

Software to Consider

Mostly free

Free is Nice!

Downloading free software and you find: "Free", "Free to Try", "Free to Download", "A one year free license" "Adware", "Nagware", and on and on. Some free software is quite good; well supported and a pleasure to use. If free software does not meet these criteria then I go with the not-free flavor.

Handy Utilities

Belarc Advisor (whats in your computer?), Ccleaner (highly recommended), SyncBack (backup folders), DoubleKiller (find duplicate files), 7-Zip (extracts zip files), RoboForm (remembers your passwords and fills forms, if you don't pay up it reverts to a less capable free version).

Protect your Computer

Security software -- what a mess! A basic rule is don't get carried away -- more is not necessarily better. For example if both the Windows XP firewall and a "better" one you've installed (ZoneAlarm maybe) are both active, they may not get along.

I upgraded from the AVG Anti-Virus Free Edition to the full (not free) AVG Internet Security Suite. (Fry's had a rebate offer I couldn't refuse). Since I image my C: drive to an external hard drive I'm not that concerned about defending against malware. But for this essay I found nice things said about:

Anti virus: AVG Anti-Virus Free Edition, Avast Home Edition and AntiVir Personal Edition.

Firewalls: Microsoft Windows Defender, ZoneAlarm and Comodo Firewall Pro.

Spyware/malware tools: Ad-Aware SE Personal Edition and Spybot Search and Destroy, (Roger has concerns about both of these).

Image the Hard Drive

Imaging is the ultimate backup. After disaster strikes an exact byte-by-byte copy of a hard disc/partition can be restored. If you had remembered to image the drive first, that is!

There are two scenarios. Run the imaging software from an installed program, then run the same program to restore the image. All imaging programs, including the free program (that I haven't tried) Drive Image XML, will do this.

But what to do if your computer no longer runs -- it doesn't even boot up? Then you need to run the restore program from a CD that will boot up, so-called bare metal restore procedure. Roger has prepared a CD that will do this. I use the not-free program Acronis True Image. There is a free program, that I have not tried, RSJ HD Image that promises to do a bare metal restore.

Read and Create PDFs

The free Adobe Acrobat Reader is the standard, but I recommend Foxit Reader instead. Foxit is leaner, faster and cool. With Foxit you can add comments to a PDF file.

Create PDF files with a "printer" that creates PDF files from any Windows print dialog. I use the Open Source program PDFCreator, but both CutePDF and novaPDF are well thought of.

Personal Information Manager (PIM)

The "standard" is Windows Outlook, part of the Windows Office Suite (not free). In addition to the usual PIM capabilities, Outlook is an e-mail client and features many web capabilities.

My calendar program is Rainlendar which is free. It's easy to use. It sits on the desktop and keeps appointments and to-do lists for me.

Treepad Lite creates free form databases organized like the Windows Explorer folder tree. I use it for almost everything. For example in my Personal Treepad database I have a folder labeled Health and under that are Doctor visits, Medications, and the like. In the Medications folder are sub-folders labeled with my prescriptions. If I read something on-line about a drug I use, I may copy the information to the clipboard and paste it in the appropriate folder. Everything about that item is in one place where I can find it.

My rule is: avoid filing scraps of paper with information I may need or may want to refer to.

Word Processors and Office Suites

I use Open Office for word processing, spread sheets and preparing Powerpoint presentations. The saved files are compatible with Microsoft Office files (maybe not Office 2007).

If word processing is all you need then I recommend AbiWord. It does all the important things Microsoft Word does without the confusing bloatware features. Can read/save Word DOC files.

Picture Viewers, Editors & Organizers

My favorite for many years has been Irfanview, still a worthwhile program. Then that was replaced with Faststone Image Viewer which in turn has been replaced with XnView. XnView allows me to organize my pictures the way I like to see it done.

You may decide you like Picasa or possibly the viewer/organizer in Photoshop Elements. The Vista operating system has a feature called Windows Photo Gallery which does almost everything. It transfers pictures from your camera, renames, resizes, organizes and edits them. A better Picasa?

You can have this capability on WindowsXP by downloading and installing the free Microsoft Live Photo Gallery. It does a nice job on panoramas by the way.

Graphics Editors

The standard is Adobe Photoshop; designed for professionals and definitely not suitable for us ordinary mortals. Most other graphics programs are Photoshop wannabes.

The program I use is Adobe Photoshop Elements. It lists for \$100 but can be had for \$55 from Amazon with the easily obtained rebate.

Free Graphics Editors -- alternatives to Photoshop Elements

Paint.net. An image editing program that began life as an update of Microsoft Paint and grew (and is still growing) into a full fledged image editing program that does almost everything the expensive stuff from Adobe can do. As is common with many free programs the help files are minimal.

GIMP & GIMPshop. GIMP is an Open Source graphics program almost as full-featured as Photoshop. It's well documented, but I find some aspects difficult to understand and not pleasurable to use, so I am reluctant to recommend it. GIMPshop is a version of GIMP emulating Photoshop.

PhotoFiltre. A French contender with some nice features; definitely worth a look.

Thanks to Roger Thornburn for many useful comments.