

TechRepublic has written [thousands of tips, tweaks, tricks, and hacks](#) since Windows XP first appeared on the scene -- and this year has been no exception. We already pulled together some of the most popular tips as [10+ ways to get more out of Windows XP](#) and [10 Windows XP tricks and timesavers](#). Now it's time to wind up 2008 with this final collection of some of the highest rated Windows XP techniques of the year.

Table of contents

How do I ... tweak Windows Explorer to open in a directory of my choosing?.....	2
Permanently set your flash drive's default AutoPlay action.....	4
Add image thumbnails to folders in Windows Explorer.....	4
Install Microsoft Management Console 3.0 for Windows XP SP2.....	5
Copy desktop themes to other Windows XP computers.....	6
Retrieve information for multiple Windows XP disk drives.....	7
Manage the most frequently used programs list on your XP Start menu.....	8
Put your applications into a tabbed user interface with WinTabber.....	8
Use photos in Windows XP's 3D Flying Objects.....	9
Configure Windows Explorer to display Windows XP disk drives.....	9

How do I ... tweak Windows Explorer to open in a directory of my choosing?

By Mark Kaelin

The directory/folder metaphor employed by Windows XP to organize files on a hard drive fits well with my natural tendency of hierarchical organization. My thinking pattern follows the general > less general > specific > most specific framework. So there are times when I want to see a particular folder hierarchy laid out before me in Windows Explorer.

Tweak the displayed folder

The default display for Windows XP Explorer is to show the My Documents folder with all of its subfolders expanded and ready to be selected (**Figure A**).

There is nothing wrong with this view, but I don't always want to open Windows Explorer in the My Documents folder. I have access to, and the need to use, several different network folders during the course of a day. With a small tweak of the Windows Explorer Properties settings you can change which folder gets displayed and how that display is revealed.

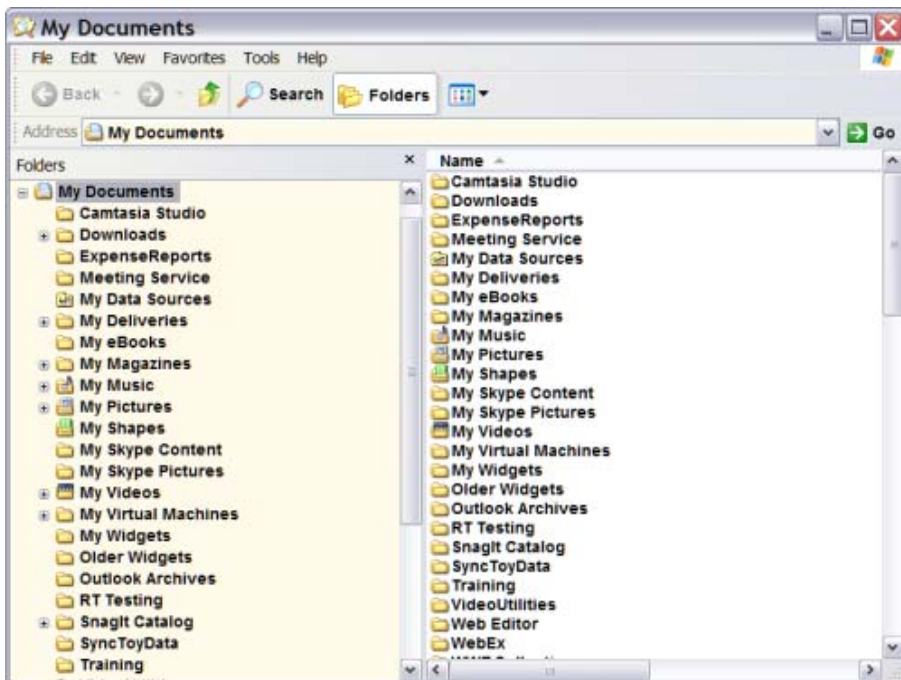


Figure A

To get to the Windows Explorer Properties dialog box, right-click the Windows Explorer shortcut. You can copy the shortcut in the Start Menu to your Desktop to make it easier to work with. I like to have several Windows Explorer shortcuts in my toolbar for easy access — each going to a different place. When you right-click and go to Properties and click the Shortcut tab, you should see a screen similar to **Figure B**.

