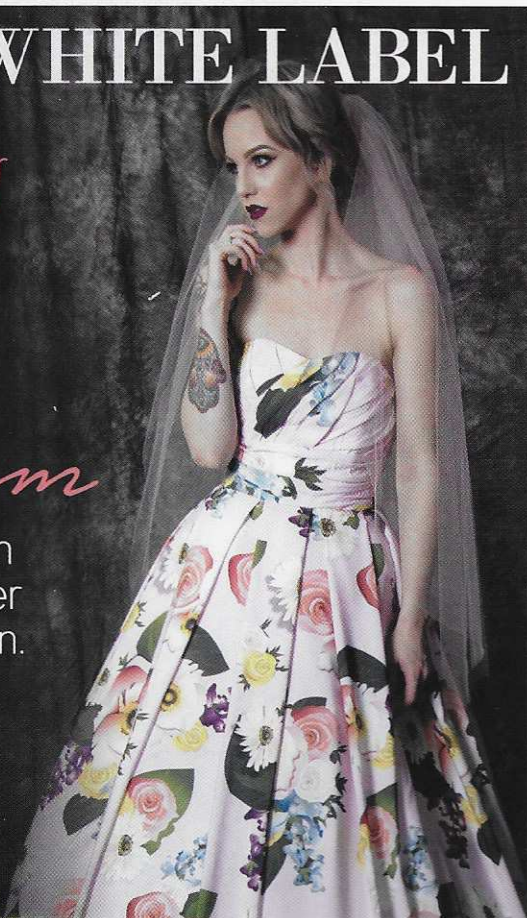
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When going to an alterations appointment you need all of the undergarments that you are wearing on the day of the wedding, including bra, slip, petticoat and/or Spanx, as well as your shoes.

- AJ RULEY, WEDDINGS BY DEBBIE

slip, petticoat and/or Spanx, as well as your shoes,” says Ruley.

Also remember that alterations are an added cost—sometimes a significant one, depending on how extensively you are adjusting your gown—and should be factored in when deciding on your attire budget.

“Depending on the amount of lace, beading, and appliqué your gown has, as well as how much needs to be done to the dress to make it fit you properly, alterations can cost upwards of several hundred dollars, so be prepared for that added expense when dress shopping,” advises Armstrong.

Ruley also offers some practical suggestions for caring for your body while going through the alterations process. She recommends watching your salt intake for one to two days prior to each fitting (as well as the days before your wedding), and that any planned weight change before the wedding (loss or gain), should be about completed by the time the alterations begin.

6. DON'T FORGET THE ACCESSORIES

“When you look at a bride, you want to see in this order: the bride’s beauty, the gown’s beauty, and then the added beauty of the accessories,” says Lounsberry.

But with seemingly endless choices in belts, sashes, capes, jewelry, shoes,




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veils and hair accessories, artful bridal accessorizing is a task that bewilders many gown buyers. Which is where an experienced salon consultant comes in handy.

Vo reminds brides to think of both legacy and style when settling on accessories: "Think of how you want to look and be remembered. Try to showcase your own style and personality, but remember to edit and eliminate because sometimes less is more."

And speaking of legacy, "Family accessories can also be a wonderful addition to your bridal look," Nelson reminds brides. "Remember, your mom's '80s style veil can be re-worked, for a more modern aesthetic, and can become a treasured part of your special day."

Armstrong offers this accessorizing advice: "Accessories should be equal

parts aesthetically pleasing and practical. From an aesthetic standpoint, decide what will be the most important element of your wedding look and ensemble on your big day. Is it your hairstyle? Your veil? Your jewelry? Discuss this choice with your consultant to determine the best way to accommodate your vision. From a practical perspective, it's helpful to try to foresee what could go wrong with any particular accessory you choose. Is your dress lace or chiffon? Perhaps a bracelet that easily catches and snags fabric isn't a good choice," they advise.

As for that hairstyle, Ruley reminds brides to think about the season they will be marrying in, and go from there. "If the wedding is going to be outside in July, then you have to allow for humidity and how it might affect your hair," she notes. Dodson adds that an updo, or "beautifully

curled-to-the-side look," is a great way to beat the heat—and a great way to reveal the beautiful back details featured on so many of today's gorgeous gowns. An updo is also a wonderful opportunity for accessorizing with hair pins, hair jewelry, silk flowers, jeweled or ribbon headbands and other romantic hair accessories.

Lounsberry adds that it is essential to choose accessories while wearing your gown. Since memory can be less than reliable (Is your dress ivory? Is it more...cream? Where does the waistline fall exactly?). It is critical to see your entire look styled all together before making any final decisions regarding the accent pieces you'll choose.

7. PREPARE TO SAY "YES"

"Our biggest advice to our brides is to be open to finding their gown on the first visit," says Starla Flake, owner of

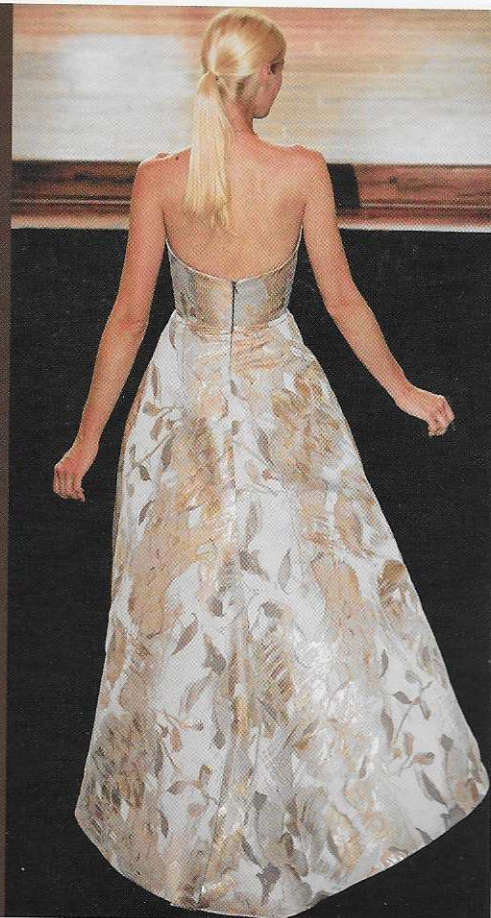
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Our biggest advice to our brides is to be open to finding their gown on the first visit. When you find your perfect gown, be prepared to say, 'Yes,' to that dress.

- STARLA FLAKE, BRICKHOUSE BRIDAL

Brickhouse Bridal. "When you find your perfect gown, be prepared to say, 'Yes,' to that dress."

Armstrong agrees, and notes that they see brides finding the right dress, right away, more often than you may think. "Visiting any more than three bridal salons can be detrimental to your search. Going to too many appointments will leave you confused and overwhelmed, and you will forget which dresses you've tried on, and cease to be able to effectively rank your choices."

Be prepared for anything—you may find your perfect dress at your first appointment, or it may reveal itself to you only after you've been searching for weeks. Even if you are feeling pressured to find a gown, it is better to find something that you truly love, rather than to make a snap decision because you think you're running out of time.

Ruley adds: "Looking for the right dress can take some time, but you also need to know what type of shopper you are. Can you make that decision on your own or do you need help? Are you a marathon shop-

per (going to many appointments before you decide), or can you know what you want when you see it or try it on?"

Most of all, Flake urges, keep your own vision for your bridal attire in the forefront of your mind: "Stay true to how you feel and what you are wanting for your wedding. Trust your instincts and what you envision for your wedding. And trust your bridal consultant"—after all, she is there for one purpose—"to help you find the perfect gown!"

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