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No shortage of style

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"Petite: having a small, trim figure; a clothing size for women."

If you heed Webster's Dictionary, you probably pass by the petite department of your favorite department store, wistfully eyeing that pretty blouse or pencil skirt, because if you're not a size 2, you can't wear petites, right?

Wrong, according to Kim Williams Dahlman, a petite fashion specialist and an expert on dressing petite women.

"I always tell people, it's a measure from head to toe, not from left to right," she said.

Petite fashions are designed for women 5-foot-4 and under and are most often available in sizes 0-14.

"Most petite departments will carry a good range of styles in sizes 2-14," she said.

Williams Dahlman is the author of "The Petite Handbook," a matter-of-fact guide to shopping for a petite frame. "I wouldn't (shop petites) if you're a 16. That would be a plus size."

"There is a huge need for education (about petite fashions)," she said. "That's why I wrote the book."

Williams Dahlman's background is in retail fashion merchandising. She has worked as a petite buyer for department stores for more than 20 years, selecting and purchasing clothing from manufacturers for companies such as Allied Department Stores. She also has worked as a corporate petite buyer for the southern chain Belk Stores Services and served as director of sales for Susan Bristol Petites.

"I've been in the business for so long and I have people who will come up to me and say, but I'm not petite. And I'll say, 'How tall are you? What size are you?' And they are petite. Again, you may have someone who is skinny, at 5-foot-6 or 5-foot-7, and you'll say 'Oh, you're so petite,' but technically, they are not petite."

In addition to the retail experience, Williams Dahlman, who lives in a suburb of Orlando, Fla., comes by her petite expertise the hard way.

"First of all, I am one. I've been a petite customer all my life. I knew the fashion challenges. I was always the shortest kid in class," she said.

The book, initially published in 2004 and now in its second printing, features a Top 10 Tips list. She had the book spiral-bound for ease of use and at 4-by-6-inches, it's the perfect size to tuck in your purse and take along on a shopping trip.

"It's my synopsis of what you need to know. In the fashion industry, there are not a lot of books out there for petite women," she said. "The few that there are, you have to sit and read like a textbook. You can read mine cover-to-cover in 30 minutes."

Through her business, Fashion Marketing Services, Williams Dahlman travels around the country sharing her knowledge at special events and fashion shows for department stores.

"I realized there was a need for education in the petite field," she said. "This happened to coincide with a department store trend to spend money on special events."

If you realize you fit the profile and you're ready to shop the petite department, Williams Dahlman has a few suggestions.

"Realize that you're going to get a better fit in the petite department if you fall into this category," she said. "Most important is that once you start knowing what to look for and how to put it together, it's going to click."

She also offers a few simple rules for petite customers.

The first Dahlman directive is to shop for silhouettes with strong vertical lines.

"Vertical lines will draw the eye in an up and down motion and will have an elongated effect," she said.

This includes not just stripes and patterns, but anything with a zip front, button front and seaming.

"(By) something vertical, (I mean) even something like the V-line of a jacket or a necklace. That's No. 1," she said.

Another tip involves the use of color.

"There's a lot you can do with color to create an optical illusion. Monochromatic will always make you look taller."

Using different shades of the same color also works well, she said.

"It doesn't have to be matchy-matchy, but shades of the same color or the same tone of colors, meaning all neutrals. You can play with that a little bit."

If you tire of all one color, try applying the same strategy, but punching it up a bit.

"When you are doing a three-piece outfit, match the outer pieces, such as the jacket and bottom or match your inner pieces, like a black top and black bottom with a purple jacket. If you paint those color lines, your body is definitely going to appear longer and give you a better look."