Question and Answer

We covered a good range of topics this time, and here is the summary of the discussions and suggestions. The order is mostly the order the topics appeared.

How do I know what Synaptic is telling me?

Synaptic is the name of the application that manages the individual packages in a Linux system derived from a Debian base, which is almost everyone involved in the Bath U3A group. It allows you to find packages with various characteristics. It's where you can go to get applications that have been suggested as an answer to a problem. In general it is more extensive than the Software Centre (derived from Ubuntu) and can give finer tuning if that is necessary, although for practical purposes for normal users like us, they are more or less equivalent.

When Synaptic is started, it will ask for the administrative password, because any changes that are made to the system will need to have suitable permissions. Then it will provide you with a window, whose contents will be determined by the left hand pane. A number of tabs are shown low in the left pane and these will filter what packages are displayed, which are more finely tuned by the headings in the upper part. All the tabs will list all the packages, but some are more useful than others. To see everything, that is available, then select Status from below, and start with All from the top.

In the list of packages, the status is marked in the little square to the left of each package name. To interpret them, then go to Help → Icon Legend, and full list of the options will be seen. Typically, you will be concerned with a blank square (not installed), a green square (installed) and a tick (to be installed).

To find a package, search for it by name or function in the search bar at the top. When you get the list, you can see whether you have it already installed or not. By clicking on the heading of a column, the display will change to show a list sorted in that column, which makes it easier to find what you are looking for. The default, is no sorting.

If you wish to install, then click on the icon box for the package, and select Mark for Installation. You may then be presented with another box which will inform you of what other packages will have to be installed to supply all the dependences which your request needs. If you see that, then accept the request; the package will not work without those others.

To complete the installation, click on the Apply icon at the top. When it has finished, you may see a completion box, which you need to accept before it will show the list of packages again.

For the inquisitive, Synaptic can also tell you a lot about each package. Select it in the list, and use either right click → Properties, or Package → Properties, and have a look.

It also can show the history of all the updates you have done. Look at File → History and see all the dates and what happened then.

A word about the Package Update Manager

On the main task bar on the desktop, there should be a shield icon (if you running Linux Mint), which indicates when update are available. Clicking it shows what is ready to be installed. You should normally take all those marked as category 1, or 2. Category 3 have not been tested, and are normally such simple fixes, or copied directly from the tested main streams that further testing is not thought necessary. Categories 4 and 5 are for special cases, and could cause you trouble.

To interpret the icons and symbols, look at Edit → Preferences and the Level tab. This will indicate what updates will be visible to you, and which ones you will accept, by means of crosses in the relevant boxes.

Secure e-mails

Another question was about secure e-mails, prompted by the announcement of Lavabit that it was working on a re-launch of its secure system. The problem with all these attempts to secure e-mail communications, is that it can only work if both ends of the message transfer know how to handle it. So using Lavabit will be secure really only when sending to another Lavabit account or address. It cannot encrypt to any other address.

The same is true of all similar attempts, like Proton mail.

And again the same for Whatsapp, or Signal, the security can only be achieved when both ends use the same system. I cannot see this changing in even the medium term, there is no pressure by anyone to create standards and insist they be followed. Even then, you will have to rely on these systems not to leak your data anywhere.

The other thing to note is that any company that provides e-mail addresses, will have to be paid for the servers and storage they will use, and if the e-mail has been encrypted, then they cannot use those messages in a commercial way for profit. Which, in turn, means they will not be free.

Firefox and videos

We have noticed that Forefox will not play more and more videos. Some of this is due to the labyrinthine script structures that the video sources have set up, and add-ons like NoScript can be fooled into blocking scripts that are needed.

But a more serious problem seems to be that Firefox is falling behind in providing all the necessary decoders for the video formats, because there is pressure to incorporate various restrictions on the use of videos via DRM.

In all the cases, where I have hit trouble, I've found that Chromium (on Linux) will show the video correctly.

File Transfer from one Machine to Another (FTP)

There are applications that can provide a GUI to use FTP to transfer files, for example from your desk to your website. But there is also a very useful add-on to Firefox, called FireFTP that will also do the job.

After your have installed it, it will show a page with two panes. The left is the local machine. Above that is a drop-down button that will enable you to give the account a convenient name, and define the connection parameters, such as the host to connect to, the login name and password, and on the Connection tab, the Port and security information. You can also define the local and remote directories to move to after the connection is made.

When the connection has been made, then the right pane shows the remote machine and by highlighting files in one, and using the central arrows, the transfer takes place in the requested direction.

Note: to find the add-on after installation, it is buried under Tools → Web Developer → Fire FTP, or from the main menu (three bars top right of Firefox window) → Developer.

If you want to transfer files from, say a phone or tablet, this way, then there are a number of suitable applications for the handheld devices. I use Wifi FTP. This will transfer over a connected wifi network. Note, however, that this will be safe enough when you are connected to your local wifi at home, but should not be used across a more public network, like a café or airport.

The device establishes an account to log onto and tells you what the IP address is to connect to and one what port. If you have set up your router to connect that device always on the same IP, then you can set up a fixed account in FireFTP for ease of use when transferring such things as photos, saving tangling up the cables.

Unpacking a Distributed Program

Sometime you want to obtain an application that is not in the repositories provided by your distribution. There are no standards for how this is done, and usually there is a Readme.txt file to help, although very often these are rather cryptic.

One example that had turned up was a file that ended in the extensions .tar.bz2. This is what is known as a compressed tar file. The bz2 implies the type of compression that is in use, so the receiver can decompress properly. And the tar is an indication that is the result of an archiving program called unimaginatively tar (originally for Tape Archive!). The tar program can combine one or more whole directory structures into a single file, and can be enormous. When decompressing such files, expect that they may take a considerable time to process.

After you have downloaded such a file, you should first place it where you want the contents to reside after you have expanded it. Then navigate to it in a file browser, and open it with the Archive Manager (double clicking should do it automatically). This will then decompress it and show in a window the list of contents, often a single directory and its contents, but could be several files.

Select all the contents, and hit the Extract button above. This will then expand the contents and place them in a directory structure that mirrors what was packed up into the archive. Then you can look inside and see and what you've got.

Launching Programs that are not in the Menu

After you have installed an application from some place other than the supported repositories, then typically it will not appear in the menu of available applications. The most practical thing you can do make it visible is create a so-called launcher on the desktop.

If you right click on the desktop background, you can select Create Launcher. From there the dialogue helps you through the process of defining the program to execute, and give it a convenient name, and comment for information. The little picture on the left is an icon. Clicking on it will take you to the standard place where all the icons are held – probably */usr/share/icons/hicolor/scalable/apps* . Unfortunately it does not show you what they look like, but you can find out by using a file browser to go to that same directory and let the thumbnails show the contents of all those files. Then you can select one that might do. Note that this is a system directory, and cannot be added to without administrative privileges.

If you are lucky, the program you installed may have supplied an icon for it, and then you can browse to where you have put it and pick it up from there instead.

Transferring e-mails for Thunderbird

In the end this problem was satisfactorily solved, so we did not consider it further. Here, I will merely say that there is a useful add-on to Thunderbird called ImportExportTools that will do a good job of extracting your e-mails from one place, and building a file that can be transferred for import at your target location. It should merge the mail messages form one to the other.

References

The references are included in each section above.