



# A DIY WEDDING? INSPIRED *or* INSANE?

When her daughter decided to eschew an all-in wedding package, **MARY DOWEY** became an expert in flower arranging – and a host of other nuptials-related chores. She shares what she learned

**S**on No 1 was married a few years ago in a Sydney swimming pool as waves spilled up the beach in the coppery light of the setting sun. Different. Magnificent. The two siblings, toasting the newly-weds with home-brew cooked up for the occasion, may have felt their own, still unformed wedding plans veer off in an unconventional direction that very afternoon.

“We don’t want anything fancy,” said The Daughter when the time came around for her engagement. “We’d just like to have a party for about 120 people with really good food, really good wine and a bit of crack.” On a modest budget, she might have added – because, like many couples, she and her fiancé were footing the bill themselves.

Rather than choose a wedding package, their idea was to find a venue flexible enough to let them take charge of as many elements as possible – putting their own stamp on the day to the maximum degree while keeping costs on the right side of crazy. Food, drink, flowers, decorations, music ... these were some of the things they wanted to arrange

themselves, roping in friends and family members to help.

If that sounds straightforward, it shouldn’t. The learning curve seemed steeper than Mont Blanc when various stumbling blocks emerged along the way. “I’m beginning to see now why wedding packages are so popular,” groaned The Daughter as lists multiplied and stress intensified during the final week. But, in the end, she and her new husband had exactly the kind of party they’d hoped for.

If you feel tempted by a self-assembly wedding, here are some of the critical nuts and bolts.

## THE VENUE

The most crucial element of all – so the minute you’ve decided on numbers and the general shape of your event, research, research, research. Points to consider: their caterer or yours? Their wines or yours? Their decorations or yours? Music? Dancing? Late bar? Outdoor heating if required? Rooms available for use of the bridal party, if required? Floor manager and staff on the day: how many for how long? For venues that appeal, try to track down

recent bridal customers as well as reading internet reviews.

Our bride and groom visited about ten venues before choosing the one that seemed most suitable. Unfortunately a change of management between booking date and wedding day led to arguments about what had been agreed (with endless hours spent trawling through emails for evidence). The moral of this story: make sure you have a written agreement mentioning every detail of what the price includes before you pay the deposit. Long before that, of course, negotiate.

## THE INVITATIONS

It’s easy enough to put these together, either making them from scratch (with pretty handmade paper, perhaps – Daintree on Camden Street in Dublin 2 has an inspiring selection) or customising the design of your choice online (as our couple did, attracted by the wide range of options on [www.zazzle.com](http://www.zazzle.com)).

## THE DRESSES

Even if you’re hoping to avoid spending thousands on a

# WEDDING

wedding dress, it's worth trying on luxurious designer gowns to see what suits you best in terms of fabric, shape and style. You may fall for a beauty and decide to blow the budget - or look for something similar at an easier price elsewhere.

After a brief flirtation with a few classic, full-length dresses, The Daughter fell for a gorgeous 1960s beaded satin cocktail dress from vintage specialists Dirty Fabulous ([www.dirtyfabulous.com](http://www.dirtyfabulous.com)). Her two bridesmaids were instructed not to bother about colours or styles but to buy any dress they liked and would enjoy wearing again. This worked out brilliantly, both of them looking relaxed as well as beautiful.

## THE FLOWERS

How, oh how did somebody with zero flower-arranging skill get talked into this? "You'll be grand, Mum," she said. "We don't want formal flowers. Just stick them in vases casually the way you do at home." Giant gladioli in hot colours were what she envisaged for the big displays - easy enough, even for me. We'd carpet the table centres with freeze-dried rose petals in rich red and burnt orange and plonk a tallish bud vase in the middle with a single white bloom.

This much we could manage: the bouquets we'd order from a florist. Or so it seemed until The Daughter said she'd prefer a simple bunch of garden flowers - sensibly enough, it seemed, when we discovered that three bridal bouquets would cost as much as a couple of gallons of champagne. Internet to the rescue. With a YouTube make-your-own-wedding-bouquet video and a few bunches of Tesco flowers for practice, the essentials were grasped in advance. The day before the wedding we set to work, The Daughter advising on which blooms to place where and me twirling and taping. Of all the wedding preparations, this was the most fun.

As for sourcing the flowers, the market seemed the best bet until a friend recommended Gerry, the chap who sells from a van on Baggot Street. The flowers on the street may not always look in peak condition, but don't let that put you off. For customers buying in bulk, he orders directly from Holland, so the flowers of your choice arrive on the day of your choice in a pristine state - or at least that was our experience.

A quick leaf through *Wedding Flowers* magazine and a useful chat with Gerry's daughter Margaret (087 283 9638) helped to nail down the final selection. Prices were exemplary and Margaret made the buttonholes too.

## TABLE & OTHER DECORATIONS

To survive the DIY approach with all of these, you need to keep it simple. We'd never have found the time to do a proper flower arrangement for each table as well as six or seven large displays - but popping a single stem into a bud vase or twelve doesn't take a minute. Scattering rose petals (buy freeze-dried petals from [www.rosepetalshop.co.uk](http://www.rosepetalshop.co.uk)) is fast work, too.

