- BY JILL DUFFY

Knowing how to use a few features and tools can help you organize your images
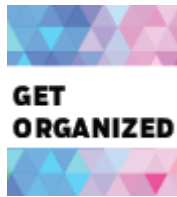

so that you can always find and share them easily.

If your digital photo collections are a mess, the good news is that software (a lot of it free or included on Windows and Mac computers) and online services now have excellent tools for helping you organized your images fast. No matter how far gone your image collection may seem—unintelligible file names, photos without dates, too many images clogging up your hard drive— you can reorganize it so that it becomes more useful.

The goal is to be able to find and share the photos you love without a headache. This article talks about a few features and tools in basic photo management software that will help you find and share those photos. It does not cover online hosting and backup, although keep an eye on this Get Organized series of articles for more on that topic in a future article.

You don't need to know anything at all about high-end digital photography software or image-editing suites to use or understand the tools mentioned in this article. All the tips in this article are meant for the average consumer or a light hobbyist photographer.

Organizing your photo collection happens in three stages: importing, editing, and saving.

Importing

The best time to take control of your photos from an organization standpoint is when you import images from your camera or smartphone to your computer. (Of course, most people have an existing backlog of images that are already imported, and I'll talk about that in the following sections.)

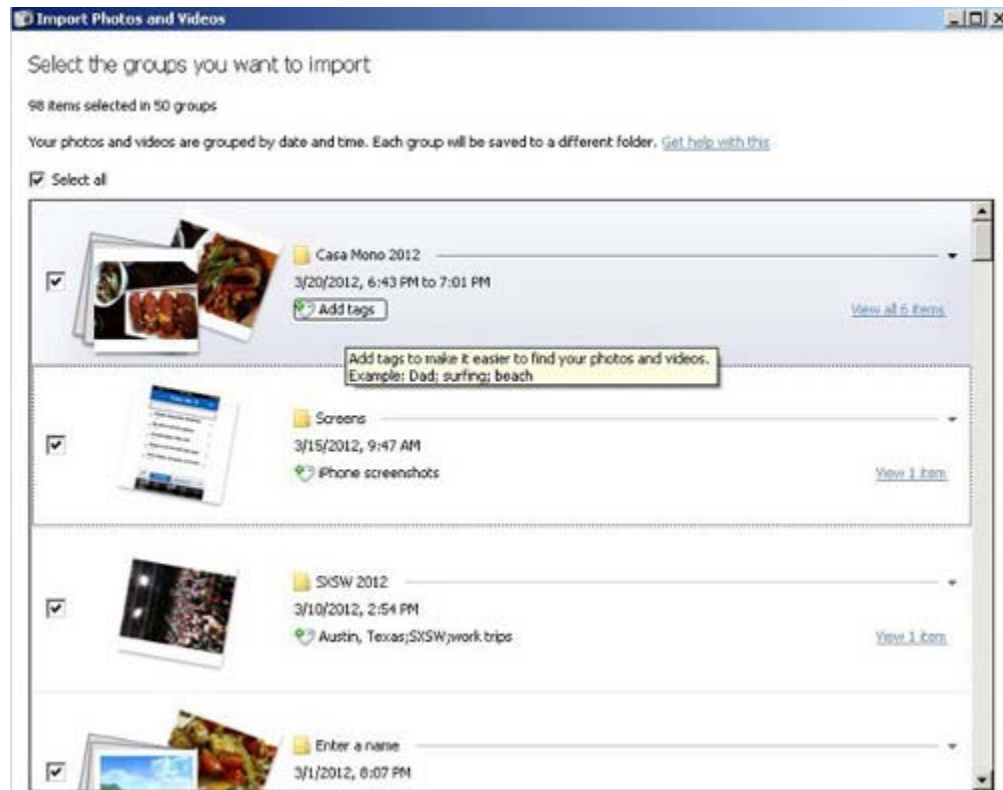**Tip 1. Don't use the software that comes with your camera.**

The first thing to address is which application you're using to transfer images. While most digital cameras come with software that you can install, it's unlikely to be your best option. Instead, use iPhoto (which comes preinstalled on most Apple computers) or Windows Live Photo Gallery (which comes preinstalled on most Windows computers).

Tip 2. Pay attention to import settings, especially date.

Regardless of which application you use to import your photos, take a moment to explore the options that are available in the settings. Most programs these days use a default by-date setting to group your images, which is good! It's especially helpful when the software also creates a folder for the group that uses a date in the folder name. You can always change the settings or change the folder names, but it usually makes sense to keep dates in the name folders because it makes them easier to find, search, and sort.

Editing for Organization

Some photo editing occurs during the import process, and some can come later. During the import process, you'll want to edit ratings, tags, and special tags.