To change the Windows Explorer shortcut to open a specific folder of your choosing, change the Target box to read:

```
c:\windows\EXPLORER.EXE /n, /e, X:\Folder of my choosing
```

For example, the blog posts I write or edit are saved on a network drive (U) in a folder I have dubbed Working Folder. The Target box for this shortcut looks like this:

```
c:\windows\EXPLORER.EXE /n, /e, u:\working folder
```

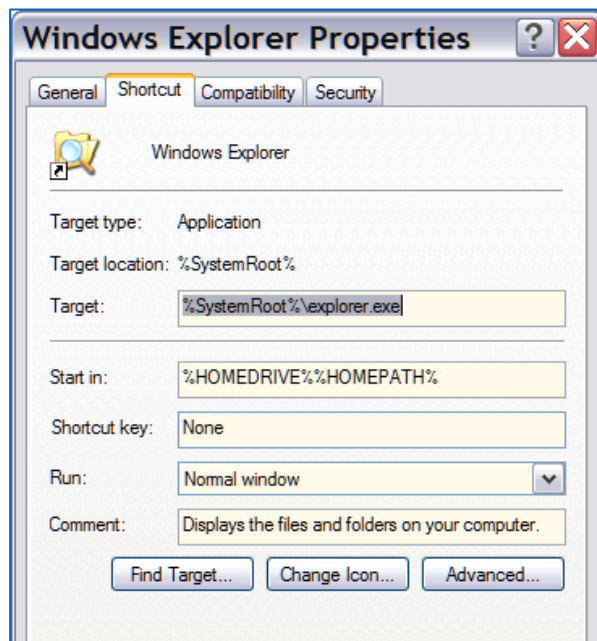


Figure B

Figure C shows the corresponding screen shot. Now, when I click this Windows Explorer shortcut, I get the screen shown in **Figure D**.

