

DIG THE DROID

> Thanks to an open policy that encourages sharing, Android, Google's mobile operating system, now runs on 79 percent of the world's smartphone and tablets. Android's astonishing popularity hasn't made it a generic, one-size-fits-all system. In fact, manufacturers have gone to great lengths to customize their Android-run products; all of the options can make the marketplace seem crowded, even overwhelming. This month, we'll cut through the clutter and provide recommendations on how you can go Android painlessly.

Best in Smartphones

When consumers choose Android over Apple iPhones, they're often doing so because of screen size. With a 5-inch screen — compared to the iPhone 5's 4-inch screen — the **Samsung Galaxy S4 Active** is our top recommendation. The phone has 16 GB of storage and retails for about \$199 at AT&T: www.samsung.com/us/mobile/cell-phones/SGH-I537ZBAATT.

The Active version of the Galaxy phone is water-resistant, so it will survive a splash in a flower bucket. (Samsung says it can withstand 3 feet of water for 30 minutes.) Unfortunately, the Active is only available through AT&T. If you must stick with another carrier, **the regular Samsung Galaxy S4** — also \$199 at most other carriers — is a good choice, too. (Just be careful around those buckets!)

DON'T BE CHEAP

If you buy an Android device, spring for the newest, top-line devices which feature the latest Android version, 4.3 or "Jellybean." (Google has a sweet tooth when it comes to naming — the next version 4.4 is named "KitKat.") Some manufacturers cut costs by loading devices with older Android versions; a third of still run on Android 2.3, according to OpenSignal. Older versions can be incompatible with the latest apps, be less secure and may run slower on less powerful, cheaper (if not free) smartphones you get when you purchase with a two-year contract.

Another option to consider is the **Google Nexus 4**, manufactured by Google in partnership with LG: www.google.com/nexus/4/. The Nexus isn't waterproof and its screen measures only 4.7 inches, but it's free of skins — the pesky, proprietary software and features that companies add on to enhance Android and position their products as unique. In practice, skins often sap the device's resources, leading to slow responsiveness and shorter battery life.

You can purchase the Nexus phone contract-free online or at your closest T-Mobile location. AT&T also carries the phone. In addition, many people opt for inexpensive, pre-paid providers, such as Straight Talk (StraightTalk.com).



FOR LAPTOP DIEHARDS Asus's Transformer offers the optional keyboard dock for touchpad-leary types.

Best in Tablets and Phablets

For tablets, **Samsung's Galaxy Tab** www.samsung.com/us/mobile/galaxy-tab is the obvious, solid choice. The tablet comes in a variety of screen sizes, from 7- to 10-inch screens, and ranges in price from \$199 to \$350.

If you want to ditch the laptop but still crave the "laptop feel," consider the **Asus Transformer Pad**, www.asus.com/Tablets_Mobile/Transformer_Pad_Products/ (\$350 to \$599 plus \$150 for the optional keyboard dock.) The Asus Transformer has an optional full QWERTY keyboard dock with a touch pad that adds more than 10 hours of battery life and a USB port.

Android tablets don't usually come with as much bloat ware, but both Asus and Samsung skin their tablets when



PHABULOUS Samsung's Galaxy Note II blends the best of a phone and a tablet.

they work alone. Here again, Google comes to the rescue with its new **Nexus 7**, manufactured with Asus, and the Nexus 10, with Samsung, <http://www.google.com/nexus/7/>. For speed, size and screen clarity, the Nexus 7's high-resolution 323 pixel per inch (PPI) is a winner, and especially good for aging eyes. The Nexus 7 is a great deal at \$229 for the 16 GB version, compared to Apple's iPad mini (retail \$329) and Samsung's Tab 3 (retail \$299), which are both more expensive with lower PPI (pixels per inch).

Before you buy a Kindle Fire HD, consider that Amazon built its own customized Android ecosystem for the Kindle and has replaced Google's Play Store with its Amazon App store. You'll find most of the common apps in Amazon (Facebook, Pinterest, Netflix, etc.), but it will not match the scope of apps found in the Play Store. Don't even consider a Nook; it's been discontinued.

If you don't mind holding a 6-inch screen to your head when you're making calls, phablets can be a good solution. The Galaxy Note II, www.samsung.com/galaxynoteII, is larger than a phone and smaller than a tablet — and it takes the place of both devices. Another good option in this hybrid category is the Asus Fonepad, www.asus.com/Tablets_Mobile/ASUS_Fonepad. 📖

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