



Say nay to black, and go floral instead.

THE BEST WAYS TO WEAR SPRING LOOKS

This season's fashion focuses on feeling pretty and flirty. Try these styles...and learn how to find them for less. *by hillary quinn*

Spring is finally here—and with it, some of the best clothes we've seen in a long time: very feminine dresses,

lively prints, sheer fabrics, and accessories done up in every shade of the rainbow. Here are the easiest ways to

work colorful pieces into your wardrobe, hunt down bargains, and use tricks to flatter your figure.

A date dress that's not little & not black!

This year's body-grazing styles offer a welcome change from the straight sheaths of the recent past. "Dresses are whimsical, charming, and '50s-inspired—with grace and movement," says Shari Hershon, senior vice president for design development at Ann Taylor Loft. Pay attention to:

- * **Bust-enhancing tops, notice-me waists, and A-line skirts** The trendiest shapes celebrate your curves.
- * **Filmy chiffon** Pick florals splashed with minty green, buttercup yellow, dusky blue.
- * **Hawaiian graphics** Nothing subtle about these exotic prints, which showcase hibiscus, palms, and tropical blooms.

- * **Moderate hemlines** They run from just above the knee to just below it, occasionally with a fluttering handkerchief edge.
 - * **Bare necklines** You'll note dipping into the décolletage—accompanied by spaghetti straps or halter tops. Work in a conservative office? Top the dress with a cardigan—ribbon-trimmed versions are pretty.
 - * **Bold-colored silks and satins** Also go for solid brights in magenta, orange, lime.
- Where to find? We suggest:** Try these online sources for dresses: edressme.com (private-collection labels), littleblackdressdirect.com (a British-based site with flair), and ardenb.com (ultrafeminine styles).

MUST-HAVE ACCESSORIES

Only splurging on a few things? These deliver the most pizzazz. **A brightly colored, classic bag** Get a copycat of the famous Hermès Birkin—a structured, leather-handle tote with a turn-lock clasp—at anyknockoff.com. Or, on the same site, pick the Jelly-style Kelly, a \$69 PVC version. **A ribbon belt** Wear this grosgrain waist cincher with simple khakis, jeans, or white capris or shorts (eyeoftheneedleinc.com). **Ballet flats** From cap-toe models to squared-off pairs with a pretty bow (aerosoles.com, spiegel.com), these are great for on-the-go moms who want to look polished, says Kim Johnson Gross of the Chic Simple book series.





The freshest way to look feminine

Choose these flirty pieces: **Trench coats** Khaki is queen, but baby blue and pink are beautiful. **Boat-neck tops**, great with three-quarter-length sleeves. **Short, shapely jackets** done in nubby pastel tweeds. **Ankle-length jeans**, mixed with Audrey Hepburn-style flats. **Colorful moccasins, loafers** add a flash of color. **Floral jewelry** Pick rose-beaded chokers or chunky cocktail rings. **Oversize watch faces**, especially fresh with colorful bands. **Bulky bangles** The bigger, the better. **Anything gold** Tees, vests, and sandals look great gilded.

Be dazzling, even in a drizzle.

4 ways to dress slimmer this season

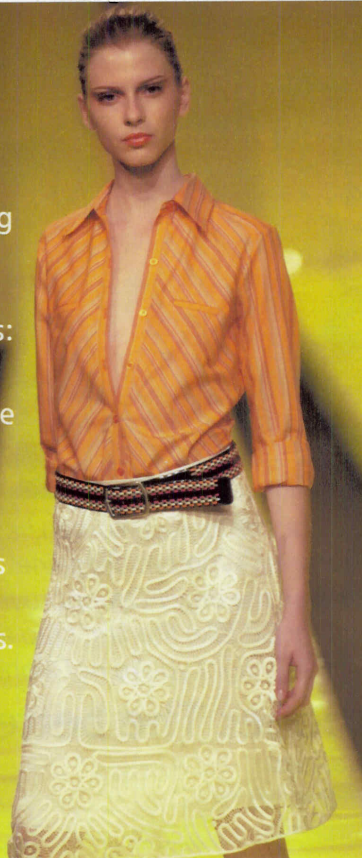
Try these maneuvers. **1** Place an item of interest at an area you want to show off (and away from an area you want to play down). Example: A pretty pin at your neck pulls attention away from larger hips. **2** Trade a giant shoulder bag (that adds bulk) for a smaller tote. **3** Wear stockings with subtle vertical stripes to create the illusion of height. **4** If you're bigger on the bottom, choose a patterned top and keep pants solid; do the opposite if your lower half is lean.



The pattern now: to mix, not match

The new flowers, stripes, and tropical graphics liven up a spring wardrobe. "But it takes skill to mix patterns," says Kim Johnson Gross. Here, a few do's and don'ts:

- Team a large pattern with a small pattern—but *only* within the same color family so they have a common denominator.
- Avoid merging two small patterns or two large patterns. Busy blooms rarely harmonize—unless they're designed and sold as coordinates.
- It's safer to mix textures (such as a cotton top with a lace skirt) rather than patterns.



How to hunt down a bargain

no need to spend much on trendy one-season pieces, says Kim Johnson Gross. Score a deal in these secret ways. **Hit a department store's teen area for bags.** Also: Target offers \$27 leather handbags by Isaac Mizrahi. **Create your own knockoffs.** Case in point: satin-ribbon accessories. Buy ribbon and intertwine it with a strand of pearls. **Eye an import store.** Emporiums (such as pearlriver.com, siamese-dream.com) specialize in low-priced Asian goods, such as brocade jackets, nylon carryalls, and bamboo bags. **Log on to affordable websites** such as chadwicks.com, stylebug.com (for cute cocktail dresses), newport-news.com, and bluefly.com. Sign up for e-mail sales at jcrew.com and gap.com.