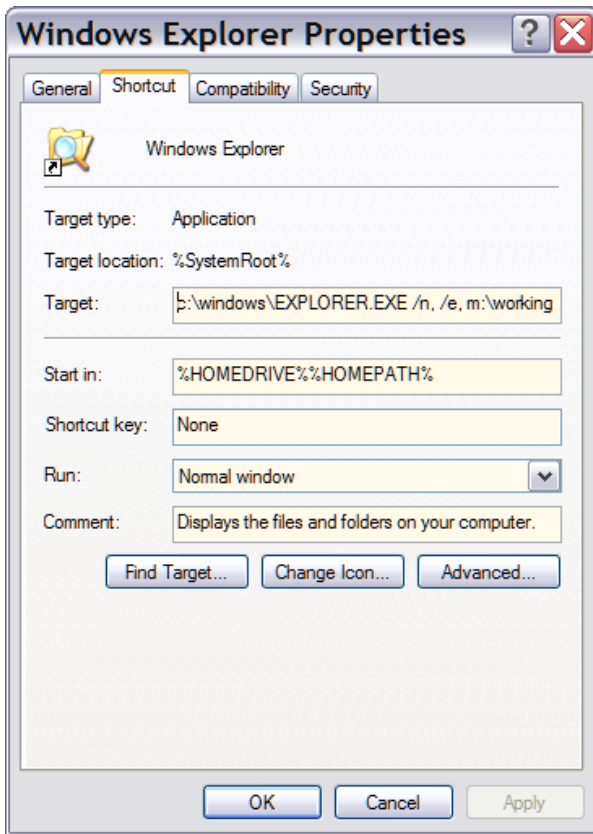


Figure C

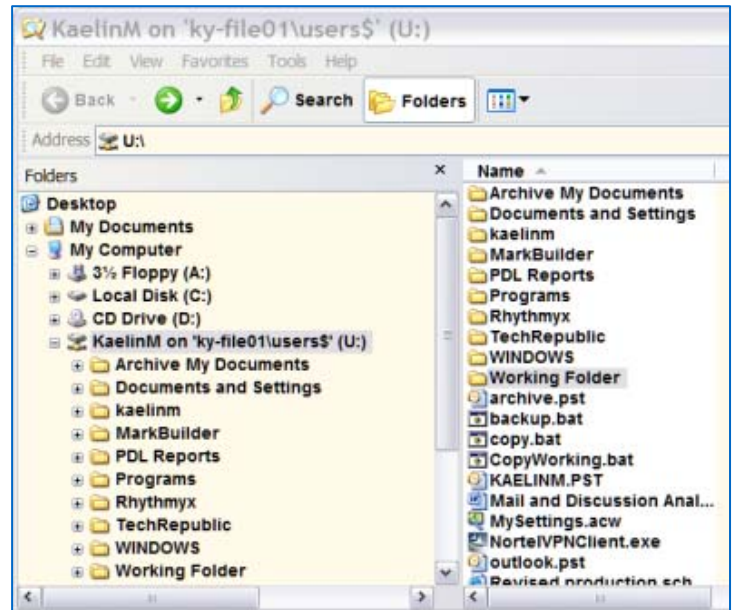


Figure D

Additional tweak

The tweak above shows my Working Folder and all the subfolders under it. But with a small additional tweak, I can get a Windows Explorer view that shows the Working Folder subfolders collapsed (**Figure E**).

This is a cleaner, more concise look. To get this behavior, add the `/select` command to the Target box like this:

```
c:\windows\EXPLORER.EXE /n, /e, /select, u:\working folder
```



Figure E

Your choice

You can apply this tweak to as many folders as you want. You can give them different icons and place them on your desktop or on your toolbar. This small tweak gives you great flexibility in how you interact with Windows XP.

Someone asked

In the [discussion thread](#) accompanying this article, there was a request for an explanation of the Windows Explorer in-line commands. I found a reference on Microsoft's Help and Support pages:

- **/n:** Opens a new window in single-paned (My Computer) view for each item selected, even if the new window duplicates a window that is already open.
 - **/e:** Uses Windows Explorer view. Windows Explorer view is most similar to File Manager in Windows version 3.x. Note that the default view is Open view.
 - **/root:** Specifies the root level of the specified view. The default is to use the normal namespace root (the desktop). Whatever is specified is the root for the display.
 - **/select:** Specifies the folder to receive the initial focus. If */select* is used, the parent folder is opened and the specified object is selected.
-

Permanently set your flash drive's default AutoPlay action

By Greg Shultz

Note: This tip is for both Windows XP Home and Professional.

If you have a USB flash drive holding various Microsoft Windows XP files, you may want to configure the drive to automatically open Windows Explorer rather than display the AutoPlay dialog box.

You can select the Open Folder To View Files In Windows Explorer and select the Always Do The Selected Action check box but that only configures the flash drive for one file type. Here's how to configure your flash drive to open Windows Explorer for all file types at the same time:

1. Insert your flash drive into the USB port.
2. When you see the AutoPlay dialog box, click Cancel.
3. Open My Computer, right-click your flash drive icon, and select Properties.
4. In the Properties dialog box, select the AutoPlay tab.
5. Perform the following steps for each item in the Content Type drop-down list:
 - a. Select an item in the Content Type drop-down list.
 - b. Choose Select An Action To Perform in the Actions panel.
 - c. Select the Open Folder To View Files In Windows Explorer action.
 - d. Click the Apply button.
6. Click OK to close the Properties dialog box.

Now use the Safely Remove Hardware feature to remove your flash drive — wait a moment and plug it back in. You'll see the AutoPlay progress appear momentarily, and then you should see Windows Explorer open to show the contents of the flash drive.

Add image thumbnails to folders in Windows Explorer

By Mark Kaelin

When you are dealing with a folder in Microsoft Windows containing numerous images, it is often helpful to see thumbnail representations of those images in the Windows Explorer display. One caveat for the resource-sensitive: turning on the thumbnail feature will increase the amount of resources being used by the operating system. Those little thumbnails take up space on the hard drive and in memory when they are being displayed. Depending on your system, the available resources, and the number of images involved, you can quickly bog down your PC if you are not careful. This is why many users will be interested in this tip for the opposite reason — they want to know how to turn off thumbnail creation in Windows.

