

Spring Cleaning

Now that the westerlies are more likely to be carrying showers than snowstorms, it's time, once again, for the annual spring cleaning—of your PC. If all winter long you've been right-click/saving your way to chaos on your PC, it's time to wash the Windows.

But just as you wouldn't vacuum before you tossed out the stacks of newspapers and boxes in the room, there's an order to cleaning up your PC that you should follow. We're going to (in this order): throw out the clutter, straighten up, sweep, and then put on the screens.

1. Eliminate the clutter. One room, one closet at a time. If tossing out files really makes you uncomfortable, set up a folder called CD backup files. Move the files there, and when you're done with the cleanup, burn a paranoia relief tablet (backup disc) and put it on a shelf nearby. Then empty the folder.

After the data files, open up e-mail and clean out the in-box, sent items, drafts, and junk mail.

Now look at your list of programs. You probably have some you never use. Get rid of these with the uninstall tool. Don't just right-click and delete the icon from your desktop. That will still leave the program on your computer. Go to the list of programs and see if there's an uninstall icon with the other program icons. That's the best way to remove it. Otherwise, go to Settings > Control Panel > Add or remove programs. Go down the list, and highlight any you want to remove.

If you occasionally download to your desktop and the screen is now cluttered with all kinds of file icons, get rid of those shortcuts next.

Finally, you should purge the temporary files on your system from the Internet and Windows. On XP

and 2000 you can find Disk Cleanup under: Programs > Accessories > System Tools > Disk Cleanup. Read the help file for advice on its use.

If you want to make sure you're not throwing out something you need, start up your programs and check your most visited sites before emptying the trash.

2. Straighten up. It's always easier to put things away when there's a place for them. If you have bad filing habits, like "I'll just park it on the C: drive for now," or there's a hodge-podge redundant collection of folders, now's the time to rearrange the system into something more logical.

3. Sweep up. After removing files and programs, your hard disk will probably be full of holes with files scattered all over its circular map. Time to defragment the disk (put the files remaining into some kind of congruous order so your computer isn't jumping all over the hard drive looking for them. Hit Start and then: Programs > Accessories > System Tools > Disk Defragmenter. Highlight the drive you want to defragment (C:, for example), and then click Analyze. You will be advised whether you should or don't need to defrag.

4. Put up the screens. If you want to open your Windows to the outside world this summer, you'll need screens to keep out the spam, adware, spyware, viruses, and worms. First, make sure your virus protection is updated, or, if you don't have any, get a program like Norton's or MacAfee's. For adware and spybot blocking programs, there's Spybot Search and Destroy (www.spybot.info/en/home/index.html) and Ad-Aware from www.lavasoft.com—both are free.

Be warned, the whole process will take some time and effort. But remember the alternative: a computer that's as slow as mud in January. ■