

Southern Illinois News



February 2026



Marion Chamber announces new board members



Derek Ervin
Glacier's End



Nick Holdinghausen
SI Now



Jennifer Vinyard
Hospice of Southern Illinois

The Marion Chamber of Commerce has elected three members to its Board of Directors for the 2026–2028 term: Derek Ervin

(Glacier's End), Nick Holdinghausen (SI Now, re-elected), and Jennifer Vinyard (Hospice of Southern Illinois). Outgoing directors

Deb Reynolds Hogg, Tyler Patton, and Jeremy Pinkston were recognized for their leadership and service. The new board

members were introduced at the December "State of the City" Luncheon and will officially begin their roles at the Annual Banquet and

Awards Ceremony on January 16, 2026, at The Pavilion. Read more about our Board of Directors and its members on our website.

Early dismissal at SIC Feb. 3rd for maintenance

Southeastern Illinois College will implement an early dismissal for students on the Harrisburg campus only beginning at 11:30 a.m. Tuesday, Feb. 3, due to facility maintenance. All students, faculty, and staff are expected to vacate the campus by 1 p.m. Evening activities in the E and F buildings, as well as outdoor facilities, will continue as scheduled. Regular class schedules will resume Wednesday, Feb. 4.

Incident involving protected health information under investigation

Pursuant to the requirements of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, 45 CFR Sections 164.400-414, the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) is notifying the media of a security incident involving internal planning maps.

On September 22, 2025, IDHS discovered that maps created by the IDHS Division of Family and Community Services' Bureau of Planning and Evaluation on a mapping website were publicly viewable due to incorrect privacy settings. These maps were created to assist

IDHS with resource allocation decisions, such as determining where to open new local offices, and were intended for internal IDHS use only.

The incident involves two categories of affected individuals:

Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) Customers: Approximately 32,401 DRS customers. The maps containing DRS customer information were publicly accessible from April 2021 through September 2025. The information involved includes: names, addresses, case numbers, case

status, referral source information, region and office information, and status as DRS recipients.

Medicaid and Medicare Savings Program Recipients: Approximately 672,616 Medicaid and Medicare Savings Program recipients. The maps containing this information were publicly accessible from January 2022 through September 2025. The information involved includes: addresses, case numbers, demographic information, and the name of medical assistance plans (such as Medicaid, Medicare, etc.). The information

did not include recipients' names.

The mapping website was unable to identify who viewed the maps. To date, IDHS is unaware of any actual or attempted misuse of personal information as a result of this incident.

Upon discovering this incident, IDHS immediately changed the privacy settings on all maps between September 22, 2025, and September 26, 2025, to restrict access to only authorized IDHS employees. IDHS conducted a comprehensive review to determine the data contained in each map and assess reporting

obligations under applicable State and federal privacy laws. IDHS has developed and implemented a Secure Map Policy that prohibits the uploading of any customer-level data to public mapping websites. Under this policy, no identifiable customer information may be uploaded, entered, or stored on public mapping platforms. Access to any customer-related maps is now restricted to authorized personnel based on role-specific needs.

IDHS is in the process of sending notice, as required by law, to the individuals affected by this

incident and to all applicable regulatory authorities. IDHS is working to ensure that this does not happen again, as the privacy of customers is of paramount importance.

The individual notices being sent to affected customers will include toll-free numbers where customers can call for additional information. Credit reporting agencies and the Federal Trade Commission can also offer information about fraud alerts and security freezes and contact information for those organizations is being provided to the affected individuals.



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ARS scientists develop innovative pipeline to analyze plant pathogens

By Tami Terella-Faram
tami.terella-faram@usda.gov

ARS scientists in Corvallis, OR, in collaboration with Oregon State University, developed a disease surveillance platform that could improve U.S. agriculture by unlocking the future of plant health. PathogenSurveillance is an innovative, open-source software tool that can quickly analyze and identify novel microbial variants based on DNA sequences.

The automated PathogenSurveillance pipeline is an innovative workflow tool to help scientists respond in real-time to emerging, or re-emerging, invasive pathogens and pests. The surveillance platform will improve plant health and aid in reducing the spread of new and emerging diseases in agronomic, urban, and forest ecosystems.

"This genomics pipeline revolutionizes plant health, allowing us to identify any microbe, pest, or pathogen in just minutes-to-hours once there is a genome sequence,"

said Nik Grunwald, ARS research plant pathologist at the Horticultural Crops Disease and Pest Management Research Unit in Corvallis. "The genomic pipeline can be used for real-time biosurveillance of known, or unknown, pathogens relatively quickly, which lessens the barrier to adoption and use of PathogenSurveillance drastically."