Open Windows Explorer and navigate to the folder of images for which you would like to see thumbnails. On the Windows Explorer menu, click Tools | Folder Options to get to the Control Panel. Click the View tab, as shown in **Figure A**.

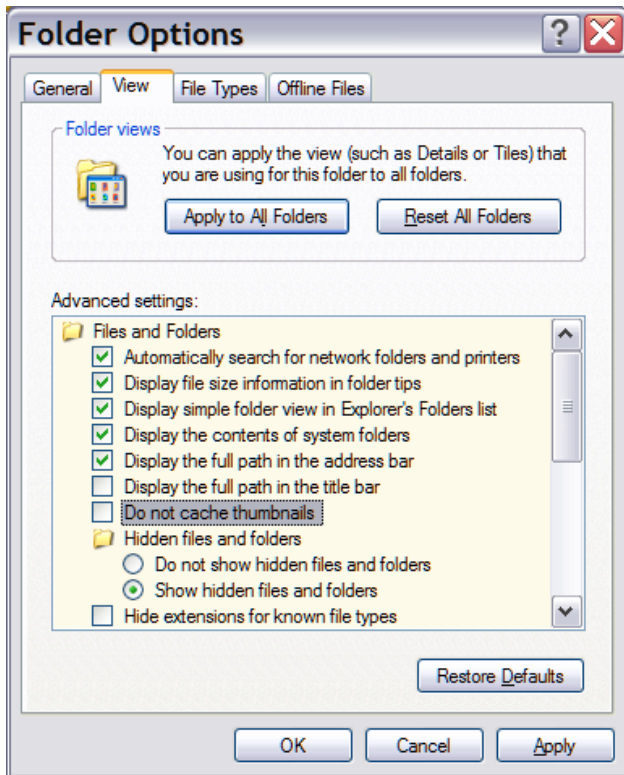


Figure A

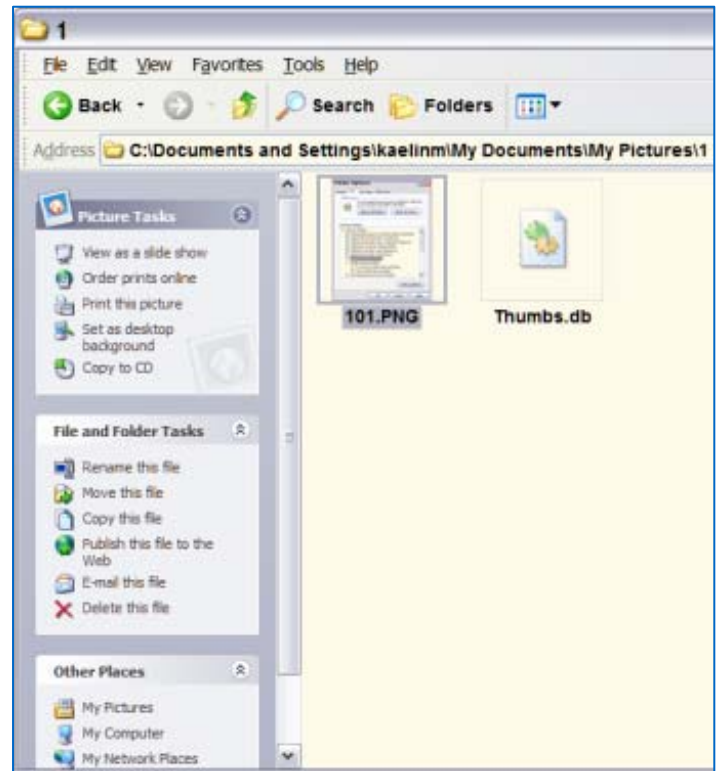


Figure B

Under the Files And Folders section, you will see the Do Not Cache Thumbnails check box. If this box is checked, there will be no thumbnails cached on your hard drive. So if you want thumbnails, you will want to uncheck it. Click OK after you've made your selection.