We bought heaps of ribbon from A Rubenesque in Dublin 2 ([www.arubanesque.ie](http://www.arubanesque.ie)) in the same hot colours as the gladioli to tie around IKEA or M&S vases and lanterns. Apart from that, candles of various shapes and sizes, bought online ([www.celticcandlesireland.com](http://www.celticcandlesireland.com)), were the main decorative element - positioned in holders on the front steps, on tables and side tables, along the bar, even in the bathrooms. Candlelight is kind to little imperfections of all sorts. Small tip: if you're using tealights, buy those with a burning time of at least eight hours.

## CLOAKROOMS

A touch of extra luxury goes a long way here - so have a careful look at your venue's cloakrooms and bathrooms in advance. Flowers, candles, proper towels, decent soap and hand cream can make all the difference. TK Maxx sells some surprisingly classy toiletries at rock-bottom prices.



A DIY wedding is not for everyone. If you've SET your HEART on a lavish and sophisticated extravaganza, it's probably not your thing. But if you're easygoing enough to give it a go, it will REFLECT your PERSONALITY and style to the utmost degree.

## FOOD

This was the big ticket item: our bride and groom were prepared to splash out in order to have great food. They contacted several recommended caterers to discuss the sort of menu they had in mind. Neil Shirt ([www.neilshirtcatering.ie](http://www.neilshirtcatering.ie)) was the most impressive, cooking a terrific sample meal that gave them a chance to judge the food and try out different wines. On the day, he and his team were outstanding.

Points to check well in advance: what facilities and equipment will your caterer expect the venue to provide? What about glassware, china, cutlery, tablecloths, napkins: how do they all look, and are there enough?

## DRINK

Decent wines were important to our couple, so a fair bit of effort was devoted to their selection. Four whites and four reds from Wines Direct ([www.winesdirect.ie](http://www.winesdirect.ie)) were tasted with the caterer's trial dinner, a zesty Spanish white and rich Languedoc red emerging as clear favourites. Buying by the case on a sale or return basis brings prices down significantly.

But, of course, wedding wine economics are more convoluted than the mere cost of the bottles. Most venues make a fat profit out of wine - either by adding hefty margins to the offerings on their own list or by charging stiff corkage - so unless you are Mr & Mrs Midas it's normal to negotiate. Try to agree on a total corkage figure that will keep the venue reasonably happy (and bring them your custom) rather than settling for the usual per-bottle arrangement, which can scarily mount up. Standard corkage on champagne and sparkling wine is particularly painful.

Make sure the agreed figure also covers the serving of beer and soft drinks. Most guests find fresh fruit juices reviving at some point - so count more than the teetotalers when you tot up your requirements for those. We bought

delicious sparkling juices from The Apple Farm ([www.theapplefarm.com](http://www.theapplefarm.com)).

## THE CAKE

Like flowers, cakes seem to quadruple in price the minute the word wedding is mentioned. Maybe you know somebody who might make you a cake? One of our bridesmaids produced a chocolate biscuit cake which made such an impact that she could probably start a wedding biscuit cake business tomorrow. Decorated with flowers and ribbon, it looked as divine as it tasted.

## FAVOURS

Son No 2 had volunteered to make these from his demon recipe for Millionaire's Shortbread, cut up, wrapped up and beribboned. But time was short, and there were other more important things to do, so the idea was quietly abandoned. Did anybody care? Not as far as we know. Favours are a nice idea but maybe not worth agonising over.

## MUSIC

Important, obviously - for ambiance and for the personal associations it brings. During the ceremony our groom's uncle and a friend played superb traditional music on guitar and violin. Later, dancing was organised with an iTunes playlist put together by our couple - a matter of individual choice, it should be stressed, as a great band can transform a wedding.

## PHOTOGRAPHS

If you want formal portraits, a wedding photographer probably makes sense. If you prefer more informal snaps, there are probably people among your family and friends who will oblige. In our case, Son No 2 did the honours (instead of the favours), helped by a guest. Afterwards, other guests emailed in great shots in such numbers that it took weeks to make the final cut.

## LATE-NIGHT SNACKS

Here's another thing that can eat up money to no great purpose. Venues often offer to lay on light snacks late in the evening - at a considerable charge per head. Yet it's a task which can easily be delegated. Our groom's sisters provided a super selection of tasty bites.

## BREAKFAST

Beware: venues with accommodation will often talk about breakfast the next morning as if it were an integral and vital part of the deal. In fact it is often an extra so before you agree, reflect. Will everybody want a full breakfast (and at what time?) - or might some bleary-eyed guests prefer coffee, a croissant and a rapid exit? A family member may be able to bring the necessary supplies, take up position in the kitchen and keep brewing.

## WORTH IT?

A DIY wedding is not for everyone - partly because it's labour-intensive and partly because it demands a degree of simplicity as well as flexibility; if you've set your heart on a lavish and sophisticated extravaganza, it's probably not your thing. But if you're easygoing enough to give it a go, it will reflect your personality and style to the utmost degree. It should also bring you close to family members and friends as you pool your strengths in a rewarding team effort.

Would we do it again? Let's hope The Daughter won't have to - but Son No 2 and his fiancée have just announced an August wedding in a converted barn in the wilds of Scotland. So, eh, yes. With luck the hillsides will be covered in heather. Seems I'm down for flowers again. ■