Grunwald added that, since everything is sequence-based, this tool can be used to monitor the evolution of pest/pathogens in real-time, providing insights into how populations change, variations emerge, and new invasions occur. The platform can also be easily deployed to identify a specific pathogen, or to monitor the emergence of new disease strains or variants.

"Samples are sent to a local lab, and the resulting genome is sequenced and uploaded to the pipeline software system for identification," Grunwald said. "Variation in genomes can thus be monitored over time and space by comparing genomes."

This allows

PathogenSurveillance to be used by labs or clinics with little computational experience, and it provides "unprecedented capability for in-field or point-of-care diagnosis of pests and pathogens," according to Grunwald.

The PathogenSurveillance platform also enables scientists to input one to several hundred population samples of small-to-modest genome sizes, including bacteria, fungi, insects, and nematodes for pathogen surveillance and identification.

The program output is also intuitive for the user because it can provide graphs of genetic diversity and

create reports in the form of an interactive HTML document.

"This will be a benefit to researchers,

disease clinics, and diagnosticians in their work to identify clonal, or other types of variants such as

the UG99 stem rust, or NA2 of sudden oak death," added Grunwald. pathogen surveillance/1.0.0/.



A Camellia plant infected with *Phytophthora nemorosa*, which causes leaf blight. (Photo by Nik Grunwald, ARS plant pathologist).

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The impact of downy mildew

A flavorful wine is a byproduct of a lot of careful attention to grape-growing, blending of flavors and masterful fermentation. Vintners know that everything from weather to pests can affect the finished product, and downy mildew is one variable such individuals may know all too well.

Downy mildew is caused by *Plasmopara viticola*. Native to North America, this oomycete even spread to Europe inadvertently in the late nineteenth century. It remains one of the most economically devastating plant diseases among global viticulture. Unlike true

fungi, downy mildew is a "water mold" and it thrives in warm, humid conditions.

Horticultural experts say the disease cycle begins with oospores overwintering in leaf litter on the vineyard floor. According to Cornell University's Fruit Resources guidelines, infection requires temperatures of at least 10 C (50 F) and 10 mm of rainfall, all within a 24-hour period. These conditions trigger the release of spores which are splashed and spread into the vine canopy. Once established, the downy

see MILDEW,
page 4

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MILDEW,
from page 3

mildew enters the plant through stomata, which are tiny pores, mostly on the leaf undersides. An "oil spot" that looks like yellowish, translucent lesion on the upper leaf surface may be an early warning sign. Under high humidity, the mildew produces a white, cottony substance on the underside of the leaf.

If left unchecked, downy mildew can lead to leaf loss on the plant and the rotting of grape clusters. This affects the vine's ability to store carbohydrates and can affect both current and future yields.

While it once was common to rely on widespread copper-based fungicides to treat downy mildew, the University of California Statewide Integrated Pest Management Program says an emphasis on more holistic strategies is best to reduce pathogen resistance and soil toxicity. These steps include:

- Increasing air flow and sunlight penetration to the

grapevines by pruning and leaf pulling. This reduces leaf wetness duration required for the mildew to take hold.

- Avoid overhead watering and apply water directly to the soil at the base of the plants.

- Scientists are developing fungus-resistant grape varieties and crossing them with North American species through modern breeding programs. This may be a possibility for those just starting their vineyards.

- Vintners are now utilizing weather station data and computerized models to time any fungicide treatments precisely

to do pre-symptomatic interventions instead of broader spraying. Penn State Extension says downy mildew can begin to affect plants in the spring, so it's best to get a jump on treatment. Typical fungicides include a combination of copper sulfate and lime, according to the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

- Remove and destroy infected plant debris at the end of the season so it does not serve as a source of spores for the next growing season.

Downy mildew is a problem that affects a variety of plants, but notably grapevines, which can adversely affect yields and cut into profits.



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2021 INTERNATIONAL LT, Nice truck, runs excellent, fleet maintained, automated transmission, air seat, smart wheel, power windows, power mirrors, heated mirrors, differential lock dump valve, sliding 5th. Stk. #21X15443LTDC.....\$26,000



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2019 PETERBILT 579, Good truck, runs great, clean, air seat, fleet maintained, no rust, very nice truck, power windows, power mirrors, heated mirrors, differential lock, dump valve, A/S 5th cruise, tilt/tele, 455 hp. Stk. #19MX597579DC.....\$23,000



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TRACT #2

40+/- acres with electricity and public water available. Per the Pike County Soil Survey, the farm has about 20.33 acres of Otwell Silt Loam (OTC3) and about 15 acres of Haubstadt Silt Loam (HBB). The balance is Belknap Silt Loam (BG), Wakeland (WA) and a small amount of Dubois Silt Loam (DBA).



