



Home weddings: a father's choice

An experienced father of two brides, Alan Titchmarsh offers advice on what's involved in hosting a wedding at home, from car parking to catering and, of course, the garden

THERE are magical corners in my garden now: where the bride and groom stood to meet their friends and relations, where the marquee was positioned, where we danced, where the jazz band played and where we walked among the wildflowers. A wedding in your own garden has the potential to be more magical and to last longer and more affectionately in your memory than one held anywhere else. As the father of the bride and the gardener, I wouldn't have missed it for anything.

If you aren't an expert in event management, there are certain points that can be easily overlooked in the planning process. Here, I've outlined my advice, garnered from personal experience.

The format

I've come to the conclusion that the best weddings are at 3.30pm in a church (or registry office) that's no more than half an hour from home. Drinks are served from the first arrivals (at about 5pm) together with canapés, which are, in effect, the first course. Everyone sits down at 6.30pm, speeches are at about 8pm and dancing follows, during which guests can nibble cake and graze on cheese and biscuits and enjoy the bar. The bride and groom leave at 11.30pm and everyone else has left by midnight.

Dictatorial? Well, perhaps, but everyone will have a very good time and be neither exhausted nor bored rigid. It might be the highlight of their lives for the bride and groom, but it's a test of true friendship if guests are asked to arrive shortly after noon and leave after midnight.

Numbers

Is your garden large enough to accommodate the number of guests that are being invited? Be honest with yourself on this point—it's nice

to show off the garden, but, if your guests are packed shoulder to shoulder, they won't be able to see the plants for bodies, let alone move.

Weather

With any luck, it will be fine, but you'll need to cater for a worst-case scenario in the hope that, on the day, you'll be favourably surprised. Make sure there's enough room inside for the reception as well as the dinner.

Marquee

If the marquee is erected two or three days before the event and dismantled a day or two after, the grass will show no ill-effects, but it's worth leaving it to grow a little longer than usual rather than mowing too close. If the canvas is left in position for longer than a week, the grass will turn yellow. Not to worry—it'll soon recover when exposed to sunlight.

The hire companies will advise on everything from size, site (the ground should be as level as possible) and seating to heating and everything else.

Gentle, warm sunshine, burgeoning blossom and mown lawns at the author's home created the perfect setting for both his daughters' weddings

Caterers

Do obtain several quotes and get them to come and look at the site in person. Taste-test the chosen menu.

Seating

Will your guests be sitting down for dinner or will it be a 'stand-up'? You'll need more room for the former, slightly less for the latter, but, in either case, you'll need chairs to allow guests to take the weight off their feet—especially the aged relatives.

Speeches

They should take no more than 30 minutes (10 minutes each for the godfather or father of the bride, the groom and the best man). Threaten to blow a whistle when their time is up if you have to.

Photographer

Most couples prefer a minimum of 'posed' shots, as guests can become fractious. Find a photographer who's adept at capturing candid images of the couple and their guests—the garden offers the perfect background.

Loos

Avoid siting loos slap bang in the middle of the drive as they don't make for a happy first impression. Go for the best your budget allows and add a vase of flowers from the garden. Baskets of essentials, such as scents, wipes, tissues and so on, are appreciated (men get through after-shave surprisingly rapidly). Make sure there are plenty of clean towels, too.

Car parking

You may well have to accommodate half the number of cars as there are guests. If they're to park in a field, make sure it's still accessible in wet weather—leaving the grass longer than normal helps tyres grip. Arrange for helpers in high-visibility vests to direct drivers to park in double rows with sufficient room between them to allow anyone to leave early. Signage should direct guests to the reception.

Garden lighting

You'll have mown the lawns, trimmed the edges, weeded the borders, staked flopping plants and, hopefully, have

planned it so that there are plenty of things in flower at the time of the wedding, but do make sure that paths are properly lit after dark.

Mud

Soft pathways such as lawns may need to be reinforced with thick plastic netting in wet weather to avoid them turning to mud.

Small bridesmaids and pages

Small children need to be kept away from ponds and swimming pools—it might be necessary to erect temporary fencing for safety's sake.

Smokers

A few tins filled with sand and placed outside the house or the marquee will allow smokers to dispose of their cigarettes and cigars without lobbing them into your beds and borders.

The house

And finally, either lock the doors or install someone in the house to give directions should a guest decide to go for a wander.