

**S**hareware Spotlight is generally intended as a fairly practical and serious look at network utilities and tools available from the “little guys” and open-source crowd, but that doesn’t mean software of a more avocational sort is off-limits!

So this month, with the holiday season just around the corner, I thought it might be a well-timed chance to look at some software to organize the torrent of photos that begins to flow for many of us about this time of year.

Many years ago I worked as a professional photographer, and back then the pinnacle of organization in the professional photography world was a fancy cardboard box. Although images were sometimes cataloged in a simple database on a PC, storage invariably involved file cabinets and index cards. These systems worked well, even for very large organizations, but of course they took up a lot of space, and were slow.

The introduction of Photoshop fifteen years ago revolutionized the industry, but even then photos typically started as a hardcopy print that was scanned into the software. Nonetheless, the challenge of coping with all those scanner-generated digital files was a harbinger of the tidal wave to come.

Enter the consumer digital camera, and open the floodgates to picture overload. Ideally, digital cameras should ease the task of sorting pictures, because unlike film, a bad shot can be deleted before it ever clutters your harddrive. In reality, if you are like most users, it takes just a short while before your collection of digital image files grows into a beast requiring hundreds of megabytes of storage and thousands of files. Fifty pictures of the dog, a hundred pictures of the kids and before long, chaos. What do you do with it all? And where’s that great picture of Aunt Mabel doing the Robot?

This month I’d like to show you some excellent tools to help you find Aunt Mabel’s picture, and to organize and even edit, color-correct, and get creative with the rest of your pictures as well.

Even if you already have photo software that shipped free with your camera (such as an image-transfer package) or even a professional-grade tool such as Photoshop, you should still consider this month’s tools. Many are faster, easier to use, and offer expedient ways to do repetitive tasks that commercial products can’t match. And, they’re all free!

### PICASA 2.1

Google periodically likes to play Santa Claus to the world of computer users, and one of the gifts they’ve put in your stocking this year is the outstanding Picasa image organizer. Until last year, Picasa was a \$29 shareware program, and well worth the price at that. Then Google acquired Picasa, improved the software—and began giving it away for free.

Picasa showcases Google’s desktop search capabilities to great effect, rapidly searching your hard disk for image files on first launch. Picasa

then organizes your images without moving the original files, and can sort them into albums independent of their physical location. So, for example, you can keep your images stored offline on CDs, but organize them via previews in Picasa. Images may then be sorted into albums, and individual shots are searchable by keyword, date, and a seemingly silly but in fact useful rating system that lets you mark favorite images with a “star.”

Importing from other media, however, is not Picasa’s forte; reading CDs and memory cards requires an extra menu step to be recognized and work best if you let Picasa’s separate system-tray resident I/O watcher keep an eye out for new media sources. To its credit, Picasa does have a very good USB camera import feature that works as well or better than some products bundled with high-end cameras, and even the less than ideal import tools do the job adequately.

Picasa sports a very handsome and intuitive interface. In keeping with the Google Search interface, Picasa sports an uncluttered blend of vital necessities with advanced capabilities lurking behind the options. It even features a bit of Google humor; there is a button called “I’m feeling Lucky,” just as in the Google search engine, only in Picasa it is a surprisingly effective one-click tool for lighting and color correction.

Regrettably, Picasa is fairly limited in file import capabilities, handling only the most common image files, such as Bitmap, TIFF, JPEG, and Photoshop files. For most users this won’t be a disadvantage, but if you expect to do file conversion you will be disappointed. In fact, Picasa can export only .jpg format, and relies on external apps for sophisticated editing.

But, that’s not really the point of Picasa, it’s all about ease-of-use. If you have a picture that was taken askew, for example, the process of straightening it in Photoshop is fairly tedious. In Picasa, it is simplicity itself. Picasa is all about one-click fixes, and at this it succeeds brilliantly. And if you make a mistake, Picasa features multiple undos, so you can step back through the cumulative changes to your picture.

Where Picasa really shines is in sharing your photos: Captioned slideshows are easily generated and burned to CD for sharing with others, and albums may be exported to the web effectively with a single click. Emailing pictures is also easy, with no need to manually reduce the resolution of your pictures—with a click Picasa optimizes pictures for email use. In addition, there is a convenient “order prints” feature, which exports to a number of online digital print services such as Snapfish or Kodak Easyshare.

Lastly, there is a picture-sharing service called “Hello” in Picasa that greatly simplifies sharing; Hello enables a real-time chat and collaborative browsing of Picasa’s albums across the Internet. Unfortunately, Hello is at heart a peer-to-peer chat system so this feature is both cool and menacing: more on that later.

My favorite feature of Picasa is the “Timeline” tool. Since most of us have a chronological sense of events (“Aunt Mabel did the Robot on

Labor Day last year”), Picasa enables one to search for and organize pictures by scrolling through a visual timeline of previews of those images. It’s incredibly intuitive and has to be experienced to grasp the significance of this handy means of organization.

