Email Clients

by Andy Pepperdine

This time we look at alternatives to Thunderbird as an email client.

Geary

Geary is designed to work with Gmail, and other IMAP servers. Currently it does not have the ability to save messages locally, although their plans indicate it is on a list of things to do. It is fast, and automatically displays threads (or conversations, as it calls them) together so you can see all of them at once. Its other features are fairly rudimentary.

On first starting up, you will see a dialog that asks for details about your email account, and it has default settings for Gmail, Yahoo! and Outlook.com; selecting Other from the drop-down list will take you to a fuller dialog that asks for more details about the receiving and sending servers. It defaults appropriately to the standard ports for the communications with the server, but you can change those if you have a special case.

In the interface, the left pane contains the names of the accounts it is handling. At the top are the inboxes for each one. Then later each account can be expanded to show all the individual folders found on the Imap server. Typically, you would need to see those for when you wish to keep messages in separate places, or to clean out drafts or old archives, etc.

The centre pane contains headings for each conversation. Selecting one will show the full conversation in the right pane.

The icons at top left are all identified by tool tips seen when you hover the mouse over them.

The compose window always composes in a rich text format, so you can change the fonts, and provide simple formatting, like italics and bold. Or include hyperlinks into the text.

The top right of the window has the tools cogwheel to bring up the menu, and in the Preferences, you can set whether you want spelling checked. It appears that it will check only against the locale (i.e. the language for which your account I set up) you are currently working in, and cannot be changed, only turned off.

There are not, and to my knowledge no plans for, any encryption facilities.

For once, I can say that the help feature (via menu, or F1-key) is written simply and is useful. This is where you can see how to move messages to different folders, mark them with labels, and search the text of mail within a folder.

This is a simple fast emailer suitable for a travelling laptop where all the mail is held on a server, and local resource is limited.

Sylpheed

Sylpheed is a Thunderbird look-alike, but intended to be faster and with fewer bells and whistles. It seems to share some ancestry with Claws, but has more integrated into it and is more usable out of the box.

When starting up, it also asks for account details for your email, and can handle Gmail straightforwardly. It can handle both POP3 and IMPA4 servers.

It has an address book to which can be added any named attribute you like, which is less convenient, but more flexible, than Thunderbird.

The menus are obvious and in standard places. Local storage is handled by a special set of mailboxes which are set up by default when the application is first opened. Although it has the name Sylpheed, this can be renamed by right-clicking on the name and selecting Properties.

Whereas there are extra plugins, I did not try to get any. Also, although it can handle encryption builtin to the mailer, you have to do all the key management outside Sylpheed, which makes it less convenient than Enigmail on Thunderbird.

 It does not have a calendar, but otherwise it seems to have all the normal features you would want from an email client, like spell checking from a selection of languages that it can find automatically installed on your system.

Others

I considered other freely available clients, but found them difficult to install on the standard Linux Mint distribution with a Gnome-based window manager. Kmail depends on several background services, like Akonadi, for the support of the various databases for the address book, calendar and such like. These are not present normally and have to be initialised, a job that was not done automatically. I would not recommend it for the basic Ubuntu user.

However, if you have a KDE-based system, then Kmail is the default mailer and will simply work out of the box.

There are other popular mailers, but I discovered on checking the reviews, that often they are proprietary, and designed to work in an enterprise and had to work with Microsoft's Exchange. These are completely over-the-top for a simple private user.

References

Geary: https://wiki.gnome.org/Apps/Geary

Sylpheed: http://sylpheed.sraoss.jp/en/features.html