

# »» Firefox Enhance your browser with the best add-ons known to mankind

# Firefox: Boost

The list of Firefox add-ons is so long that it can become quite bewildering. **Juliet Kemp** gives you a helping hand by picking out a selection of the best.



One of the great things about *Firefox* is its use of add-ons: pieces of code that you can install to make your browser work just the way you want it. The full list of what's available can be found at <https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox>, but with somewhere in the region of 5,000 add-ons, it can be hard to know where to start, so we've compiled a list of some of the best to get you started.

Add-ons are easy to install: most of them can be obtained by going to the Tools > Add-ons menu option and searching for add-ons in the Get Add-Ons tab. You'll usually have to restart *Firefox* after installation for the changes to take effect.

Some add-ons have options you can set, which you access in the Extensions tab. This is also where you remove add-ons. Some add-ons will even install an item in the Tools menu that enables you to change settings. If you don't like the way an extension behaves, it's worth checking out its options and settings before you uninstall it.

The add-ons here were all tested in *Firefox 3.6*, which is the current stable version, but may not be the version shipped with your distribution. Most add-ons ought to work with anything over version 3.0, or you can install 3.6 from the Mozilla website at [www.mozilla-europe.org/en/firefox](http://www.mozilla-europe.org/en/firefox).



## Our expert

**Juliet Kemp** is a system administrator and writer who spends far too much time on the internet. She remembers the joy felt when tabs first appeared and immediately opened about 20.

## Part 1 Change the way your browser looks



### Fox Splitter

The first thing we'll look at is *Fox Splitter*, which enables you to split up your browser screen into multiple smaller windows, either vertically or horizontally. You can repeat this step as many times as you like.

Obviously, this is going to be more useful for you if you've got a large screen – if you're on a netbook, it's probably not worth it. But given enough space, it can be really useful, especially if you're doing something like research and want to be able to compare several pages side-by-side; or if you're writing a blog post/comment or an email and want to be able

to check whatever you're quoting from without jumping between tabs every few seconds.

One neat feature is the little red pin that enables you to synchronise scrolling between panes, so that as you scroll in the main pane, the synchronised pane does the same. This works both vertically and horizontally. Another one is the drag-and-drop support: drag a link to the middle of the right side of the current pane and a little arrow box shows up. Drop the link there and it'll open up in a new pane in the direction the arrow was pointing.



» *Fox Splitter* is a great way to view two websites alongside one another, and you can set them to scroll simultaneously.



### Stylish

*Stylish* makes it easy to change the style of particular sites. You can install a user-created style from the <http://userstyles.org> website (or elsewhere), or write your own styles. All of them are quick to install and easily managed via the S icon in the bottom right-hand corner of the status bar.

The <http://userstyles.org> site has over 23,000 styles available on it. Given their enormous popularity, it's perhaps unsurprising that the sites appearing most in the list seem to be Facebook, YouTube and Google. We liked YouTube Cleaned Up, which removes some of the cruft from YouTube; and there are many, many versions of YouTube with a black background available as well. Hello Kitty Facebook is also bizarrely popular. Each to their own...

# your browsing

You can search for styles applicable to a particular site, which can be useful. There are several *Guardian* and BBC styles available, often to produce a more minimal site experience. Quite a few styles block ads (but we'll look further at ad-blocking later on). We also found a Metafilter style that gives a black/blue on white background, which is far easier on the eyes than their normal murky blue.

Unfortunately, <http://userstyles.org> suffers from the same problem as any other site that relies on user-provided content: not all of the styles available are actually any good, or even do the thing that they claim they do. Plus, there's always the risk that a site will change its CSS template, which will also break the user style.

More useful is probably the interface that *Stylish* provides to help you write your own styles for a particular site. This makes it easy to set up a simple change (such as a background colour change) to your own specifications for a site you use regularly. Be aware that there's a possible security problem with user styles if they contain XBL bindings

## One-shot wonders

**FoxClocks** This shows the time in various parts of the world in the bottom bar of your browser. It's invaluable if you have colleagues or friends in other time zones and would prefer not to wake them up at 3 am.