I’ve saved the worst for last, and this may make Picasa a non-starter for some users: Picasa must run with Admin credentials. I can’t imagine what numbskull developer thought this was a good idea, but there you have it. And the IT professional in me finds Hello’s firewall tunneling and peer-to-peer behavior worrisome.

Picasa also tosses tiny hidden .ini files in searched folders to build its index. This behavior may be annoying but is not harmful—in fact, it is the secret to Picasa’s flexibility—the .ini files are a database of changes to your pictures and albums. If you use Picasa, and especially Hello, do so fully aware of these downsides and quirks.

If these issues don’t bother you (after all, admins know how to keep an eye on their home systems, right?), then Picasa is a tremendously convenient product.

## GIMP 2.2.9

GIMP (*GNU Image Manipulation Program*) is an open source classic, a greatest hit if you will. If you use Linux or X, you may probably already know this powerful, full-featured image editor since it is bundled with many popular Linux distros, but there are versions for Windows users (and other platforms) as well.

If you are familiar with Adobe Photoshop or one of its light versions (such as Photoshop Elements) you will find GIMP ably performs most of the tasks Photoshop can, and does so for free. That said, if you are a skilled Photoshop user, GIMP is decidedly not Photoshop—it lacks the outstandingly user-friendly interface found in all Photoshop variations and is especially weak at multiple-image editing and layering.

However, for the casual user with a desire to go beyond simple image tweaking capabilities found in the built-in Windows image tools or the generally weak software bundled with most digital cameras, GIMP is an excellent choice. Be warned though that GIMP does have a considerable learning curve and so is probably best for those with fairly serious intentions.

GIMP excels at technical operations such as re-sampling an image for use on the web, and for tasks such as accurate color adjustment and image correction. GIMP also has an outstanding array of built-in special effects filters and possesses many of the sophisticated editing features of Photoshop, including layers, channels, and paths. If you don’t know what these are (or don’t care), but still want to clean-up and correct your images, you may want to consider IrfanView (below) instead.

GIMP requires the GTK+2 interface (a cross-platform graphical interface library). You may well already have GTK+2 installed, as it is a popular supporting library for many open-source apps such as OpenOffice. Installing GIMP and GTK+2 requires little more than choosing preferred directories and deciding how much memory you want to dedicate to GIMP’s image cache.

Even if you are intimidated by GIMP, multiple-undo is supported, and with a little experimentation you should get the hang of things quickly. The interface is fairly straightforward, and aside from the occasional cryptic error message (which tend to be written in programmer-speak rather than English) GIMP is not hard to use. Worth noting is the excellent help engine available, which is downloadable as a separate component from the application and is surprisingly good.

**Picasa 2.1:** [picasa.google.com](http://picasa.google.com)

**Gimp 2.2.9 and GTK toolkit:** [gimp-win.sourceforge.net](http://gimp-win.sourceforge.net)

**“Photoshop-like” GIMP version:**

[http://plasticbugs.com/?page\\_id=294](http://plasticbugs.com/?page_id=294)

**IrfanView 3.97:** [www.irfanview.com](http://www.irfanview.com)

Incidentally, if you are already comfortable with Photoshop’s interface there is a GIMP hack called “Gimpshop” that is modified to look and feel more like Photoshop (see sidebar).

GIMP may not be an exact substitute for Photoshop—it is slower, less polished, and somewhat less capable—it nonetheless is a remarkably potent photo editor, and absolutely free.

## IRFANVIEW 3.97

No fancy floating tool panels, no elaborate special-effects filters (though there are a few basic ones)—just the essentials needed to import and color-correct digital images.

IrfanView excels at tasks such as cropping, image conversion and resizing, rotation, red-eye correction and other mundane but vital digital image chores. It has particularly sophisticated batch-processing capabilities: you can automate renaming, file conversion, and even tasks such as rotation, changing color depth, and adding text captions.

Moreover, there are many plug-ins available to expand IrfanView’s already abundant import/export capabilities. For example, a very useful CAD import plug-in. In addition, there are numerous additional special-effects filters in plug-in form.

The program is the creation of Bosnian Irfan Skiljan, and he’s been generously giving away his handiwork since the mid-nineties. Although IrfanView is free, he hopes that you support his effort by using an optional eBay toolbar that generates a little income when (and if) you use eBay to help offset his expenses.

IrfanView is often the tool I reach for first for photo-editing because of its simple and intuitive interface. IrfanView is great for the most common tasks the average photographer (whether amateur, pro, or something in-between) needs to do; whether making a simple slideshow, optimizing images for web use, or correcting flaws in snapshots, IrfanView does the job with no fuss.

## CONCLUSION

I suppose you can choose from this month’s imaging software roundup by the type of camera you are comfortable with: Picasa is a point-and-shoot, GIMP is a complex pro-grade SLR, and IrfanView is a no-frills manual SLR camera. Whatever your skill-level and style, one of them will fit your needs—try them out and get ready to snap pictures with abandon over the holidays. After all, you can always delete them later!

As usual, many of this month’s files are available in your NaSPA shareware libraries as well as from the URLs in the sidebar. And, as always, I welcome your comments and suggestions at [jimj@naspacom.com](mailto:jimj@naspacom.com).

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