Say "I Do" to a Budget-Friendly Backyard Wedding

Posted Fri, Jun 01, 2007, 4:20 pm PDT

Ah, it's June, and weddings are in the air. In the open air, even! Backyards can be the ideal venue to host a celebration -- and much more personal and less pricey than a silk-festooned hotel ballroom. Just because the average American reception costs a whopping 20 grand -- yikes! -- doesn't mean you have to say "I do" to a lifetime of debt. Instead, host an at-home wedding with tons of style and a pretty price tag.

We invited newlywed and relationship expert, Elizabeth Hurchalla, to share her favorite tips for hosting your dream wedding right in your own backyard...

Steal a few ideas from the pros. Decide on a color scheme -- choosing one or two predominant colors helps create instant style. Look for inexpensive ways to feature the color and tie everything together -- from cocktail napkins to votive candles, table runners, and even food (a bowl of lemons to enhance a yellow theme, brown eggs for a neutral theme, red grapes for a purple theme, and so on).

Go for a consistent style. Create a continuous mood throughout your home -- from the front door to the guest bath to the great outdoors. Decide what you want the feel to be -- elegant, country, exotic -- and carry it through everything from the menu to the music. Steer clear of decorations like balloons or paper streamers that might cheapen the look. Instead, opt for simple and sophisticated accents with an organic feel to echo the backyard setting -- a small bowl of dried lavender in the guest bath next to a jar of lavender hand lotion, or a pair of vases filled with twigs on either side of the front door.

Use your computer to customize. Extra little touches like a menu or wedding program are easy to create using your computer and give the festivities a professional flair. Simply type up the details and print on nice paper. You can even add a ribbon, stamp, or other embellishment for an extra-special touch.

Keep the guest list exclusive. The smaller your celebration, the simpler and cheaper it is -- and the more intimate and special it will feel to your guests. First, figure out how many people can comfortably fit sitting at tables in your backyard, leaving room for dancing if you want it.

Then narrow down the list from there. If you're having trouble, try thinking about whether each guest is someone you'd pay to see, since, in a sense, that's what you'll be doing.

Set your budget. Decide how much you can afford to spend in total, then prioritize each expenditure. Save where you can: Music could be piped in from your iPod, for example; if you're planning an after-dark reception, a band would be too loud for most backyards anyway. You could also forgo hiring a florist -- the flowers in your yard are all you'll need for decoration, and a friend could pick up bouquets at a farmer's market or even supermarket on the day of the nuptials.

Have a Plan B. Don't get caught in the rain without recourse! But watch the bottom line: Tents are expensive; renting one can cost hundreds of dollars or more. Don't want to fork over that kind of cash? Then just don't invite more people than can fit inside your house.

Make yourself (and your guests) comfortable. Plan the wedding for a time of day and year that promises pleasant backyard weather. If it's going to be a daytime affair, put up a canopy to provide shade. If it's in the evening, hang strings of white lights so guests aren't left in the dark. Finally, burn citronella candles and have insect repellent on hand to keep the bugs at bay.

Dine on a dime. Forget the fancy caterer; instead, pick from the takeout menu of your favorite inexpensive ethnic restaurant. If you really want to save (and are very ambitious), cater your own wedding by serving a salad and enchiladas, lasagna, or another main dish that's easy to make ahead and freeze. Just make sure you have someone else assigned to heat and serve for you on the big day. If you really want to save, have an early afternoon wedding and only serve hors d'oeuvres and cake.

Skip the mixed drinks. Keep your liquor list to beer, wine, and champagne. It's easier to serve (you'll only need one bartender), easier to figure out how much to buy in the first place -- and a lot cheaper, since you'll avoid ending up with a bunch of barely opened bottles. Add sodas and water and you're done. Also, check with your local liquor stores about their return policy -- some will let you bring back unopened booze for a refund.

Tell (or invite) the neighbors. Nothing ruins a rollicking reception like a house call from the cops. Besides, if you need chairs, it's easier to ask a guest!

Borrow or rent what you don't have. Borrowing chairs, tables, dishes, etc., is more cost-effective, obviously. But if you rent, everything is delivered and picked up, and damaged or lost items are covered by your deposit (and don't cause any hard feelings). If you only have one bathroom, rent more -- a portable with a flush toilet and sink might run you about $150 a day -- or ask an invited next-door neighbor if you could also use theirs. Don't forget extra TP! And finally, rent a Dumpster or borrow extra trash and recycling cans.

Prepare for problems. Move breakables and valuables, know that your lawn may sustain some damage from people tromping on it all day, and get additional insurance added to your homeowner's policy. Then, well, try to relax.

Enlist the help of shutterbug buds. Professional photographers can be super pricey, but you've got to have pictures to remember your big day. If you have a couple of friends that are good with a camera, ask

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them to serve as photogs (better to ask two friends than one so neither has to feel they're on duty for the entire event). Or contact a local art school to inquire about students who might be available at discounted rates.

Don't do everything yourself. DIY means more money in your pocket, sure, but this is your one chance to spend time with all the people you love the most. Hire some help if you can, and assign an organized, helpful close friend or family member to act as the host of the party. Now go enjoy yourselves!