Tip 3. Use ratings, the delete button, and tags.
The best time to add ratings and tags to images is immediately after you import photos or during the import process for software that allows for it—in any event during the same sitting that you import.

Ratings, such as star ratings, are helpful for when you want to find your best or favorite images. When you review your photos and nine that are nearly the same of one object, scene, or person, but only one or two of those nine images are any good, that's when you should apply ratings. They come into play more later.

Just as import as the ratings tool is the delete button. If you have nine pictures of essentially the same thing, but only two of them look good, consider deleting some of them. Some people delete as they shoot, which is an equally good tactic, though it's not always possible to tell which pictures are good on a camera's LCD. Whatever the case, the delete button is very important to keeping your photos manageable and well organized.

Tags make your images more searchable and easier to find. Unlike file names, which must be unique for images in the same folder, tags are supposed to be used over and over across many images. Tags should be simple and intuitive, and you can apply multiple tags to one image. Here are some examples of tags you might want to use:

• Holidays
• Family names/surnames (the MacGuires)
• Vacation destinations
• Sport or event name (e.g., Little League, Girl Scouts camp)
• Season or month plus year (e.g., Winter 2011, March 2012)

You can add tags for full names of people, but you can also use facial-recognition features (they're not as creepy as they sound, I promise!) to accomplish the same goal.

Tip 4. Use auto-tags: Geotag, facial recognition, time and date stamps.
If your camera and software support geotags and facial recognition, know when to use them.

Facial recognition, or letting the software identify pictures of people by their face, may sound creepy, but in the context of your own private photo collections, it's really a very powerful, useful tool. Say you want to create a scrapbook with pictures of your daughter for her birthday. If you use facial recognition, or face-tagging, to find all your photos of her, the program will do all the work for you. Then you can spend your time and energy finding the right pictures to go into the book.

Geotags typically come in handy for travelers. A geotag is the GPS location of where an image was shot. Let's say you took a few dozen photos in Puerto Rico on the beach, and in reviewing your images, you can't tell which images are from Culebra and which are from Vieques, two beach islands that look similar. If you look at the geotag, you'll be able to see on a map exactly where you took the photos.

Time and date stamps are invaluable as well. As I suggested before, keep them turned on in the import settings, but also leave them turned on at the camera level. Having times and dates associated with images is one of the fastest ways people sync up the correct event with an image.

With all these tips so far, the goal is to be able to organize your photos so that you can find them quickly and easily later, long after the event is done and you've forgotten the details of the day.

Saving
You've imported your images and taken a few other simple steps to make them more searchable. Now what?
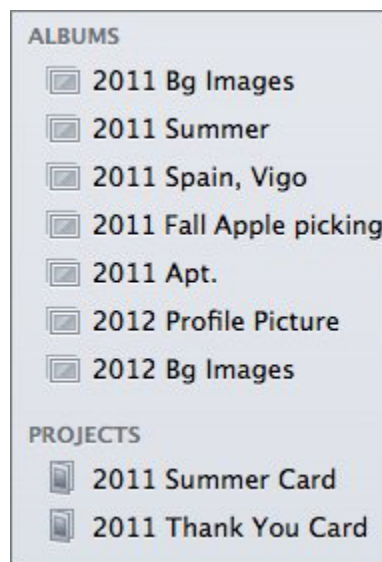
The next step is about how you save your images. This article does not cover the complicated choices you may face in choosing an online hosting site or back-up solution (I'll cover those hairy details in a future Get Organized article, although a few suggestions for services are included on the last page of this article). But we can talk about albums or sets.

Tip 5. Use albums or sets.

Albums, sometimes also called sets, are groups of images that you want to keep together. Typically, albums are separate from the import groups, which are grouped by date. When you drag images into an album, they still also exist in the original import set. The album is almost like a different kind of tag; it's just another way to group pictures together.

Any time you look through your photos, build your albums. It takes little more than a drag-and-drop motion to work on them. Albums aren't set in stone. You can change what's in them any time, making them a great organizational chore to do little by little rather than all at once. When you import your photos, you should take the time to follow some of the other tips mentioned above, and only work on albums if you have additional time. It's more important at the time of import to work on tags, ratings, and special tags.

Tip 6. When all else fails, use smart file, folder, and album names.

ALBUMS
2011 Bg Images
2011 Summer
2011 Spain, Vigo
2011 Fall Apple picking
2011 Apt.
2012 Profile Picture
2012 Bg Images

PROJECTS
2011 Summer Card
2011 Thank You Card

If all these tips just sound complicated and difficult, the most basic thing you can do to take control of a messy photo collection is to use intelligent naming conventions for file, folder, and album names. It's time consuming and requires more manual work than using the other tips, but it works.