**Automatic Save Folder** Set up where you prefer to save particular types of file, based on the filename.

**Better Gmail 2** Adds various features to Gmail, including hierarchical labels and an unread message icon on your

browser tab. It's a package of *Greasemonkey* scripts.

**RightToClick** Enables you to right-click and highlight part of a page that JavaScript doesn't want you to.

**SkipScreen** Skips the intermediate screens on some file sharing sites such as RapidDownload.

**Firebug** A must-have for web developers. This enables you to edit, monitor and debug HTML, CSS and JavaScript live.

(which can contain executable code). Styles on <http://userstyles.org> aren't allowed to include XBL bindings, but be wary of styles that come from elsewhere.

## Part 2 Navigate the web more easily



### GleeBox

Many people find that switching as much control as possible to the keyboard rather than the mouse is beneficial for backache and wrist strain. *GleeBox* gives you better keyboard access to your browser, which otherwise requires you to use your mouse a lot.

This is an experimental add-on, so you can't install it directly from the Add-ons window. You have to go to the Add-ons web page and click the Let Me Install This option to enable installation.

Once you've installed it and restarted *Firefox*, find a link in the current page that you want to open. Press G to bring up the *GleeBox* search and start typing the name of the link. When it's highlighted, hit Return to open it, or Shift+Return to open it in another tab. If there are multiple matches, you can hit Tab to move between them.

You can also set *GleeBox* up to search your bookmarks. If you visit links in your bookmarks particularly frequently, you'll no doubt find this useful. Enable it by checking the relevant box in the Features section of its Options screen.

*GleeBox* isn't restricted to links. You can also use it to navigate within a page. Hit G, then type **?h** to select all the headings (**h1**, **h2** and **h3** levels). Move between them with Tab and Shift+Tab. Further options include **!share t** to share the current page on Twitter (other services you can use include Gmail, Facebook, Digg and Delicious). Type **![bookmarkletname]** to run a bookmarklet with a particular name. We loved this last one for running the Zap bookmarklet we have that gets rid of all page formatting – great for when your random surfing comes across a page with hot pink text

on a yellow background. (To change the look of a site you visit regularly, have a play with *Stylish*, as mentioned above.)

*GleeBox* also interacts with YubNub, which effectively provides a 'command line for the web'. To try this out, press G and then type:

```
!xe -amount 100 -from USD -to GBP
```

You'll be sent to the [www.xe.com](http://www.xe.com) currency site, which will helpfully tell you how much \$100 is in pounds sterling today. Check out the *GleeBox* manual and the YubNub website for more, and to create your own YubNub commands.



### FireGestures

*FireGestures* goes the opposite way from *GleeBox* – it makes more commands accessible via the mouse only, without needing to go to one of the keyboard buttons. The default setting for most of the commands is to use what



### Quick tip

If you haven't already used *Greasemonkey*, try it – it enables you to customise any web page using JavaScript. See LXF118 for more.

» Browse the internet using your keyboard, thanks to the *GleeBox* add-on.

» If you missed last issue Call 0870 837 4773 or +44 1858 438795.

*FireGestures* calls Mouse Gestures (hold down the right mouse button and move the mouse), but various other gestures are also supported, including using the mouse wheel, the 'rocker' (hold down the left button and click the right, or vice versa), and mouse-plus-keypress.

We particularly liked the tab wheel gestures, which aren't switched on by default. These enable you to scroll the mouse wheel on the tab bar to switch between tabs. You can also scroll the wheel while holding the right button down to view a list of all tabs, which you can then continue to scroll down. The only downside with this option is that the list doesn't scroll, so if you've got so many tabs open that they run off the bottom of the screen (not that we would ever let our browsers get that cluttered...), you can't get to them this way.