To start seeing thumbnails, you have to change views in Windows Explorer. On the menu bar, click View | Thumbnails, and Windows will replace the normal file icons with thumbnails of the images. Windows will also create a new file in that folder called Thumbs.db, where the thumbnail information is stored, as shown in **Figure B**.

The Thumbs.db file will be created in every folder you designate to display thumbnails. To apply your changes to all Windows Explorer folders, navigate to Tools | Folder Options and click the View tab. From there, make your changes and then click the Apply To All Folders button before you click OK.

Install Microsoft Management Console 3.0 for Windows XP SP2

By Greg Shultz

Note: This tip applies to both Windows XP Home and Professional but requires that Service Pack 2 or 3 is installed. Editing the registry is risky, so be sure you have a verified backup before making any changes.

The Microsoft Management Console (MMC) application provides you with an interface shell into which you can insert various tools called snap-ins to create custom consoles. While custom consoles can come in handy for performing any number of tasks, Windows XP's MMC 2.0 convoluted console-creation process often seems counterintuitive.

Fortunately, Microsoft has made the new MMC interface developed for Windows Vista available for Windows XP. Version 3.0 of the MMC application provides more functionality for snap-ins than prior versions and sports a smoother-looking user interface that makes it much easier to create and use consoles.

One of the biggest changes in MMC 3.0 for Windows XP is the new Add Or Remove Snap-ins interface. Instead of having to use a tedious procedure that involves two separate dialog boxes to build a custom console, the new MMC 3.0 provides a single dialog box that makes it much easier to create custom consoles.

Downloading and installing the MMC 3.0 for Windows XP is a breeze. However, you must manually enable the new user interface by adding a key to the registry. Here's how:

1. Download the Microsoft Management Console 3.0 for Windows XP from the Microsoft Download Center.
2. Locate and run the WindowsXP-KB907265-x86-ENU.exe executable file to launch the MMC 3.0 installation wizard.
3. Once the installation is complete, launch the Registry Editor (Regedit.exe).
4. Go to HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\SOFTWARE\Microsoft\MMC.
5. Right-click the MMC subkey and select New | Key.
6. Name the key UseNewUI and press [Enter].
7. Close the Registry Editor.

Now, when you launch MMC.exe from the Run dialog box, you'll be able to take advantage of the new Add or Remove Snap-ins interface. You simply scroll through the available snap-ins in the left panel and click the Add button to build your custom console in the right panel.

Copy desktop themes to other Windows XP computers

By Greg Shultz

Note: This tip applies to both Windows XP Home and Windows XP Professional.

If you have created a favorite desktop theme and you work on more than one Windows XP computer, you may have considered recreating that theme on your other computers. However, manually re-creating the desktop theme can be a tricky and time-consuming operation. Here's how you can easily copy your favorite desktop theme from one Windows XP computer to another.

Steps

1. On the computer containing your favorite desktop theme, right-click the desktop and select Properties. On the Themes tab (**Figure A**), with your theme selected, click the Save As button and save the file to the My Documents folder (or folder of your choice).
2. Launch Windows Explorer and access the My Documents folder.
3. Look for files with the .theme extension, locate your file, and copy it to a floppy disk or USB thumb drive.
4. Go to the other computer on which you would like to have your favorite desktop theme and copy the .theme file to My Documents.
5. Right-click the desktop and select Properties to open the Display Properties dialog box.



Figure A

6. On the Themes tab, click the Theme drop-down list and select Browse.
7. In the Open Theme dialog box, access the My Documents folder, locate your theme file, and double-click it.
8. Click OK to load the new theme and close the Display Properties dialog box.
9. While Windows XP loads the desktop theme, you'll see a Please Wait message in the middle of the screen. Your current desktop colors will fade to gray while the new settings are applied.

There is one caveat to this approach — if part of your theme involves wallpaper you created or other graphical elements unique to that particular PC, those elements will have to be copied over along with the .theme file.