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A rundown on glyphosate

Herbicide use sometimes is required to keep crops thriving. Glyphosate is a broad-spectrum systemic herbicide and crop desiccant that has been used for decades. However, glyphosate is a much-litigated and debated topic due to its link to health and environmental concerns.

Glyphosate has been registered as a pesticide in the United States since 1974. When glyphosate is used in accordance with its current label, the Environmental Protection Agency has repeatedly found that it poses no risks or concern to human health. The agency also found glyphosate is unlikely to be a human carcinogen. But that conclusion is not shared by all regulatory agencies.

What is glyphosate?
One of the most widely used products for both commercial and home properties, glyphosate is an ingredient most often associated with the weedkiller Roundup®. The product kills plants by inhibiting a specific metabolic pathway called the shikimate pathway and blocking an enzyme called EPSPS. Plants use this enzyme to synthesize three essential amino acids. Without them, a plant cannot produce proteins and essentially starves to death. Since humans do not have this shikimate pathway, and people obtain amino acids

from the food they eat, scientists have made the argument for glyphosate's safety for use around humans.

With the combination of glyphosate and the development of genetically modified crops that were bioengineered to be immune to glyphosate, farmers have been able to spray entire fields with the herbicide to kill off weeds and leave the desired food crops unharmed. Soy, corn, canola, and cotton were some of these engineered varieties to be glyphosate-immune. With weeds eradicated, less time is needed for mechanical tilling, which also reduces soil erosion.

The health controversy

Various major national regulatory bodies have concluded that glyphosate is not a danger to humans when used as directed. Both the EPA and the European Food Safety Authority conclude that there are "no critical areas of concern" regarding its impact on human and animal health. Despite this, the International Agency for Research on Cancer, a branch of the World Health Organization, begs to differ. It is their belief that glyphosate is "probably carcinogenic to humans," and the organization cited "limited evidence" of glyphosate's link to non-Hodgkin lymphoma and "sufficient evidence" of such a link in



animal experiments. As of 2024, Bayer, the manufacturer of Roundup®, has faced tens of thousands of lawsuits, primarily from individuals claiming the herbicide caused their non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

Many have settled out of court, but the company still stands by the safety of its product.

Environmental scrutiny

Beyond the implications that

the product, forcing farmers to use older, more toxic chemicals. By reducing weeds in general, those that are beneficial to certain insects, especially pollinators like the Monarch butterfly, are less populous. In addition, a primary metabolite from glyphosate called AMPA is frequently detected in surface waters and can persist in the environment, raising environmental concerns.

Glyphosate is very effective at reducing weeds and unwanted plant growth, both at home and in commercial agriculture outfits. However, the environmental implications require further study to determine if glyphosate has any direct ties to cancer in both humans and animals.

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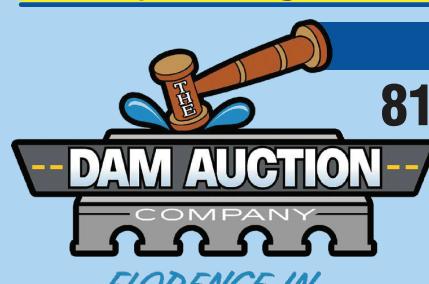
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SI's 22nd season will celebrate 'America at 250'

By Pete Rosenbery

CARBONDALE, Ill. — Set your calendars to commemorate the nation's music history as the 22nd season of the nationally recognized Southern Illinois Music Festival (SIFest) will celebrate "America at 250."

The festival, from June 18 to July 4, will present American classical music from the 18th through the 21st centuries, featuring composers such as Amy Beach, George Whitefield Chadwick, Samuel Barber, Irving Berlin, Leonard Bernstein, Chick Corea, Aaron Copland and many more. Offerings include five major orchestral programs, five "patriotic pops" concerts, three outdoor pre-fireworks concerts, and numerous chamber music programs, at locations throughout the region.

Edward Benyas, SIFest artistic director, founder and conductor, said this year's

repertoire includes a "great cross section of eras and composers." Benyas is an emeritus professor of oboe and conducting at SIU Carbondale and executive director of the Cascade Symphony in Edmonds, Washington.

"I love American classical music and can't tell you how excited I am to help introduce audiences to the tremendous range of music by American composers," Benyas said. "For example, we will perform two great symphonies — William Grant Still's 'Afro-American' Symphony and George Chadwick's Second Symphony. Chadwick is kind of like an American Brahms — he trained in Germany and was part of the Second New England School from the late 19th century."

