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MSN Shopping Buyer's Guide

Gemstones

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Some of the most spectacular colors found in nature come from an unlikely source. Bits of dull rock, when pulled from the earth, polished and cut, become dazzling gems of unparalleled sparkle and value. If you're in the market for these sensational stones, it's good to have a background in the basics.

Popular Colored Gemstones

- **Amethyst** – Found in both South America and several African nations, this immensely popular gem's regal hue can range from dark, true purple to a translucent lilac. It's a member of the colorful quartz family and has been a historical favorite of royalty and religious leaders, both East and West. February babies call this their birthstone.
- **Aquamarine** – One of the more expensive gems on the list is mined in Africa and Sri Lanka, but the best quality specimens hail from Brazil. As its name makes clear, its color is ocean-like, on a spectrum from pale and watery, to deep and saturated, blue. It's cousin to another beryl mineral, the emerald, and is claimed by those born in March.
- **Citrine** – This solid sunshine most often begins life as an amethyst or smoky quartz, and is then heat-treated to affect a color change that spans the spectrum between blanched lemon to dark orange and fiery red. (It's quite rare to find the stone in its "true," untreated, form.) This quartz gem is November's birthstone.
- **Emerald** – A truly precious rock, commanding top dollar when found in vivid, undiluted green, it's just as gorgeous in either darker or lighter variations of that shade. (And inclusions won't be a shock, as they're common.) This most valuable of all beryls can be found in many traditionally gem-rich countries, but the best come from Columbia, while the bulk of them are Brazilian. Give May babies this beauty.
- **Garnet** – Small gatherings of these were used in antiquity to mimic pomegranate seeds, and no wonder, as they're usually found in a juicy dark red. But this versatile gem, mined on most continents, can also be green, gold, brown and pink. Varieties include the beloved "rhodolite," and the more expensive "tsavorite." This is January's birthstone.
- **Opal** – The interplay of blue, green, yellow and pink sets this stone apart. It seems to be lit from within, and has been mesmerizing humanity for centuries. While often found in white Australian varieties, other areas of the globe also yield exotic variants like "fire," "resin," and "black." You October-born call it your own.
- **Peridot** – There's an abundance of green minerals, and this is one of the most beautiful. That vibrant green can range from glassy yellow-tinged shades to a deep moss. A part of the olivine family, it's famously extracted from Arizona soil, but can also be found in locales as diverse as Germany and Hawaii. August birthdates celebrate with this stone.
- **Ruby** – It's the scarlet temptress of the jewelry world, and the rarest of all colored stones. Celebrated throughout history as a gem fit for royalty, it's a variety of the mineral corundum and sapphire's sister. The most valued shade in the dark pink to red spectrum is a brilliant rich crimson, and, like emeralds, inclusions are common but not fatal. It's also the birthstone for red-hot July.
- **Topaz** – The colors radiating from this fluorine aluminum silicate range from the familiar golden, to popular blue, rare red and pink, and even a "mystic" version that dazzles with its interplay of green and purple. Some stones originate in the U.S., but the bulk of them are from that generous rock bonanza, Brazil. December kids have dibs on this one.
- **Sapphire** – As blue as the Aegean Sea, and while that cerulean hue is certainly the most sought after, there are other breathtaking pigments to swoon over. Yellow, green, pink, even a crystal

clear variety that rivals the diamond. This corundum comes from all over the world to charm us, and those born in September are lucky enough to claim it as their birthstone.

Key Features & How to Choose Your Gemstones

- **Carat** – This is the weight of the stone, and an important measurement, but check the millimeter size as well before you buy. Gemstones have varying densities. For example, a four-carat sapphire is approximately the same size stone as a two and a half-carat emerald. And some stones are found in such high-carat-weight abundance, they may be more affordable if you want to sport some serious bling. You'll be hard-pressed to find large, quality rubies, but a fat blue topaz or substantial amethyst shouldn't be too expensive.
- **Cut** – The expert shaping of a colored gemstone will accentuate hue, clarity, and maximize its beauty. This feature isn't quite as important in the refining process as it is with diamonds, but master cutters still work their magic ensuring that crown facets are elegant and symmetrical, minimizing any inclusions in the stone, coaxing out maximum color, and releasing the fire of the gem. Well-cut sparklers should be brilliant, with no visible scores or scrapes, and show an even consistency of hue throughout.
- **Color** – Generally, the more "pure" a gemstone's hue is, the more valuable. For example, look for velvety blue sapphires with very little hint of green, and the best rubies should be a vivid red, without much orange or purple visible. A good guide is the saturation of the stone. There should be little gray or brown in the color, and even lighter stones like aquamarine, peridot and citrine should shout their shades and not appear too pale or washed out. That said, a too-dark stone can be lifeless. Medium tones provide the truest hue.
- **Clarity** – Diamonds containing internal flaws, or "inclusions," are severely downgraded in desirability. Not so with colored gems. Obviously, the ideal is a stone free of these small marks, but there's a high price put on perfection, especially when it comes to rubies, sapphires and emeralds. These "precious" gems frequently contain inclusions that aren't considered a hindrance to their overall beauty. If you want a stone that's clean to the naked eye, consider the "semi-precious" category, especially aquamarine, citrine and peridot. Be careful of any surface cracks, though, as these can lead to breakage.
- **Enhancements** – When we think of a treated stone, we may consider it something of a cheat. The truth is, the vast majority of colored gems go through an enhancement process that does not diminish their natural beauty, or true worth. Heat-treating, which significantly enhances color, is the most common procedure and has a long historical precedent. Other practices include oil and resin applications to fill tiny cracks (this is especially common with rubies and emeralds), and, to a lesser extent, diffusion treatments that boost the surface color of the stone.
- **Mohs' Scale** – Visual beauty is paramount when buying jewelry, but you should know how tough your baubles are as well. Gemstones are graded on a mineral hardness scale devised by Friedrich Mohs almost 200 years ago. Sapphires and rubies are the hardest, scoring a 9 on the 1-to-10 scale, only surpassed by the mighty diamond. Topaz follows at 8, and emeralds are a touch softer. Aquamarine, amethyst, garnet, peridot and citrine are all in the area of 6.5 to 8 and can be worn with few worries, while opals, at 5.5 are the softest and should be treated quite gently.

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