WiFi Networks

WiFi wireless networking is a gift that keeps on giving – well, once you get the WiFi network set up.

The core ingredient is a book-sized gadget called an access point, which will broadcast your Internet connection throughout your house. Each computer not directly connected to the access point by Ethernet cable will need its own WiFi receiver – a plug-in module for a desktop and an internal card for a laptop.

WiFi comes in two flavors: **802.11b**, which has a theoretical top speed of 11 million bits per second, and **802.11g** (54 million bits per second, although in each case actual speeds in practice don't get above half of those figures). Faster isn't necessarily better; the only real application for 802.11g's faster speed is zapping lots of data between computers. For simply sharing a cable or DSL Internet account, 802.11b is fine.

However, prices for 802.11g hardware have shrunk so quickly that I can't blame you for buying this faster version, just in case. You shouldn't need to spend more than $100 for an access point and $50 for a receiver. (Note to Apple: Yes, this means that your AirPort Extreme hardware, as stylish as it may be, is also ludicrously overpriced next to the competition).

Two other bits of advice: Make sure your access point includes its own firewall, which can secure the Internet connection throughout your house, and that all your WiFi hardware supports "WiFi Protected Access" (WPA), which will encrypt your connection against eavesdroppers much more reliably than the earlier "WEP" standard can.

Not sure about which vendor's hardware to buy? Look through the tech-support section of the manufacturer's Web site. If the answers and explanations posted there are written in terms you can understand, that's a good sign.

TOP TIPS

* You shouldn't need to spend more than $100 for a WiFi access point and $50 for a receiver.
* Make sure your WiFi access point includes its own firewall.
* 802.11b should be enough for most WiFi needs, but falling prices on the faster 802.11g standard make it an attractive alternative.