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After "I Do"

What to Do With Your Wedding Dress After the Big Day.

By **STEFANIE BERRY STARK**

Although she doubts it will be worn again, Washington writer Stefanie Stark decided to hang on to her wedding gown.

After months of searching—tearing out ads in bridal magazines, trying on dozens of gowns—you found The Dress. On your wedding day, you looked amazing.

But what do you do now with that made-you-feel-like-a-princess gown?

Clean and Preserve It

Most brides hang on to their dress, even if it will never be worn again. Proper cleaning and preservation is essential for a gown to stay in good condition.

The store where you bought your dress can recommend a cleaner, but it pays to ask others too. In the *Bridal Gown Guide*, authors Denise and Alan Fields report that as many as 80 percent of gowns that have supposedly been cleaned and preserved never actually are. While some industry insiders feel this number is high, scams and bad cleaners do exist.

Jacqueline Zeranski, owner of I Do I Do Wedding Gowns, a Rockville consignment shop, knows of several women who opened boxes of "preserved" gowns to find that the dresses were discolored, dirty, or missing pieces such as veils.

"It happens a lot more than you would think," Zeranski says.

Steer clear of any cleaner that insists a gown must remain sealed in the box it returns to you. A hermetically sealed box isn't necessary for preservation and in fact can cause damage by trapping moisture. Experts suggest you open the box yearly to check a dress for discoloration.

Be wary, too, of any establishment with a fixed price for

cleaning gowns. The price should be based on the level of detailing, such as lace and beading, and the type and amount of fabric. High-end gowns made of silk or organza may warrant special cleaning.

Any dry cleaner may be capable of cleaning a wedding dress but usually sends out gowns to be preserved. You can cut out the middleman by going to a wedding-gown specialist. Locally, the two most reputable are **Parkway Custom Drycleaning** (8402 Connecticut Ave., Chevy Chase; 301-652-3377) and **Imperial Gown Restoration Company** (2814-C Merrilee Dr., Fairfax; 800-933-4696; www.gown.com). Each has been in business more than 50 years.

Provide as much information as you can about what happened to your dress on your wedding day—any spills, for example, or whether saltwater may have skimmed the hem if you got married by the sea.

Once a gown is cleaned, it should be preserved in acid-free tissue in an acid-free box and stored in a cool, dry place, such as under a bed. You may preserve a clean gown yourself by purchasing an archival box. **The Container Store** sells them for \$37.99.

Never store a gown in an attic or basement, in a plastic bag, or on a hanger. Ask your dry cleaner about its warranty on yellowing or staining that may develop after your gown is cleaned and preserved; most cleaners will stand by their work.

Having a gown cleaned and preserved is expensive—on average \$400. If a gown was inexpensive or made of a synthetic fiber such as polyester, cleaning it at any dry cleaner and preserving it yourself may be adequate, says Zeranski. Standard cleaning starts at \$125, though simple gowns may run less.

Give It a Second Wedding

Some brides give gowns new life by reselling them.

If you decide on that route, it's best not to wait: Styles change, and some consignment shops won't take gowns that are more than a year or two old.

You won't get back all the money you paid, but you can recoup 35 to 45 percent.

You could post your gown for sale on **eBay** or on www.nearlynewbridal.com or place an ad in the newspaper.

Many brides avoid the hassle of dealing with buyers by using a

consignment shop. The best in this area is **I Do I Do Wedding Gowns** (622 Hungerford Dr., Rockville; 301-762-4464; by appointment), which has more than 600 dresses, from Vera Wang to David's Bridal. Only gowns less than a year old are considered, unless a gown is an unusual size. Gowns are discounted 25 to 50 percent off original retail; if the dress sells, the money is split between the shop and the consigner. Dresses that don't sell within 18 months are returned to the consigner.

Restyle It

Some brides restyle their gown into a party dress or baby's christening outfit.

New York designer **Michelle Roth** (212-245-3390) is resurrecting gowns that had been put away for years. She and her brother, Henry, are shortening, dyeing, and reshaping, yielding surprisingly fashionable results.

Restyling isn't cheap: It starts at \$500 and averages \$1,200, including fittings and sketches. Check out a few before-and-afters at www.michelleroth.com/pgs/restyling.html.

Steven Saidman of Imperial Gown Restoration also has designers on staff who can dye and unbead dresses, but he tries to talk women out of restyling gowns.

"It's a cute concept," Saidman says, "but years later they might say, 'I wish I had my wedding gown to pass on to my daughter.'"

Donate It

A more charitable choice is donating a gown to the Salvation Army or Goodwill, to a high-school or university drama department, or to a theater company.

Another option is the Making Memories Breast Cancer Foundation's **Brides Against Breast Cancer** program. Established in January 2000, this program has collected more than 10,000 wedding dresses and raised close to \$400,000. Dresses are resold at huge discounts—they cost \$49 to \$599—on the foundation's Nationwide Tour of Gowns. (A stop in Bethesda is planned for April 18 and 19 at the Ballroom, 5521 Landy La., www.theballroom.org). Donations are tax-deductible; the money raised goes toward granting the wishes of women dying of breast cancer, such as the now-deceased 29-year-old mother of two young children who asked for a video camera to record herself so her children wouldn't forget her mannerisms or her voice.

For more information, go to
www.makingmemories.org/gowns2.html or call
503-252-3955.

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