

BRIDES

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Bring in nature

THIS YEAR'S HOT THEME IS A NATURAL FIT FOR WEDDINGS

Nothing is more beautiful than the things created by Mother Nature, and today's designers are going to great lengths to bring that beauty into weddings, whether indoors or out.

Natural weddings start with a palette of natural fabrics, typically cotton and linen, to set the tone. Inspiration for accent colors can come directly from nature, too, perhaps even from the location where the wedding will be held. Native plants and textures help give the wedding a sense of place.

In other words, a natural wedding is all about harmo-

ny with your surroundings, wherever they may be.

For the floral arrangements, wildflowers or daisies can be loosely tied together in bunches to look as if they were just picked from a garden. They will typically look less formal than a traditional wedding but no less elegant when designed tastefully.

And, while natural weddings are becoming more

popular each year, they're not only about creating a style inspired by the Earth. They're also about protecting it.

Natural weddings should incorporate ideas that are friendly for the environment, such as printing recyclable invitations and giving away seed packets and organic, pesticide-free flowers to guests.



The theme is the thing in 2012

One popular trend that continues this year is the themed wedding. It's about a lot more than picking a consistent style and colors. Instead, it goes the extra step by weaving one central idea through the entire celebration, whether it's one of the couple's hobbies or a particular historical period. In a themed wedding, everything — decor, clothing, food and even a gift for guests — is centered around one idea of the couple's choosing.

Layers and textures

WEDDING GOWNS THIS YEAR INSPIRED BY VICTORIAN PERIOD

There is an unmistakable romance about the Victorian period, from its rich fabrics to its elaborate building architecture and decor.

Now that same romance is inspiring some of today's most stunning wedding gowns. The emerging style is one that does not directly copy Victorian dresses but evokes the romanticism of the era.

LAYERS

The most notable feature of today's Victorian-inspired dresses is their use of layering to create a rich, full look.

Rather than the more simple, flowing styles that have become popular in recent years, the Victorian dresses will pile layer upon layer of fabric to create textures that draw the eye.

The skirt is the most obvious area where layering can have its full effect, but the high neck lines and longer sleeves of the Victorian era also create opportunities for designers to recreate the elegance of another time.

FABRICS

As part of the Victorian renaissance,

designers are also turning to more delicate fabrics that work together for a fairytale feel.

Laces are coming back into fashion as modern dresses try to emulate the feminine, graceful manners so commonly associated with the Victorian period. Sheers, laces and traditional satins may be layered together for a combination that creates delicate shoulder sleeves and intricate designs.

ROYAL INSPIRATION

Many people credit Kate Middleton and her Alexander McQueen-designed wedding dress for the resurgence of Victorian style.

But the true inspiration was Queen Victoria herself, who was the first modern bride to popularize the white wedding dress.



Reception dress

KICK UP YOUR HEELS WITH A SIMPLER, MORE DANCE-FRIENDLY ENSEMBLE

One trend that shows no signs of slowing down is the use of a separate reception dress that is simpler and easier to dance in than a traditional wedding gown.

And that makes perfect sense. If a bride is going to spend time and money to create a spectacular reception, she should at least be able to wear a dress that lets her enjoy it.

SHORTER SKIRTS

One of the most obvious differences in a wedding gown and a reception dress is the length of the skirt. Wedding gowns usually have full-length skirts that can drag on the floor, which is not exactly conducive to kicking up your feet on the dance floor.

Reception dresses are designed to allow more freedom of motion and be more comfortable while looking beautiful at the same time.

CONVERTIBLE DRESSES

If you don't want to go to the expense and hassle of picking a separate dress for the reception, some bridal gowns are actually two dresses in one.

Convertible dresses let you dress down between the wedding and the reception, giving you one dress with two functions.



Bake in some goodness

BAKED GOODS ADD WARMTH TO RECEPTIONS



For many people, the smell of fresh-baked treats evokes the happiest of memories.

And this year, one of the biggest trends in weddings is serving baked goods to evoke the warmth and taste of home. Pies, cupcakes, brownies and cookies are all popular options that brides are choosing to give their reception a fresh, sweet taste that will make lasting memories.

TASTEFUL FLAVOR

One of the challenges of serving baked goods at a wedding is making the event seem relaxed but not cheap.

After all, baked goods can be made by just about anybody, so it can be a

good way to save money for other parts of the wedding if you can ask people to bring baked goods to help out.

The secret is making it not look like a thrown-together potluck buffet.

One good option is choosing a caterer that offers a wide selection of baked goods. They're the experts who can deliver exactly what you need. You can even ask if they will incorporate a few of your family's favorite recipes to personalize the event, letting Grandma serve her famous oatmeal raisin cookies that have made you happy since you were 5.

Baked goods are all about comfort, so serve whatever makes you smile and feel good inside.

PRESENTATION

Too often brides will decide what foods to serve without thinking about how they will be presented to guests, and that's a mistake.

