

LOCK DOWN Windows XP

LEARN HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF ITS BUILT-IN PRIVACY AND SECURITY FEATURES. BY RUSSELL SHAW

The information stored inside your PC can reveal a lot about you: Your financial situation, your family and personal relationships, your hobbies, your shopping preferences.... Now, imagine a stranger poking around your hard drive, seeing all this and learning all about you. Kinda gives you the willies, doesn't it?

Fortunately, Microsoft has built a number of privacy and security features into Windows

XP that help prevent this kind of intrusion. But you need to know how they work and how to activate them before you can take full advantage of the protection they have to offer. We'll show you how.

As you might know, Windows XP is available in two different versions: XP Home Edition and XP Professional Edition. The Professional edition offers stronger security, but the Home edition is no lightweight, as you'll soon discover.

Setting Up Accounts

The first step in boosting the privacy capabilities of Windows XP is to establish user accounts for each person you plan to grant access to your computer. This not only gives you the power to limit who has access to which files stored on your computer, but it gives each user the power to customize the PC to their own preferences.

If you want to prevent your kids from accessing your financial records, for example, but still let them use your personal-finance software to manage their own budget, you can. And if you want your desktop background to be a group photo of Spinal Tap, but your son or daughter prefers a portrait of Usher, you each can have your own way.

For each user account, Windows XP will keep track of preferences such as favorite Websites, default font size and type, desktop wallpaper, screensaver, and more. You, as system administrator, can grant—or deny—access to any folder or file. What's more, each account holder will have their own My Documents folder for storing word-processing documents, spreadsheets, photos, and other types of files.

Add password protection for each user account, and no one else will be able to access anyone else's files unless those folders are labeled "shared"



→ With Windows XP's User Accounts feature, each person using the computer can customize it to their own preferences.

resources. If you *don't* create a password for each user account, anyone with access to your PC will be able to see anyone else's files—even those stored in private folders—by logging in using that user's name.

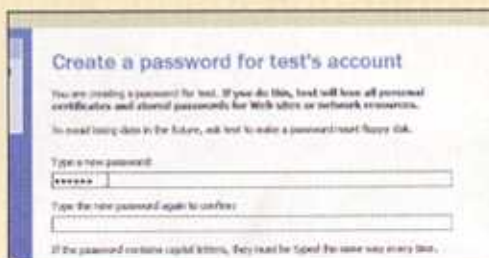
HIDING FILES

To add password safeguards, you will first need to create a user account of your own. Here's how:

- 1 Click on the Start menu.
- 2 Click on Control Panel.
- 3 Click on User Accounts.
- 4 Under the heading that reads "Pick a task..." click on "Create a new account."
- 5 Under the heading "Name the new account," type a name for the new account and then click Next.
- 6 Under the heading "Pick an account type," click the button next to Limited. (We'll explain why shortly.) Now, click on the button that reads "Create Account."

At this point, you should be back at the User Accounts window. Next, we'll assign a password to the account you just created.

- 1 In the User Accounts window, click on the account name you wish to change.
 - 2 Under the heading "What do you want to change..." choose "Create a password."
 - 3 Type in a password in the first box and type it again in the second box. In the third box, you can type a reminder hint in case you forget your password.
 - 4 Click on the button that reads "Create Password."
- Now, no one will be able to log onto the computer using that User Account unless they know the password.



→ Establish a password for each user account you create in Windows XP; otherwise, anyone who logs on using that account will have access to that account's ostensibly protected files.

Marking Folders as Private

Each person with a Windows XP user account has the option of designating individual folders as "private," which means only they can access them. By the same token, they can also designate particular folders as "shared," meaning that any other user on that computer can access them.

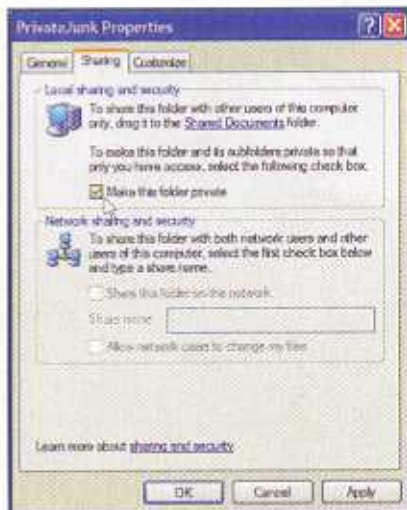
Each user's My Documents folder enjoys a limited amount of privacy by default, in the sense that only someone logged on with an Administrator account can gain access to other users' My Documents folders.

Anyone who logs on using an Administrator account will be able to see folders marked private, but they won't be able to open them.