Retrieve information for multiple Windows XP disk drives

By Greg Shultz

Note: This tip applies to both Windows XP Home and Professional editions.

You can obtain detailed information about the amount of available and used space on your Windows XP disk by right-clicking any drive icon in My Computer and selecting Properties. You also get a nice pie chart display that depicts this information graphically, which makes it easy to quickly analyze your hard disk usage.

If you have multiple drives, performing this operation on each one can be time consuming. Fortunately, Windows XP can provide the same type of pie chart display for all your drives in one tabbed dialog box. Here's how.

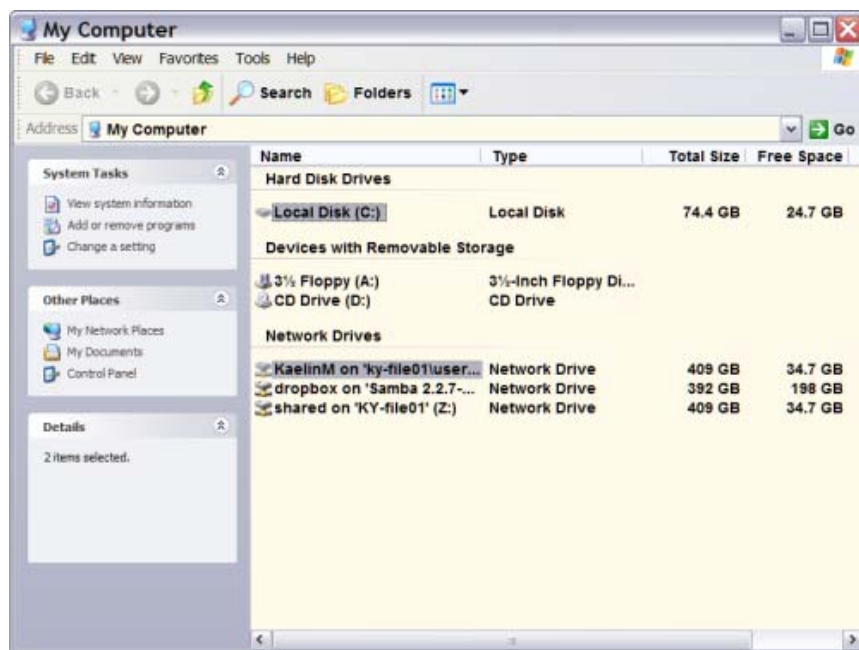


Figure A

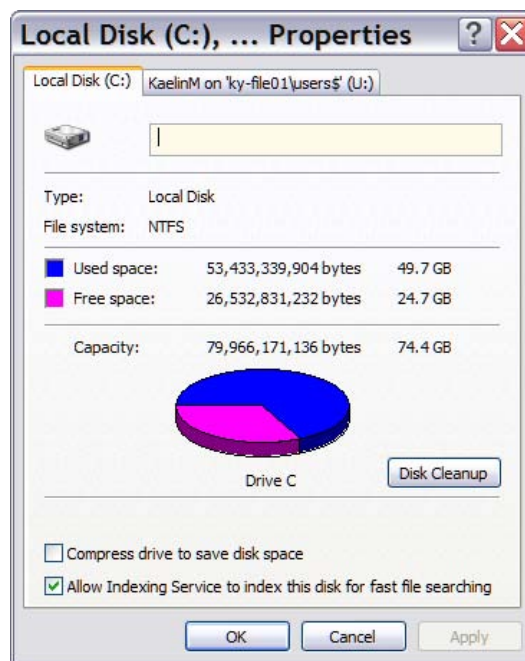


Figure B

1. Open My Computer.
2. Hold down [Ctrl] and select each one of the drive icons (**Figure A**).
3. Right-click the last one and select Properties.

The resulting dialog box will have a tab containing a pie chart for each drive (**Figure B**). You can use this technique with removable as well as floppy disk drives.

Manage the most frequently used programs list on your XP Start menu

By Greg Shultz

Note: Editing the registry file is risky, so be sure you have a verified backup before making any changes. This tip applies to both Windows XP Home and Windows XP Professional.