The festival will also feature three piano concertos that span a century and music "from great American musicals like 'Oklahoma!,' 'South



Southern Illinois Music Festival orchestra members rehearse for a June 2025 performance in John A. Logan College's O'Neill Auditorium. The 22nd festival, which celebrates the nation's 250th birthday, is June 18 to July 4.

Photo by Diana Higbee

Pacific,' 'West Side Story' and 'A Chorus Line,'" Benyas said, adding there also will be excerpts from John Williams' film scores at every concert.

Concert locations include Carterville High School; the Harold Jones Fine Arts Center in Cairo; ArtSpace Southern Illinois 304 Cultural

Arts Center, the African American Museum and First United Methodist Church, all in Carbondale; Alto Vineyards and the Anna Arts Center in Union County. The three free pre-fireworks concerts will be July 2 at Mtn Dew Park in Marion, July 3 at Riverside Park

in Murphysboro and July 4 outside of SIU Carbondale's Banterra Center.

Tickets for all SIFest 2026 events, except those that are free, will be \$25 general admission and \$10 for students of any age, and available at concert venues 30 minutes before each performance.

An all-festival pass is \$150 and includes admission to all events along with a 60-page program booklet, valued together at \$200. Advance festival passes and individual tickets will be available on the SIFest 2026 brochure ticket order form, which will be posted in March on the festival website.



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SIU's online MBA ranked best in Illinois

By Christi Mathis

CARBONDALE, Ill. — Southern Illinois University Carbondale has the top online MBA program in Illinois, according to U.S. News & World Report's 2026 online program rankings released Tuesday, Jan. 27.

The program earned the No. 1 spot in Illinois, among 14 programs, and is ranked 127th in the United States.

"Being recognized by U.S. News among the nation's Best Online MBA programs and ranked No. 1 in Illinois is an important recognition of the work of our students and the commitment of our faculty and staff," said Marc Morris, dean of the College of Business and Analytics. "Our online MBA is built for working professionals and emphasizes rigorous, career-relevant learning while providing strong support for online students. We're encouraged by this recognition and committed to continuous improvement for our students and the employers they serve."

All online and

comprehensive

SIU officials said there are a number of reasons SIU's program stands out. With a flexible, totally online format, it is convenient for busy people, especially working professionals. Strong faculty engagement and support for online learners are emphasized to give the students all the tools they need to succeed as they complete the intense curriculum, which emphasizes practical and pertinent education, Morris said.

Moreover, the 33-credit-hour cohort can be completed in as little as 14 months. Students in the program are not required to take the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) to participate in the program.

SIU's online MBA incorporates a comprehensive learning experience to provide a critical understanding of finance, management-level accounting, business analytics, marketing, supply chain management and organizational behavior. Students learn cost behavior and estimation, cost allocation and performance

evaluation, how to grow an organization's competitiveness in the global market, and organizational strategies and tools. The program incorporates the most current research and theories on various relevant topics such as group dynamics, leadership, job performance, ethics and decision-making, and it prepares graduates for leadership roles.

Nationally recognized

The college and its accounting program are accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International, an accomplishment that puts SIU among the top 6% of business schools worldwide.

SIU's online undergraduate business program also earned a place among the top 29% on the best online program list, earning the 73rd overall spot. This a reflection of strength across the college's online business offerings, Morris said.

The next online MBA session begins March 16. Learn more by visiting SIU's online programs website or calling 855-741-0087.

Keeping your heart healthy

(Rural Health Inc. recognizes February as American Heart Month)

While deaths from heart disease have continued to decline in recent decades, heart disease remains the leading cause of death in the United States. February is American Heart Month. Rural Health Inc. (RHI) encourages residents to talk to a healthcare provider to schedule a heart-healthy check if needed and to join them in preventing heart-related diseases.

According to the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) heart disease is the leading cause of death for women, men, and people of most racial and ethnic groups in the United States. In 2024, approximately 683,000 people in the U.S. died from heart disease; that is

roughly 1 in every 5 deaths.

While heart disease is a broad category, specific statistics show approximately 805,000 heart attacks occur yearly in the nation. Coronary artery disease, the most common type of heart disease, is caused by risk factors like high cholesterol, blood pressure, smoking, diabetes, and lack of exercise, and develops gradually, often without symptoms until a major event happens. It is estimated that 5%, or 1 in 20 adults aged 20 and older, have coronary artery disease. Other causes of heart disease include obesity, unhealthy diet, physical inactivity,



February is American Heart Month

Keeping your heart healthy is not a one-size-fits-all process. Schedule an appointment with a Rural Health, Inc. healthcare professional before starting any diet or exercise program.



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and excessive alcohol use.

