As consumers open their wallets again to buy new computers this spring, they'll face a wide variety of choices and price points, ranging from bargain PCs for as little as $299 to heavily equipped machines for thousands of dollars. This season, there aren't any big, new mainstream developments in the market, such as when tiny netbooks were introduced a couple of years ago. But there are some new processors and new graphics innovations.

To help guide you through these choices, here's my annual spring computer buyers' guide, a quick cheat sheet that tries to clarify some of the issues to make shopping easier.

I've focused on laptops, which now dominate the market, but most of this advice also applies to desktops. I haven't included the new generation of tablets, an emerging category that may eventually replace laptops for some users, but have instead focused on the traditional computers most consumers still seek.

As always, these tips are for average users doing the most common tasks. This advice doesn't apply to businesses or to hard-core gamers or serious media producers.

Cost: Last fall, I noted that manufacturers and retailers were striving to move buyers away from cheap netbooks to a somewhat pricier type of Windows laptop, variously called "thin and light" or "ultrathin." These typically cost $500 to $800, and have bigger screens and keyboards and better graphics. But you can still pay less. Netbooks, which usually run between $300 and $500, are hanging in and have improved, with higher screen resolutions and punchier graphics. A desktop tower can be had for $400 or less, and some stores carry a 15″ Acer laptop for just $299. Some dealers, including the Micro Center chain, even regularly knock $200 off the $999 price of Apple's entry-level MacBook laptop, despite the rarity of discounts for Apple products.

Processors: The big news on this front is Intel's new Core series of chips, called i3, i5 and i7, which is available in both PCs and Macs. Intel says all three are faster and more efficient than their predecessors. But the i5 and i7 also feature something called Turbo Boost, which hikes the speed when it senses it's needed, and turns off parts of the chip to save power during less-intensive tasks. Having said that, there's also nothing wrong with buying a PC that uses chips from rival Advanced Micro Devices, which can often cost less, and bargain shoppers can still do fine with older chips, like Intel's Core 2 Duo. Netbook buyers with limited needs should look for Intel's wimpier Atom processor.

Graphics: For the most common tasks—even video playback—integrated graphics, which lack their own dedicated memory, are adequate. So-called discrete graphics, which are almost like having a second processor, are more potent, especially for games. Some programs use them to carry out nongraphical tasks, which can improve speed and efficiency. But discrete processors suck up more battery life.

Now, a few Windows PCs are featuring a technology from graphics-chip maker Nvidia called Optimus that switches between the two types of graphics to save power. Apple has built a similar system into its latest 15″ and 17″ MacBook Pro laptops.

Windows vs. Mac: Microsoft's Windows 7 operating system is quite competitive with Apple's Snow Leopard operating system. And Windows PCs can be had for much less and in more varieties than Apple's lineup, the heart of which starts at $1,199. But Macs have their own advantages. Apple's hardware is handsome and reliable, and, in my tests, Macs usually boot faster than Windows machines.
Plus, Apple often scores highest on surveys of customer support, and Macs aren't affected by the vast majority of malicious software, which is overwhelmingly designed to run on Windows. Also, I consider Apple's built-in software excellent. By contrast, Microsoft has removed things like a photo organizer and basic email program from Windows 7. Some PC makers do include them, but in many cases, you'll have to download these from Microsoft or other companies.

Memory: Unless you're buying a bargain model, you should look for 4 gigabytes of memory, or RAM, on a new computer, and never settle for less than 2 gigabytes.
Hard disks: A 320-gigabyte hard disk should be the minimum on most PCs, though 250 gigabytes will do if price is crucial. On a netbook, look for at least a 160-gigabyte disk. Solid-state disks are faster and use less battery power but cost much more.
64-bit: Many models now use a 64-bit architecture, which allows properly written software to use more memory and run faster. If possible, buy 64 bit, which will become more and more important.

Touch: Windows 7 allows you to control the computer by touching the screen with your fingers, and some PC makers add their own touch-screen features. Make sure any touch-enabled PC you consider has a full multi-touch screen that supports all the Windows 7 gestures. Apple uses the laptop touch pad, or its new desktop mouse, as the multi-touch, finger-gesture, mechanism, instead of the screen.

As always, don't buy more machine than you need.

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