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Saying "I do" to a green wedding

By Tom Watson
Special to The Seattle Times

For a sterling example of the contradictions of modern environmentalism, look no further than the green-wedding movement.

Virtually nonexistent 10 years ago, green weddings have become trendy and almost mainstream. Dozens upon dozens of green-wedding Web sites, blogs, articles and books have appeared, with many pitching products and services.

All these efforts to make weddings greener have definitely raised awareness and produced tangible results. Many betrothed couples now go to great lengths to reduce waste, lessen transportation impacts and use organic or local food and flowers at the big event.

Some critics take a cynical view, however, saying that all the green trimmings have only become more fodder for what's been called "the wedding industrial complex." Similar to



DAMIEN JONES

Local food and flowers were emphasized at the Blains' reception dinner.

the green-products trend in general, green weddings sometimes seem like just an insidious way to make us feel better about all our consumption.

A green wedding can be much more than that. But with all the hype, how do you separate the roses from the thorns?

Eco-minefield

The greenest wedding, of course, would be a tiny, intimate affair, with no reception. But for many couples the launching of their marriage is a once-in-a-lifetime occasion meant to be celebrated with lots of friends and family. The problem is, if you want the type of traditional big bash attended by 100 or more guests, that puts you in a defensive position right away from an environmental standpoint.

Soon-to-be brides — and let's admit it, they usually do the heavy lifting when it comes to wedding planning — may face challenges when trying to make a green wedding a reality. They would like to make the event less wasteful and more natural, but they don't want to come across as tacky or worse yet, a hypocrite. And they certainly don't want to detract from the wedding or alienate their family, their fiancé's relatives or other guests.

Green nuptials on Vashon



DAMIEN JONES

Having a green wedding "was a big part of our belief system as a couple," says Libbe Blain, listening to wedding toasts with her husband, Ben.



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The Blains purchased a variety of plates at Goodwill for their reception dinner, which were then donated to Sustainable Vashon's "No-Trash Bash" program.

Green-wedding resources

Green your wedding: www.treehugger.com/files/2007/04/how-to-green-your-wedding.php

Libbe and Ben Blain's wedding: www.ewedding.com/sites/libben/

Wedding offset calculator: www.carbonfund.org/site/pages/individuals/category/Weddings

The first crucial ingredient for a green wedding is that both the bride and groom consider it a priority.

West Seattle resident Libbe Blain (formerly Jones) said that when she married her husband, Ben Blain, on July 26, having a green wedding "was a big part of our belief system as a couple. It was really tied into the theme of our ceremony."

The couple held their 175-guest wedding reception on Vashon Island. They emphasized local food, flowers, products and vendors, using many resources available on the island.

The mostly locally grown or organic menu for the reception dinner featured Vashon Island chickens. Flowers — about 40 vases and 10 buckets worth for decorating and the tables — were all grown within about 15 miles, including hydrangeas from the yard of Blain's mother. Her vintage ring was purchased used, and her wedding dress was locally made from natural silk.

In their most innovative green strategy, they bought a variety of used dishes at Goodwill stores for the reception dinner. Blain said their guests loved the "uniformly eclectic" dishes. Afterward, they donated them to Sustainable Vashon's "No-Trash Bash" program that loans out durable dishes for island parties.

And at a pre-wedding barbecue for 80 people at Lincoln Park in West Seattle, they used only compostable items, including plates, bowls and utensils. Blain said she had first contacted Cedar Grove Composting to make sure the items that they chose were approved for collection with food scraps and yard waste.

Their wedding Web site, which is still up, gives extensive background on the green event plans, and also provides information to help make transportation for guests as efficient as possible.

After long deliberation, the Blains purchased a wedding carbon offset just two weeks beforehand from Carbonfund.org, a Maryland-based nonprofit. Using Carbonfund's wedding calculator, they estimated they would generate about 22 tons of carbon dioxide, including plane flights, car trips and hotel stays of their guests. The \$220 dollars they paid to offset that CO₂ helps support Carbonfund's energy and reforestation projects.

That offset and the organic, locally grown food were probably the only main features of their green wedding that cost more than a normal wedding, Blain observed.

Their guests fully embraced the green concept, Blain said, and she was especially touched that so many of

the gifts they received reflected that theme. Those gifts, some of which even came in eco-friendly packaging, included green products and donations to nonprofits.

"I'm so appreciative of that," she said. "They did it because they care about us and what we believe in."

Popping the question

To answer the big question — "How green can our wedding be?" — a couple needs to be strategic. An eco-wedding should aim to purchase as few new products as possible, since overconsumption may just be "the great North American environmental problem," as author Bill McKibben says. And transportation and food production have huge global-warming impacts, so any green wedding should address those areas in some fashion.

As the Blains found out, fortunately you can now choose from a bountiful bouquet of options to find what fits your needs best as you turn your white wedding to green.

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