

Backyard Vows

The setting is priceless, but the savings may be elusive

Source: *Kiplinger's Personal Finance*

Shortly after Jonelle Kunkle's future husband, Bob, popped the question, she made a proposal of her own. As other couples and their parents were plunking down hefty deposits to snag a prized venue for their wedding reception, Jonelle suggested calling in a favor and securing, free of charge, a hilltop setting with gorgeous views: Mom and Dad's backyard in Kittanning, Pa.

The cost of the average wedding is closing in on \$28,000, reports the Conde Nast Bridal Group. And the reception is the biggest expense, averaging about \$14,000, according to TheWeddingReport.com. So cutting the cost of the venue might seem like the natural way to save. Anna Pohl, director of Mattison's Catering, in Sarasota, Fla., has noticed an increase in backyard weddings with the influx of retirees to her area. "Family members realize that they have access to beautiful backyards and ocean views, and they don't have to pay for them," says Pohl.

But although at-home weddings offer flexibility and priceless memories, they don't necessarily save money. "The tent really balloons the cost of a home wedding," says Alan Fields, co-author with his wife, Denise, of *Bridal Bargains* (Windsor Peak Press, \$14.95).

Tents typically start at \$1,000 and go up from there. For the Kunkles' 2004 wedding, a tent claimed about one-third of the \$4,300 rental bill, which also included tables, chairs, linens and other extras. Dennis and Leslie Donahue will pay \$1,800 for a tent that seats 150, plus another \$1,800 for air conditioning, when their daughter, Sarah, marries Michael Wolff this spring at their Longwood, Fla., home.

And there are expenses that might not occur to you, such as renting portable restrooms (\$150 to \$250 for a standard unit) so you don't have large numbers of guests trekking through your house. Or \$10 to \$25 per hour for valet parking. For a crowd of 150, figure on five valets and a doorman, for a total cost of \$360 to \$900 for six hours – and make sure the service provider is insured.

Add dance floors, lighting and a sound system – not to mention catering – and it's easy to see how your down-home reception can cost more than one at a fully equipped venue.

Ways to save.

You can realize some savings on a backyard affair. For example, the typical wedding budgets \$1,200 for flowers. With Mother Nature's help, Jonelle Kunkle's parents spent half that amount.

A catered bar can cost \$18 per guest in Sarasota. But the Donahues went on a wine-tasting jaunt to North Carolina, where Sarah and Michael live, and are providing their own alcoholic beverages: wine at an average price of \$7 per bottle and beer brewed by Dad.

Getting friends and family members to help out can cut costs, too. Each member of the Donahue clan has a personalized task list. Kunkle's parents cleaned out the garage to make room for the caterer. Without that kind of support, you'll need a wedding planner, which can add 10% to 20% to your budget.

But the money really adds up when you start sprucing up your house. "People want to paint, redo the yard and buy new furniture," says Ann Nola, found of the Association of Certified Professional Wedding Consultants.

The Donahues' home already had an intricately designed pond, but the driveway was too narrow, the house needed paint and a large part of the backyard had to be leveled. Says Sarah, "We've saved money, if you don't count the home improvements." When everything's finished, she says, "I've told my parents they should open up the house for more weddings."