“Keeping your heart healthy is not a one-size-fits-all process, that’s why it’s important to talk with a healthcare professional before starting any diet or exercise program,” says Shawnna Rhine,

RHI Director of Public Relations. “What works for someone else, may not work for you. Your and your provider will assess your overall health needs and, together, establish a plan just for you that includes diet, exercise, and managing stress.”

There are several ways you can participate in American Heart Month.

- Join Rural Health, Inc. in Wearing Red on February 6th, to show support for women’s heart health.
- Learn CPR: Take courses in Hands-Only CPR to save lives.

- Get Screened: Schedule regular check-ups for blood pressure, cholesterol, and other risk factors.

- Spread Awareness: Share information and use hashtags like #HeartMonth, #GoRed, and #MoveWithHeart.

To learn more about American Heart Month, visit heart.org/en/american-heart-month. To schedule your heart-healthy appointment

through Rural Health, Inc., call 618-833-4471 or visit ruralhealthinc.org for a clinic near you.

Rural Health, Inc. (RHI) is a not-for-profit organization serving Johnson, Massac, and Union counties in Illinois, designated by the federal government as a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC), whose mission is to provide quality services to all patients in need of healthcare while being committed to the overall health and well-being of the underserved.

###

Follow Rural Health Inc. on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and at www.ruralhealthinc.org

The impact of heart disease on women

Heart health is vital. Despite widespread recognition of the importance of a healthy heart, cardiovascular disease (CVD) is the leading cause of death around the world. CVD includes coronary artery disease and other issues affecting the heart or blood vessels. e.

Even though heart disease affects both men and women, it's often mistakenly seen as a condition that mostly affects men. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says that heart disease,

namely coronary artery disease, is the leading cause of death for women and those assigned female at birth. It occurs when plaque develops in the walls of the arteries and slows down the flow of blood supply to the heart and other parts of the body. Women are particularly at risk because, after menopause, hormone changes like a reduction in the production of estrogen can cause higher risk of coronary heart disease, especially in smaller blood vessels.

In addition to

hormonal changes after menopause, the risk factors for heart disease in women include:

- **Diabetes:** Women with diabetes are more likely to develop heart disease than men with diabetes. There's also an increased risk of silent heart attack since diabetes can change the way women perceive pain.

- **Mental health:** Emotional stress and depression can affect women's hearts more than men's, as depression may compromise a woman's ability to maintain a

healthy lifestyle.

- **Smoking:** Smoking is another risk factor for heart disease.

- **Inactivity:** A sedentary lifestyle increases heart disease risk.

- **Inflammatory diseases:** Individuals with arthritis, lupus and other inflammatory conditions may be at an elevated risk for heart disease.

Learning about the warning signs of heart attack and stroke can help women stay on top of their health. Here's what to look for, courtesy of

GoRedForWomen.org.

Heart attack

- Uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness, or pain in the center of your chest. It lasts more than a few minutes or goes away and comes back.
- Pain or discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw, or stomach.
- Shortness of breath with or without chest discomfort.

- Cold sweats, nausea or lightheadedness.
- Chest pain or discomfort.

Stroke

- Sudden numbness or weakness in the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body.

- Sudden confusion or trouble communicating.

- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination.

- Sudden severe headache with no known cause.

Women mindful of the risk factors of heart disease as well as the symptoms of heart attack and stroke may be better positioned to protect their long-term heart health.



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How STEM powers modern agriculture

The image of farmers clad in flannel shirts while livestock pull plows through the fields

may still be foremost on the minds of individuals asked to imagine farm life. But such images may

no longer reflect an industry increasingly governed by advanced technology.

Even small-

scale family farms have recognized the advantages of embracing technology to help

make their operations more efficient and successful. Manual plows and tractors largely have been replaced by fleets of autonomous machines and precision farming technology.

Experts agree that the evolution of modern farming is a case study in the application of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. STEM is helping to address the problem of global food security and widespread climate change. U.S. News & World Report says 27 percent of new high-skills jobs in agriculture will require a STEM education. There are many ways STEM is utilized within the agricultural sector.

farming based on observing, measuring and responding to within-field variability through crop management. Precision farming utilizes remote sensing from satellites and drones, sensors embedded in the soil or devices worn by livestock to provide real-time data. AI tools also are used to predict harvest yields and optimize fertilization and irrigation.

• Robotics: Automation and robotics fills a void created by human worker shortages. Agricultural engineers help design machinery or focus on the physical infrastructure of the farm. Engineers also are the minds behind innovative farming practices like vertical farming and controlled environment agriculture, which encompasses hydroponic and aeroponic systems.