Baked goods, like any foods, will become a part of the reception's overall atmosphere. You need to think about how they will be served, garnished and presented to your guests, making sure the baked goods follow your overall theme and design.

One possibility is leaving a small box or bag with a sampling of baked goods at each guest's place setting at the table.

Another is using baked goods as wedding favors, giving each person a package of treats they can take home with them to continue the fun.

With the right foods and beautiful presentation, baked treats can become a big part of your wedding memories.

Give your wedding personality

FIVE IDEAS FOR AN EVENT AS UNIQUE AS YOU ARE

1. LOCATION: Weddings don't have to be held in churches, so get creative with the site of your ceremony or reception. Look for a location that matches the couple — the park where you had your first kiss, a quaint cabin in the woods for nature lovers, or even at a stadium for big-time sports fans. You're only limited by your imagination.

2. MUSIC: Let's face it. "Here Comes the Bride" just isn't for everybody. If you want your ceremony to have a non-traditional twist, there's no reason you can't walk down the aisle to Rhianna or Coldplay. The soundtrack of your wedding ought to reflect your unique personality.

3. PHOTOGRAPHY: Today's wedding photographs are about a lot more than posed pictures with family. If you find the right photographer, you'll have all kinds of options to reflect who you are, from creative, artistic portraits to photojournalism that documents the entire day in beautiful images. The key is finding a photographer who clearly understands what you want and has the skills to make it happen.

4. STATIONERY: Bland-looking cream or white wedding invitations are out, and personalized invites are in. Use the invitations you send as a chance to reflect your personality and set the tone for what guests can expect at your wedding.

5. ENTRANCE: If you want to make a real splash, come up with a creative way to make your big entrance at the wedding. Whether you arrive on a white horse, Napoleon Dynamite style, or show up in a stretched Hummer with bass blasting from the stereo, your first impression can be one guests never forget.

6. CAKE: Your wedding cake doesn't have to be frilly and tiered. Watch "Cake Boss" or "Ace of Cakes" to get inspiration for just how creative your cake can be. And if you really want to surprise people, forego the wedding cake in favor of the wedding donuts — or whatever dessert you want.

BOLD or more subdued?

THIS YEAR'S POPULAR COLORS ARE EITHER PALE BLUES AND BEIGES OR BOLD, BRIGHT SPLASHES. TAKE YOUR PICK.

This year's hot wedding colors are at two extremes: very subtle or very bold.

One trend is using pale blue and beige together for an elegant, understated look. The other is using extremely bright colors to make a big impact.

Either way — subdued or extreme — you can find a combination that speaks about who you are as a bride.

PALE BLUES

If there is any color that defines 2012 weddings, it's a pale, smoky blue paired with beige.

This is a twist on the blues and chocolate browns that have been popular in home decor for several years, although it works much better with toned-down hues for weddings.

The end result is a beautiful combination that evokes romanticism and whimsy, creating a great base palette around which you can build your wedding decor.

Think about it: combining light blue and pure white might look too childish, almost like Cinderella's

grand ball. But when you add in beige, you create a warmer, more sophisticated look that is perfect for a modern wedding.

BOLD COLORS

If you want to take the opposite extreme, bold splashes of color continue to be popular this year. Using bright, highly saturated colors is a great way to add some visual "pop" and fun to your wedding.

This year's hot colors range from Kelly green to neon pink and hot orange, although they're rarely monochrome. By pairing colors that don't typically go together — such as navy blue with hot pink — you can create a unique look for your wedding that gives it a distinctive visual DNA.

Deciding to go bold comes with risks, though. It's easy to overdo it when dealing with such bright colors, so use them in moderation.



A delicious farewell

A GOODNIGHT STATION GIVES YOUR GUESTS A TASTY SENDOFF

Do you remember getting goody bags to take home from friends' birthday parties as a child?

One of the biggest trends in 2012 weddings is the use of a "goodnight station" to give your guests a selection of nice treats that they can carry with them as they leave.

It's something you can do in addition or in place of giving wedding favors.

The goodnight station is a small buffet where guests can pick from drinks, desserts and snacks that

they take home with them, giving them one last "thank you" for their visit.

You can include bags or boxes — preferably decorated to match your theme — and let your guests choose their favorite treats to take home.

Popular items at goodnight stations include donuts, cookies, chocolates and a selection of hot

or cold drinks, depending on the season.

You can also opt for a candy buffet to leave suckers, jawbreakers, peppermints and other sugary extras for your guests.

The great thing about goodnight stations and candy buffets is that they can be customized to match the color, theme and decor of your wedding.



TIP: Match your goodnight station to the season

To keep your wedding fresh, fashionable and timely, make your goodnight station match the season of your wedding. In the spring and summer, you could serve ice cream, lemonade, fresh fruit and frappés. Fall and winter weddings could use hot chocolate, pies or herbal tea.