The South Bay Mug

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A Monthly Cupful For South Bay Apple Mac User Group Members, Aug. 2006

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A personal view from Bob

Garbage Is Your Friend

I read an article in the June 26 Issue of TidBITS by Derek Miller about securing information on your computer. It described a procedure I've been using so I decided to use it as a basis for my article.

Computers are wonderful for storing all your information, but what happens if sensitive informations falls into the wrong hands due to loss or theft. Laptops are especially vulnerable.

Apple includes FileVault, a feature built into Mac OS X 10.3 and later, that encrypts your entire Home folder, but most experts agree that FileVault is overkill. You really don't need to encrypt your movies, music and photos. Backing up is more difficult and a software glitch can lock you out of everything.

What's the alternative? With Apple's Disk Utility, you can easily create an encrypted disk image that behaves just like — and can be backed up just like — a regular Mac folder. You can even set it to open automatically (with a password) whenever you restart or log in to your account. You can protect only those files that are important, while leaving your music, photos and less sensitive documents alone.

1. Figure out which files you want to protect, and consolidate them in a single folder. Subfolders are fine, but make sure not only that you have everything you want to protect in one place, but also that you don't miss anything.

2. Launch Disk Utility (in /Applications/Utilities). Click the New Image button in the toolbar to create a disk image. Choose the Sparse Image format. (A sparse image is like a balloon that expands to fit the data inside but doesn't waste any space.) Under Encryption, choose AES-128 (the only choice) and a maximum size from the Size pop-up menu that makes sense, e.g. a backup CD (700 MB) or DVD (4.7 GB).

3. Name your encrypted disk image and save it (e.g. to ~/Documents/). Click the Create button.

4. Choose a strong and secure password that you will never, ever forget. Leave the Remember Password checkbox unchecked, because otherwise anyone who gets at your computer while you're logged in can also access your encrypted files.

5. Disk Utility saves the disk image where you specified, with the name you gave and opens it as a virtual disk on your Desktop. It's as if you had a huge Zip disk that you kept under lock and key and inserted in your computer whenever you needed it.

6. Add the encrypted disk image file to your login items. Choose System Preferences > Accounts and drag the file into the Login Items tab. Now, whenever you restart or log in to your account, your Mac will ask you for your decryption password and mount the virtual disk on your Desktop. You can eject the virtual disk to protect the files if you're putting your computer to sleep, or even just stepping away from your desk.

7. For extra convenience, put an alias to the virtual disk in the Dock.

8. Check that everything works and erase the unencrypted originals. Choose Secure Empty Trash from the Finder application menu.

9. Finally, make sure you have a backup strategy that includes regularly copying the encrypted disk image to other media, some of which are stored offsite.