One of the many features of Windows XP's Start Menu is the most frequently used programs list. When it comes to configuring this feature, Windows XP provides you with only two controls: the ability to completely clear the list and the ability to specify the maximum number of programs that can appear on this list at any one time. However, there is one other thing that would be nice to be able to control, and that is preventing certain applications from appearing on that list.

For example, you probably don't need to have often-used but inconsequential applications such as Calculator or Notepad showing up in that space. You probably would rather not have games you occasionally play show up in that space, either.

Fortunately, you can prevent an application from appearing in the Start Menu's most frequently used programs list by adding a special key to the registry. Follow these steps:

1. Launch the Registry Editor (Regedit.exe).
2. Go to HKEY_CLASSES_ROOT\Applications.
3. Right-click the Applications key and select New | Key.
4. Name the key the same as the application's executable file.
5. Right-click your new key and select New | String Value.
6. Name the string value NoStartPage.
7. Close the Registry Editor.

You'll need to reboot, or at least log off and then back on again for this change to become effective.

Put your applications into a tabbed user interface with WinTabber

By Greg Shultz

Note: This tip applies to both Windows XP Home and Windows XP Professional.

If you've been using a tabbed browser, chances are that you've fallen in love with having a tabbed user interface. Keeping each site you visit on separate tabs during a heavy surfing session is an efficient use of screen real estate and provides a great experience.

You've probably also found yourself in situations where you're working with other applications or even certain operating system components and wished that the user interface had tabs.



Figure A

For example, suppose that you're working with multiple copies of Windows Explorer and simultaneously working with files and folders on your hard disk and mapped network drives. Maybe you're working with multiple text files and have several copies of Notepad open at the same time. Sure the Taskbar is designed for these sort of operations as is the task switcher ([Alt] [Tab]), but having multiple windows in a single tabbed interface sure would be nice.

The folks at [WinTabber](#) have created a FREE tool that will allow you to easily transform your multiple windows into a single tabbed user interface. Once you have WinTabber up and running, you can open multiple windows, and then with the click of a button, you can add each window to WinTabber. Once in WinTabber, each window becomes a tab (**Figure A**) and you can begin clicking tabs to switch between the windows.

Use photos in Windows XP's 3D Flying Objects

By Greg Shultz

Note: This tip applies to Windows XP Home and Windows XP Professional.

If you're familiar with Windows XP's My Pictures Slideshow screen saver to display photos of loved ones, here's a twist that you might find interesting — you can use a photo for the texture in the 3D Flying Objects screen saver. Here's how:

1. Locate the photo you want to use in this screen saver, load it into a graphics program, and save it as a BMP file. (BMP is the only file type the 3D Flying Objects screen saver will allow you to select.)
 2. Right-click on the desktop, select Properties, select the Screen Saver tab, and select 3D Flying Objects from the Screen Saver drop-down list.
 3. Click the Settings button and select Textured Flag from the Style drop-down list.
 4. Click the Texture button and use the Choose Texture File dialog box to locate and select your photo.
 5. Crank up Resolution and Size sliders to the Max setting and click OK to close the 3D Flying Objects Setting dialog box.
 6. Click the Preview button to test your new screen saver, then click OK to enable it.
-

Configure Windows Explorer to display Windows XP disk drives

By Greg Shultz

Note: This tip applies to Windows XP Home and Windows XP Professional.

When you double-click the My Computer icon in Windows XP, you see a list of all the drives on your hard disk. However, when you launch Windows Explorer, it displays the contents of My Documents in the right panel. If you like the way that the My Computer view displays all the disk drives when you first launch it, but prefer the Windows Explorer view, here's how you can get the best of both views.

1. Right-click on the desktop.
2. Select New | Shortcut.
3. Type `C:\Windows\Explorer.exe /n, /e, /select, C:\` in the text box, then click Next.
4. Type *My Explorer* in the text box and click Finish.

Using the `/select` switch with `C:\` as the object causes Windows Explorer open a My Computer view of your system. Now, when you select your new shortcut, your window will look more like the My Computer view.