• Genomics and biotechnology: Scientists can now identify specific traits in plant DNA that will allow for more drought-resistant crops or those better equipped to tolerate problems like downy mildew. Other traits may make plants more capable of thriving in saline soils. Soil science also enables farmers to learn more about the complex microbiome of the soil, which ultimately can help to maximize nutrient uptake.

• Mathematical analysis: Math is vital in the agricultural sector. Statistics, predictive modeling, accounting, and risk management, are types of mathematical analysis employed to forecast global food supplies and profits.

The link between STEM and agriculture is undeniable. STEM is an important driver of the industry and only stands to gain influence in the years to come.

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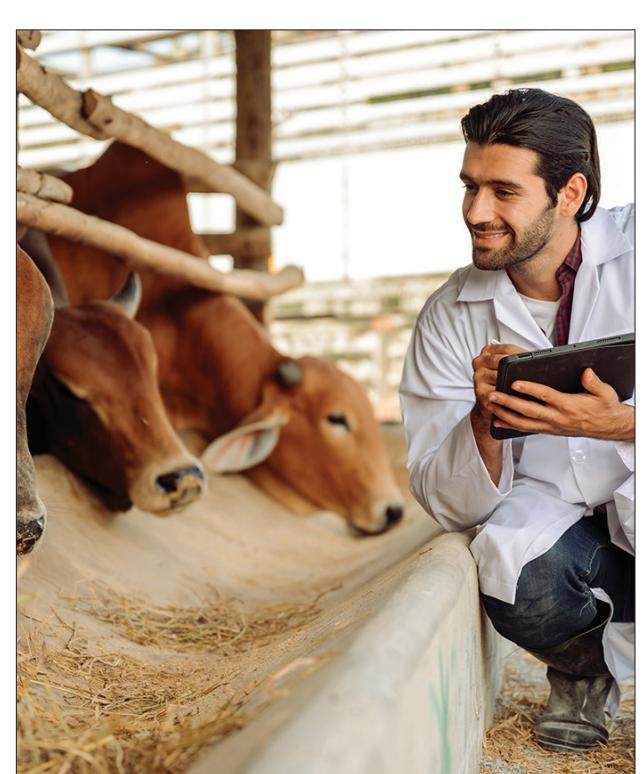
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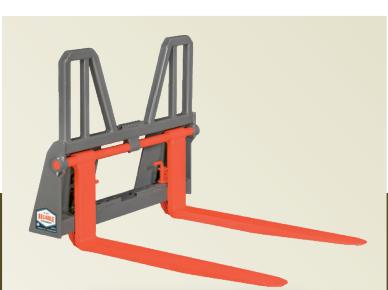
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what to know before a wedding gown shopping trip



Weddings mark a turning point from one stage in life to another. The significance of that transition is perhaps one reason why couples and their guests dress so nicely for a wedding ceremony and reception. Formal garb is a wedding tradition, and guests anxiously await seeing which type of gown a bride will wear. In western cultures, white wedding gowns have been the standard since the nineteenth century and are believed to symbolize purity and grace. In eastern cultures, wedding gowns often have been elaborate, colorful creations that have their own symbolic meanings unique to various areas of the

world.

Shopping for a wedding gown can spark mixed emotions. While it is exciting to try on some remarkable garments, there also is the pressure of knowing all eyes will be on you while wearing this couture creation. Narrowing down wedding gown prospects can take vision, time and patience. The following pointers can help when it comes time to visit bridal shops.

Make an appointment

Many bridal shops operate by appointment only. That's because the staff wants to devote complete attention to a client, and having people simply walk in from the street can draw their attention away and/or lead to long wait times. Identify the stores you want to visit, and then call to secure your time slot.

Narrow down styles

Think about what your personal style might be and how you want to look on your wedding day. If you're not sure about the vocabulary surrounding dress silhouettes, visit Pinterest or Instagram and save images of dresses that you love. Then you can show the sales staff what you are thinking instead of going in empty-handed.

Keep an open mind

Try on a few different styles even if you have a particular dress in mind. You never know if something might be a better fit for your body type or the scope and style of your wedding.

unless you give it a go.

Start the process early

Unlike off-the-rack clothing, most wedding shops will have to order your dress and have it shipped. Then comes a few weeks for alterations. KWH Bridal notes eight to 12 months before a wedding is a good time to choose and order a dress. Brides magazine says most made-to-order wedding gowns take about six to nine months to create. There also are three separate fittings to ensure the gown will fit like a glove.

Invite a handful of confidantes

It's best not to arrive at the shopping appointment with an entire entourage. Pick, at the most, four people whose opinions you trust; otherwise, it could be a case of too many cooks in the kitchen. As a bride-to-be you'll already be anxious, and you'll want soothing, supportive people with you.