As Administrator, however, you can easily get around this barrier by going into the User Account system, changing the user's password, and then logging in using that user's name and the new password.

Here's how to mark a folder as private:

- 1 Double-click on My Computer.
- 2 Double-click on the drive on which Windows XP is installed (this will typically be the C: drive). (Note: If you're greeted with a message that reads "These files are hidden," click on the menu item under the heading "System Tasks" that reads "Show the contents of this drive").
- 3 Double-click on the Documents and Settings folder.
- 4 Double-click on the folder labeled with your user name (drill further down, if needed, to find the folder you're looking for).
- 5 Right click on the folder you wish to mark as private and choose the Properties menu item.
- 6 Click on the Sharing tab and place a checkmark next to the item that reads "Make this folder private."



→ To mark a folder as private, so that no one else can view its contents, right-click on it and choose Properties. Click on the Sharing tab and place a checkmark in the box labeled "Make this folder private."

Update Windows XP The Easy Way

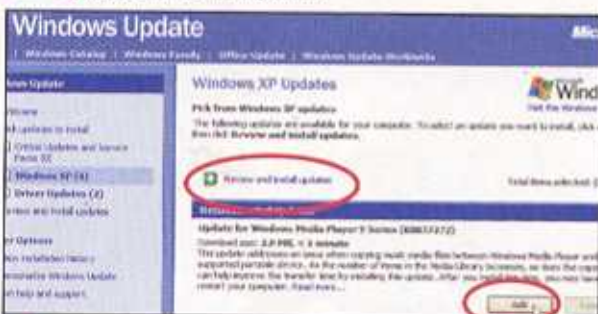
Use the Windows Update tool in Microsoft's Internet Explorer on a regular basis, and take advantage of Microsoft's efforts to plug newly discovered security holes in its most important software.



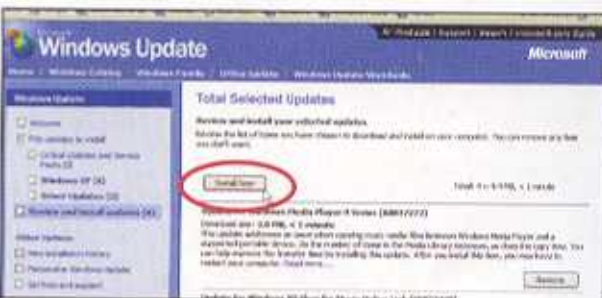
1 Establish a connection to the Internet and launch Internet Explorer. Click on the Tools menu and choose Windows Update.



2 You'll be taken to Microsoft's Windows Update Website. When you arrive, click on the item that reads "Scan for updates."



3 Once the scan is complete, choose the updates you'd like to install by clicking on the Add buttons. Any updates labeled as "critical" should be downloaded immediately. Once you've selected the updates you want, click on the text that reads "Review and install updates."



4 Review the instructions on this page, and then click on the Install Now button.

5 The updates will be downloaded and installed onto your computer.



6 Once the updates have been downloaded and installed, you might be prompted to restart your computer. Make sure you have saved any open documents and shut down any other programs that are running before clicking OK.



A Sneak Peek at Windows XP SP2

At press time, Windows XP Service Pack 2 was expected to be available sometime this summer. Windows XP SP2 will contain numerous improvements that will further increase your privacy and security while using Windows XP.

Some of these improvements are "under the hood" upgrades that will be of interest chiefly to Website and network administrators, but several will profoundly affect individual users. Here's some of what you can expect:

- The biggest improvement is expected to come in the form of a new Security Center, which will run in the background to determine the status of your firewall, if your anti-virus software is up to date, and whether your PC is configured to receive security patches and other useful utilities from Microsoft's Automatic Update feature. If Security Center detects anything amiss, it will place an icon in the notification area of your taskbar and present an Alert message when you log on.

LIMITED VS. ADMIN ACCOUNTS

On the previous pages, we created a "limited" user account. With a limited user account, you can change or remove your own password, change your theme and other desktop settings, view any files you've created, and view any files contained in shared folders. In some cases, however, you might not be able to install new programs, and you won't have any control over other users' accounts.

It's always a good idea to create a limited user account for yourself, and use that routinely, even if you're the only person using the computer. That way, if a Trojan-horse program manages to gain access to your PC while you're logged on, it will be restricted as to the damage it can cause because you're signed on with limited privileges.

You'll also want to establish a "computer administrator" account for yourself in order to gain full control of the computer. As administrator, you can create new user accounts (and modify or delete existing accounts), install new programs, and otherwise maintain full control of your computer.

