

Fashion Outlook

Attendant worries

Bridesmaids want versatile dresses

The second-biggest problem with being "always a bridesmaid and never a bride" is buying one of those ditsy — and often pricey — bridesmaids' dresses.

"It always costs more than you think it will," says Karla Bausman, a 30-year-old New York City executive who recently was a bridesmaid for the sixth — and she swears last — time. "Of the six dresses, all were custom-made," she says. "One was a pink silk copy of the Princess of Wales' wedding dress and cost about \$350, not including the accessories or shoes. I've never worn any of them again."

Most bridesmaids are too polite to tell the bride they don't like the style of the dress she's chosen for them — nor should they. However, if price is a real concern, prospective bridesmaids should let the bride know; she in turn should be understanding if a friend can't be in the bridal party for financial reasons. But behind these etiquette guidelines, there's always been plenty of whispering and even teeth-clenching.

In recent years, however, manufacturers have offered bridesmaids' dresses that are stylish enough to be worn again as party dresses. They are taking their cues from current fashions — most recently, with puffs, bubble skirts and floral prints.

Some are even breaking a taboo and offering bridesmaids' dresses in black, the most popular choice for evening dresses, but traditionally shunned for weddings because of its connotation of mourning. "For an evening hotel wedding, black is great — why not?" says Vivian Dessy Diamond, vice president and designer at Dessy Creations, which has manufactured bridesmaids' dresses for almost 50 years.

One reason for this change is that bridesmaids, like brides, are older and less willing to tolerate Bo Peep styles. While no separate figures exist for bridesmaids, the industry reports that the average bride today is 23 years old — up from only 18 in the 1950s.

"In general, bridesmaids' dresses the last couple of seasons have become much more sophisticated than in the past," observes Michele Piccione, vice president of design for Alfred Angelo, a Pennsylvania-based manufacturer of bridal and bridesmaids' apparel. For instance, she notes, the strapless, bustier look currently popular in evening fashion "has filtered into the bridesmaids' market." While black bridesmaids' dresses remain something of a rarity, black-and-white dresses have become relatively popular.

Seven years ago, Lynn Bonner Pitts and Terry Banta started a company to make bridesmaids' dresses specifically designed to be wearable again outside the wedding chapel. The secret of Currie-Bonner, their Atlanta-based company: top-quality fabrics, including many designed for upholstery, such as heavy chintzes and moires. "To keep prices down, on the assumption that the dress probably won't be worn again, many other companies use inexpensive fabrics," Pitts explains.

Despite stylistic breakthroughs, some brides find choosing bridesmaids' dresses to be almost as difficult as choosing a husband. The main reason is that brides and bridesmaids frequently have different notions about what the latter's dresses should look like.

With today's return to traditional, formal weddings, a bride is apt to envision dresses that are festive and sometimes virginal, and complement her own classically styled dress.

The bride's mission is further complicated by the fact that the dress's style and color must be flattering to several young women, presumably including a range of figures and complexions. (Pregnant bridesmaids aren't unheard of; overweight bridesmaids are so common that last year Alfred Angelo extended its size range up to 44.)

Tradition dictates that bridesmaids' dresses be designed with some of their most interesting features at the back, because bridesmaids normally stand with their backs partially toward the guests in the church. Today's bridesmaid, however, is more

concerned with what the front of her dress looks like.

As with some bridal gowns, removable pieces are sometimes used to make a bridesmaids' dress that is traditional in appearance for the wedding and modern-looking for after.

But in the end, says Piccione, a woman who is too concerned about getting mileage out of her bridesmaids' dress may have no business accepting the honor in the first place.

"The most important thing is still

that the bride has the look that she wants for her wedding," says Piccione. "I would hate to think of a bride compromising, and making her wedding more casual than she wanted, just to be practical."

"Part of being a bridesmaid may be buying a dress you may never wear again."

As for Bausman, the six-time-bridesmaid, the experience has been educational: "When I get married, I'm going to elope."



BLACK velvet bolero jacket over halter bodice with satin sash at waist and brocade floor-length skirt in black and silver from Frank Masandra for Dessy Creations (ensemble, about \$350).

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