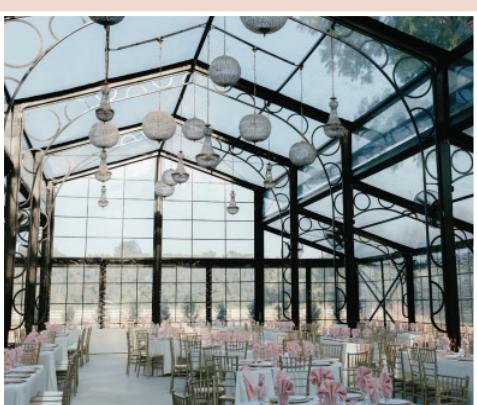
Plan your budget

Know well in advance what you can afford to spend. According to data from The Knot, wedding attire accounts for 7 percent of the average couple's budget. Most wedding gowns are in the range of \$2,000. Don't forget about additional costs, such as veil, shoes, alterations, undergarments, and any add-ons.

In addition to these tips, arrive to an appointment well-rested, fed and comfortable.

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Why it pays to trust a pro with wedding photography

User-friendly technology and greatly enhanced connectivity has changed the way people approach various tasks. The do-it-yourself home improvement trend is a testament to that shift, as homeowners now have access to professional grade tools and can easily take to social media for inspiration and instructions for renovations that were once the domain of experienced contractors.

Though it can be fun and budget-friendly to embrace a DIY approach in many settings, that strategy is not ideal for every situation, including the day couples tie the knot. A couple's wedding day is one to cherish forever, which is why it pays to rely on skilled professionals. That's particularly so with wedding photography, which will serve as the official record of a day filled with love and laughs. Modern technology may compel some couples to think they can go without the services of a professional photographer on their wedding day, but there are many reasons to trust this important job to an experienced pro.

- Photographers can get great shots no matter the conditions. There's a difference between snapping great shots of an idyllic setting on a smartphone and taking wedding day photographs couples will look back on for years to come. Experienced photographers have cameras capable of far more than those on a smartphone,



and these skilled professionals also possess the knowledge of how to get great shots in settings that might not be so conducive to photography. A dimly lit reception hall dance floor may prove challenging for untrained amateurs, but professional photographers know what to do to get great shots in such settings. Professionals also know how to utilize natural light to their advantage when taking shots outdoors.

- Photographers handle the details. Couples have enough on their plate when planning weddings. Taking on photography duties requires identifying the right photo locations, knowing when to take photos to maximize surroundings, ensuring bridal party members are all ready to go so photos can be taken within tight deadlines, and post-wedding detailing. That's a lot to take on, and it's work best left to professionals.

- Photographers free up time. Many newlyweds note their wedding day

- seemed to fly by and was over before they knew it. Such sentiments may be

even stronger when couples take on too much responsibility come the wedding day. A professional photographer will coordinate shots and timelines with couples prior to the big day and take over getting bridal party members where they need to be when they need to be there. That frees up time for couples to spend more time with each other and their guests come the day of the wedding, which in turn can make it feel as though the day didn't fly by.

- You get a professionally finished product. Amateur photographers

simply won't produce as stunning a finished product as professionals who take and touch up photos for a living. A wedding day photo album is a keepsake couples will look back on for years, so it's best to ensure its contents include photos taken and touched up by a skilled professional.

Couples can find ways to cut costs with their wedding budgets. But it's best to avoid cutting corners regarding photography, as there's no way to turn back the clock and get better shots if the efforts of amateurs fall short of expectations.

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A beginner's guide to engagement ring shopping



wide will tie the knot this year. Weddings join two lives together and often culminate with a lavish party that sees extended family and friends gather around tables enhanced by floral arrangements and delicious food. But long before guests can choose chicken or beef or newlyweds mail the final thank you note, couples must first take the initial step on the road to the wedding. That means getting engaged. Traditionally, engagements involve a sparkling gem that symbolizes love, fidelity and a whirlwind series of months poring over every possible wedding detail.

Shopping for

an engagement ring is a unique experience. A ring requires a significant financial investment and serves as a lifelong symbol of commitment to another person. To navigate this sparkling world of diamonds and settings, shoppers can focus on key areas, notably budget, gem classification and finding a reputable jeweler.

Establish an engagement ring budget

Those ready to pop the question need not adhere to the outdated "three months' salary" rule when selecting an engagement ring. Instead, the ring should be chosen based on financial realism and means. The Knot's 2024 Jewelry & Engagement

Study indicates the average cost of an engagement ring in the United States comes in at approximately \$5,200. However, many couples spend less, showing that a marriage need not start on shaky financial footing due to the cost of a ring. If cost is a factor, lab-grown diamonds often cost 50 percent or more less than natural diamonds, yet they are chemically and physically identical to mined diamonds. One also can consider another gemstone, particularly if diamonds are beyond a budget or seem too traditional.