Here's how to set up a computer administrator account in Windows XP:

- 1 Click on the Start menu.
- 2 Click on Control Panel.
- 3 Click on User Accounts.
- 4 Click on the account name you wish to change.
- 5 Click on the menu item that reads "Change the account type."
- 6 Under the heading "Pick a new account type," click the button next to "Computer administrator," and then click on the button labeled "Change Account Type."

- Viruses and other malicious code are often transmitted in HTML email messages, so an update to Outlook Express will make it easier to display email messages as plain text, instead.
- Spam (unsolicited junk email) that's formatted using HTML can automatically notify the sender as soon as you open it—thereby verifying your address as legitimate and triggering even more spam. SP2 will prevent these acknowledgements from being sent.
- If you receive a file containing executable code

(an .exe extension will appear at the end of the filename), Internet Explorer will display the name of the file's publisher. Armed with this knowledge, you can decide whether or not it's safe to execute the command.

As soon as Microsoft releases Windows XP SP2, you can expect to see it listed on the company's Windows Update Website. Configure your PC for automatic updates (discussed elsewhere in this story), and the update should be installed on your PC automatically.

Convert Your Hard Drive to NTFS The Easy Way

In order to mark folders as private, the hard drive on which they're contained must be set up to use the NTFS (New Technology File System). If your computer came from the factory with Windows XP install, you probably don't need to worry about this, because it's the default setting for Windows XP machines. If you want to be sure, simply double-click on My Computers, click on the icon representing your hard drive (typically the "c:/" drive), and look in the Details box in the left-hand column. If it says "NTFS" next to the item "File System," you're all set.

If it says "FAT32" or anything else, you can easily convert the drive to NTFS. Here's how:

- 1 Click on the Start menu and choose Run.
- 2 When the Run window appears, type in this command: convert drive_letter c: /fs:ntfs (note: this assumes your primary hard drive is labeled "c:" which is the most common scenario) and click OK.
- 3 Restart your computer.

Warning: Don't convert your hard drive to NTFS if you think you might need to uninstall Windows XP down the road.



➔ Run isn't used very often, but it's handy for issuing very low-level commands to Windows XP.

Activate XP's Built-in Firewall

A robust firewall can deliver excellent protection from security threats by preventing unauthorized access from online intruders. Windows XP has a rudimentary firewall built in: It's called Internet Connection Firewall (ICF). This isn't a robust solution, but it's better than nothing (Note: We'll discuss firewalls in greater detail elsewhere in this issue).

ICF checks incoming traffic from the Internet to prevent hackers from invading your PC. It works by rejecting unwarranted communication from Internet sources, but if a virus or Trojan horse makes its way onto your computer through some other source—a floppy disk or as an attachment to a downloaded file, for example—ICF won't prevent that malicious software from sending sensitive information from your computer to a hacker over the Internet.

ICF can also cause problems if you have several computers and a printer or scanner networked together. If you already have a commercial firewall product installed (you'll find the free version of Zone Labs' popular ZoneAlarm program on the disc accompanying this issue), you'll want to leave ICF off.

Our recommendation, therefore, is to install a commercial firewall program. But if you'd prefer not to take that step, you should at least activate ICF. Here's how:

1 Click on the Start menu.

2 Click on Control Panel.

3 Click on Network and Internet Connections.

4 Click on Network Connections.

5 Right-click on the Dial-up, LAN, or High-Speed Internet icon you use to connect to the Internet and choose Properties from the pop-out menu.

6 Click on the Advanced tab.

7 In the box labeled "Internet Connection Firewall," place a checkmark next to the phrase "Protect my computer and network by limiting or preventing access to this computer from the Internet."



→ The firewall built into Windows XP offers some protection from hackers, but you'd be better off installing a stand-alone program.

SCREENSAVER PROTECTION

If you find yourself frequently away from your computer for long stretches at a time, you can configure your screensaver to provide automatic security while you're gone. Activate your screensaver's password-protection feature, and you'll need to provide your password to bring it back from its temporary slumber. Here's how:

1 Right-click anywhere on the desktop.

2 Choose Properties from the pop-up menu.

3 Click on the Screen Saver tab in the Display Properties window.

4 Choose a screen saver from the drop-down menu.

5 If you're using Home edition, place a checkmark next to the item that reads "On resume, display Welcome screen" (If you're using Professional edition, place a checkmark next to the item that reads "On resume, password protect.")

You don't have to wait for the screensaver to appear, however; you can also log yourself off by clicking on the Start menu and selecting Log Off.



→ Windows XP's screen saver can add a level of security, too. To activate it, put a checkmark next to the text that reads "On resume, display Welcome screen." (If you're using XP Professional, the text will read "On resume, password protect.")