

Custom diamonds help add shimmer

A diamond may be forever, but the popularity of certain settings and cuts comes and goes.

The wise groom doesn't shop for his bride's ring without her — unless he knows exactly what she'll like. And the wise bridal couple knows what questions to ask when shopping for rings.

The average couple spends about an hour looking at stones and settings and learning how to purchase a diamond, said Michael Mazzone, co-owner of Orin Jewelers, Garden City, Northville and Brighton.

"Today, our customers are wise consumers. They want to know exactly what they're buying," said Mazzone, who encourages his customers to stay in a price range that's comfortable for them.

"The diamond is still the preferred stone, but we're seeing more and more couples choosing a birthstone or another precious stone like a ruby or emerald to surround it," Mazzone said.

Because couples are waiting longer to marry (age 22 to 28), he said, they're willing to spend more on wedding sets.

Jewelers like Mazzone say beware of prices that seem too good to be true. There's a wide variety in quality among stones that superficially seem the same. Your best bet: Choose a reputable jeweler who's a member of the American Gem Society or a similar organization. Ask the jeweler for certification — your written proof of a diamond's quality.

Diamonds sold at Orin's are pregraded by registered jewelers (trained by the Gemological Institute of America) and a certified appraiser. The traditional brilliant (round) cut is by no means the only one. Other shapes may look better on the bride's hand. Certain cuts may even enhance the setting you choose. Color, graded by letter, varies from clear (white) to shades of yellow; the whiter the diamond, the higher its value.

Carat is the weight of the stone.

CARATS

Larger stones are more expensive than small ones, unless, of course, they're flawed or yellow. Gold should be 14 to 18 karat to be of good quality; colors range from yellow and white to rose. Textures include matte, polished, hammered and satin.

There's a trend toward sculptural settings and creatively cut stones, said Gary Astrein, co-owner of Astrein's Jewelers, Birmingham.

Astrein, who sells only certified stones, said many couples like "fancy" stones like the brilliant cut triangular-shaped diamond and the modified emerald cut that has the brilliance of a round stone.

Many couples also like the newer, contemporary settings: the channel setting holds stones without prongs; stones in an invisible setting are "locked" together like tongue-in-groove flooring.

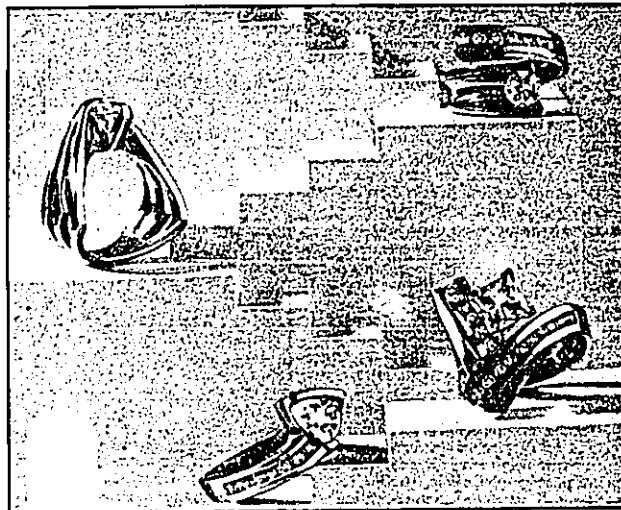
The most popular bands are works of art.

Astrein and Mazzone both said many couples like yellow gold bands combined with platinum or white gold. Tiny stones can be embedded in the band; textures sometimes vary within a single ring.

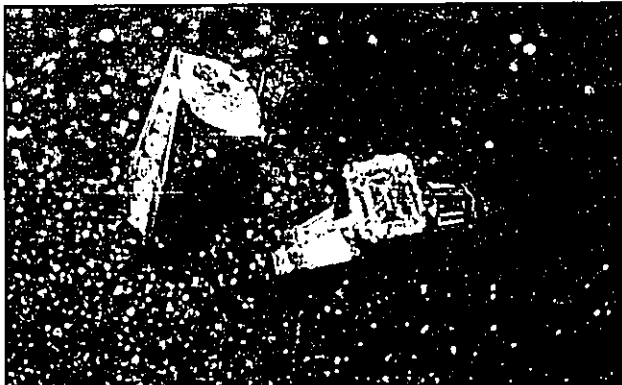
Both jewelers said textured bands with gothic, Greek and other ethnic engravings are popular. Other possibilities include tri-colored gold, interlocking designs and styles that reflect a shared heritage (such as matching Claddagh rings for an Irish couple).

Identical wedding rings aren't necessary, but if you buy different rings, talk about it beforehand, the jewelers recommend.

Copley News Service contributed to this report.



Contemporary look: Creativity for the '90s couple . . . Top (from left) the pear-shaped diamond; the brilliant cut stone. Bottom (from left) the triangular cut diamond; the princess cut stone. The smaller accent stones are channel set (placed in a groove without prongs). At Astrein's Jewelers, Birmingham.



Modern to classic: This contemporary, channel set marquis diamond is flanked by smaller stones (1.22 carats total weight). The traditional emerald cut is accented with baguettes (1.69 carat total weight). At Orin Jewelers, Garden City, Northville, Brighton.



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