By default, mouse trails are on, so you get a track in green of where *FireGestures* thinks your mouse has been, but fortunately, this is only when you're performing mouse gestures and not all the time. This is an improvement on other gesture add-ons we've used in the past, but it can be turned off if you find it annoying.

## Quick tip

Check out the Collections option on the Mozilla Add-ons page to get sets of add-ons that work well together.



### FastestFox Plus

*FastestFox Plus* (formerly known as *SmarterFox*) aims to speed up your web browsing in a number of ways. One feature we found useful almost as soon as we installed it is the Endless Pages facility. It detects if there's a Next Page link on a page (such as those found at the bottom of a blog), loads up the next page and dumps it underneath the current one as you scroll downwards. This makes it even easier to waste hours going back through blog archives, because now you don't even need to click a link to do so.

Another neat feature is the small bubble widget that pops up if you highlight a section of a web page, giving you the option to tweet the selection, or to look it up on various services. By default, these are Wikipedia, Google, or OneRiot (which indexes links shared on Digg, Twitter, and other social



› *FastestFox* has a **Also Search On** box and the search/Twitter widget is shown here next to the highlighted text.

sharing services), but you can change the options via the Tools > *FastestFox* menu. If you're tweeting the highlighted text, it does the right thing with links by giving both the label and the link. The widget is particularly handy if you're into using Twitter a lot, but it's also really useful for speeding up your searching.

*FastestFox* also enhances the search facility in the URL bar, to include results from a Google search for what you're typing in the drop-down, as well as the history search results that *Firefox* provides automatically. If you do a regular Google search, it will also provide suggested search refinements – click on one of these and it'll give you a refined search page. You can also search for **something book**, and it'll give you a set of Amazon links for **book**, but unfortunately this is for **amazon.com** only and not the UK site, and there's no option to change it.

You can disable any part of *FastestFox* from the Tools menu, so you can limit it just to provide the tools that you like and not those that irritate you.

## Part 3 Work with bookmarks



### XMarks

If you use *Firefox* on more than one computer, and you haven't got *XMarks* installed, you're missing out. *XMarks* enables you to synchronise your bookmarks

across more than one instance of *Firefox*. Just install the add-on, set up an account when you're asked to (or log into an existing account if you have one), and your bookmarks will be merged into your synchronised set.

This is massively useful if you regularly find yourself at home looking for a bookmark, then remembering that you saved it on your work computer, or if you have to transfer bookmarks between your laptop and desktop machines manually. Even better, it'll sync across different browsers, and now supports *Internet Explorer*, *Google Chrome* and *Safari*, as well as *Firefox*.

If you don't want all the bookmarks from your home computer being synchronised to your work machine, you can set up profiles to restrict which bookmarks are shared with other computers. This means you won't have all your work-related bookmarks cluttering up your personal machine at home, for example.

*XMarks* has a couple of other features that are less useful but still interesting to know about: it'll flag up the most-bookmarked sites on your Google search results, and if you click on the icon in the address bar, it'll tell you more about the site you're on, and suggest other similar sites that might be of interest to you. This is a handy way to discover new content on the web.



› The *Delicious* sidebar enables you to search your bookmarks from *Firefox*.



### Delicious Bookmarks

Rather than using your browser for bookmarking web pages, you may prefer to keep some or most of your bookmarks in a web-based service like Delicious, which enables you to tag and add notes to them, and then share your links with others. The *Delicious Bookmarks* add-on makes working with those bookmarks easier.

It installs three toolbar buttons: one for adding the current page to Delicious, one to open up a sidebar with all your Delicious bookmarks in for searching, and one to open your Delicious homepage. There's also Delicious's own toolbar,

which can show either recent bookmarks, tag bundles, or favourite tags. In theory, tags, tag bundles, and favourite tags can all be managed via the add-on, but in practice, it's usually more straightforward to do this on the Delicious homepage.

If you're a Delicious user, the tag-this-page button alone is worth installing this add-on for. The Save window it pops up enables you to add your own title, notes, and tags (there's also a suggested tags button) to choose a service to send your bookmark to, and to mark the bookmark as private. The ability to search your list of bookmarks from a sidebar is an added bonus.