Know the four Cs

Diamond shopping involves mastering the Four Cs, which refers to Cut, Color, Clarity, and Carat Weight. A person should prioritize the cut above all else, and try to find a diamond in budget that has a cut that

brings out the gem's brilliance and fire. It can be challenging to distinguish a diamond's color with the naked eye. Very often a near-colorless G-J diamond can look identical to a colorless one (Grade D). Color grades increase up to Z, with the diamond being more yellow/brown as the grading goes on. Clarity refers to tiny flaws (inclusions) in the diamond. A diamond that is Very Slightly Included will have inclusions not visible without magnification, making them a safe bet for saving money over those without any inclusions at all. Carat weight refers to the diamond's weight and not its size. Diamonds just shy of the full- or half-carat mark tend to be less expensive but still look impressive.

Choose a reputable seller

It's best to choose a gem that has been graded by an independent laboratory like the Gemological Institute of America. Customers also should select a jeweler they trust, which may require some research and word-of-mouth recommendations. A knowledgeable jeweler also can make suggestions on setting and gem shape. Upon purchasing the engagement ring, one also might consider having it independently appraised for further purchase protection.

An engagement ring purchase requires careful consideration and a significant investment. But once the stress of purchase wears away, the lasting memories of the engagement and wedding to come will make everything well worth it.

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Rotisserie Chicken Enchiladas

INGREDIENTS:

- 8-12 Tortillas
- 3/4 Cup of Queso
- 1/4 Cup of Salsa
- 2 TBS Cilantro
- 1 Cup of Shredded Cheese
- 2 Cups of Rotisserie Chicken
- 1 Can of Green Chiles
- 1/2 Cup of Chicken Broth

INSTRUCTIONS:

- Take off meat from rotisserie and dice.
- Place 1/4 C chicken and 2 TBS shredded cheese into a tortilla and roll up. Place seam down into a shallow greased baking dish.
- Continue until baking dish is full.
- On stove top, combine queso, can of green chiles, and 1/4 C chicken stock.
- Mix and heat on low heat until thin.
- After 5 minutes of heating, pour over top of tortillas.
- Bake at 350 for 30 minutes. Garnish with cilantro and serve.



Photos by Lecia Verwers

Chicken Casserole

INGREDIENTS:

- Small Fryer Chicken, save broth
- 1 Onion, chopped
- 1 Green Pepper, chopped
- 1 c. Uncooked Rice
- 2 c. Broth
- 1 can Cream of Celery Soup

INSTRUCTIONS:

- Boil a small fryer until tender. Reserve broth; bone chicken
- Saute onion & green pepper
- Mix chopped chicken, onion, pepper, rice, broth and cream of celery soup in a casserole dish. Bake at 350 degrees for 1 to 1.5 hours. Serves 6



Strawberry Valentine's Day Chex Mix

INGREDIENTS

- 4-6 cups Rice Chex cereal
- 1 8-oz bag Strawberry Candy Melts OR 1 bag of white chocolate baking chips {12 oz}
- AND 1 box of Strawberry Creme Jell-O Pudding** {pudding, NOT gelatin!}



Valentines M&M's and/or Sprinkles

INSTRUCTIONS

- Measure out the Chex cereal into a large bowl. Note: if you're using the Strawberry Candy Melts, you'll use 4 cups of cereal. If you're using the white chocolate chips + pudding mix, you'll use 6 cups of cereal.
- Pour the chocolate into a small glass dish. Add in 1/2 tsp of shortening, if desired, to help the chocolate coat the cereal more easily.
- Microwave for 1 minute 20 seconds. Let sit in the microwave for 3 minutes. Remove and gently stir. If once stirred the chocolate looks smooth, it's done. If not, return to the microwave in 15 second increments, letting it sit for 2-3 minutes each time, until melted and smooth.
- If you used White Chocolate Chips + Pudding Mix: Add in 4 TBSP of the strawberry cream pudding into the white chocolate and stir gently until smooth. Add in 2 drops of red food coloring, if desired.
- Pour the chocolate mixture over the Chex cereal and then stir gently to coat.
- Transfer the cereal mixture to a large piece of wax paper. Sprinkle with M&M's and Valentine's colored sprinkles, if desired.
- Let cool to set. Break into pieces and then store in an airtight container to save. Candy can be made up to 3-4 days ahead if desired. It saves really well!

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