## Part 4 Controlling your browser and privacy



### Flashblock

*Flashblock* has long been a favourite *Firefox* add-on for many users who find Flash content irritating and intrusive. *Flashblock* simply replaces any Flash stuff with a blank box and a little Play button in the middle. If you want to see the Flash content, click the button and off you go. If you don't, ignore the whole thing. It's just like magic.

You can specify particular sites to exclude from the block, which is useful if you frequent pages that aren't usable without Flash and you don't want to have to keep on clicking through. *Flashblock* is one of those lovely pieces of code that's straightforward, simple, and just works. Plus, you'll never get rickrolled again, which has to be a good thing.

what happens when it's not switched on. After five minutes of clicking around, we turned it back on with a sigh of relief. It's very strongly recommended indeed if adverts on web pages make you want to put a fist through your screen.



### NoScript

Another straightforward one, this disables JavaScript, Java, and other executable content. You can enable it from specific domains that you're happy to trust. Initially, you'll find that the vast majority of sites you visit will trigger the pop-up box along the bottom, warning you that scripts have been blocked. You can change the settings so that it doesn't display this box, and rely on the status bar icon instead, if you prefer.

There are simple options to permit a site to run scripts – temporarily or permanently – so as you surf, you'll teach *NoScript* what is and isn't OK, and it'll become less intrusive. However, if you spend a lot of time clicking around and reading new sites, you may find it a bit too much.

There are some changes you can make via the options, but ultimately, you may have to choose between paranoia and ease of browsing.



### BetterPrivacy

Many websites use 'Flash cookies', which are objects that store information to track users and keep details about them. Unlike regular browser cookies, Flash ones are excluded from the browser's privacy controls,

More importantly, even if you've set your browser up to delete all your cookies when you shut it down, Flash cookies won't be deleted. You can change these settings via the Adobe website, but the usability is, shall we say, not great.

*BetterPrivacy* fixes this, and enables you to control how long Flash cookies are kept for. You can also browse through the Flash cookies

that are already stored on your computer to see what's going on. We were somewhat

shocked at the size of the list on our test system, with some of the entries dating back to 2007. We deleted all of them, and haven't noticed any problems since doing this.

Note that, as with regular cookies, if you delete everything every time you shut down your browser, you may find yourself removing things that you actually wanted to save. You can set exclusions to prevent this though, which is useful.

*BetterPrivacy* is another must-have add-on if you're at all concerned about your online privacy. **LXF**

**“Unlike regular cookies, Flash ones are excluded from privacy controls.”**



### AdBlock Plus

You probably have this already, but it's worth mentioning again just in case there's someone out there who hasn't encountered it. *AdBlock Plus* blocks ads and banners of all sorts.

You can add things to block manually by right-clicking and choosing *AdBlock* from the contextual menu, or just subscribe to a content filter (either when you first run it or by going to the Preferences menu) and most ads will be blocked by the automatically updated filter. You can also exclude particular items from being blocked if you've got a false positive that's causing problems.

We've used *AdBlock Plus* for a long time, so we disabled it briefly while we were writing this tutorial to make sure it was still actually doing something, and thus worth recommending. We were both pleased (it is definitely working!) and faintly horrified (there's so much ad-related rubbish out there!) by

## Games and oddities

**Consciousness Bell** Plays a Tibetan bowl chime at random intervals to remind you to be mindful.

**about:kittens** Replaces the Firefox logo in the About box with a random picture of a kitten. Get your kitten fix here!

**Destroy the Web** We're pretty sure that this shouldn't be as much fun as it is. *Destroy the Web* temporarily turns any web page into a shoot 'em up game. Click on elements to destroy them (complete with explosion soundtrack!) and save your score at the end.



**› We couldn't resist juxtaposing this kitten with [www.dailymail.co.uk](http://www.dailymail.co.uk).**