

SMART HOME

# How to pick a smart home platform

One connected lock does not a smart home make. If you want to get serious with home automation, start with a smart home platform.

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## Smart homes for smart people

When you first get started with home automation, you'll quickly find that your smart gadgets do even more when they work together. Yes, it's great that your smart lights can turn on automatically at sunset and your smart lock will lock itself,

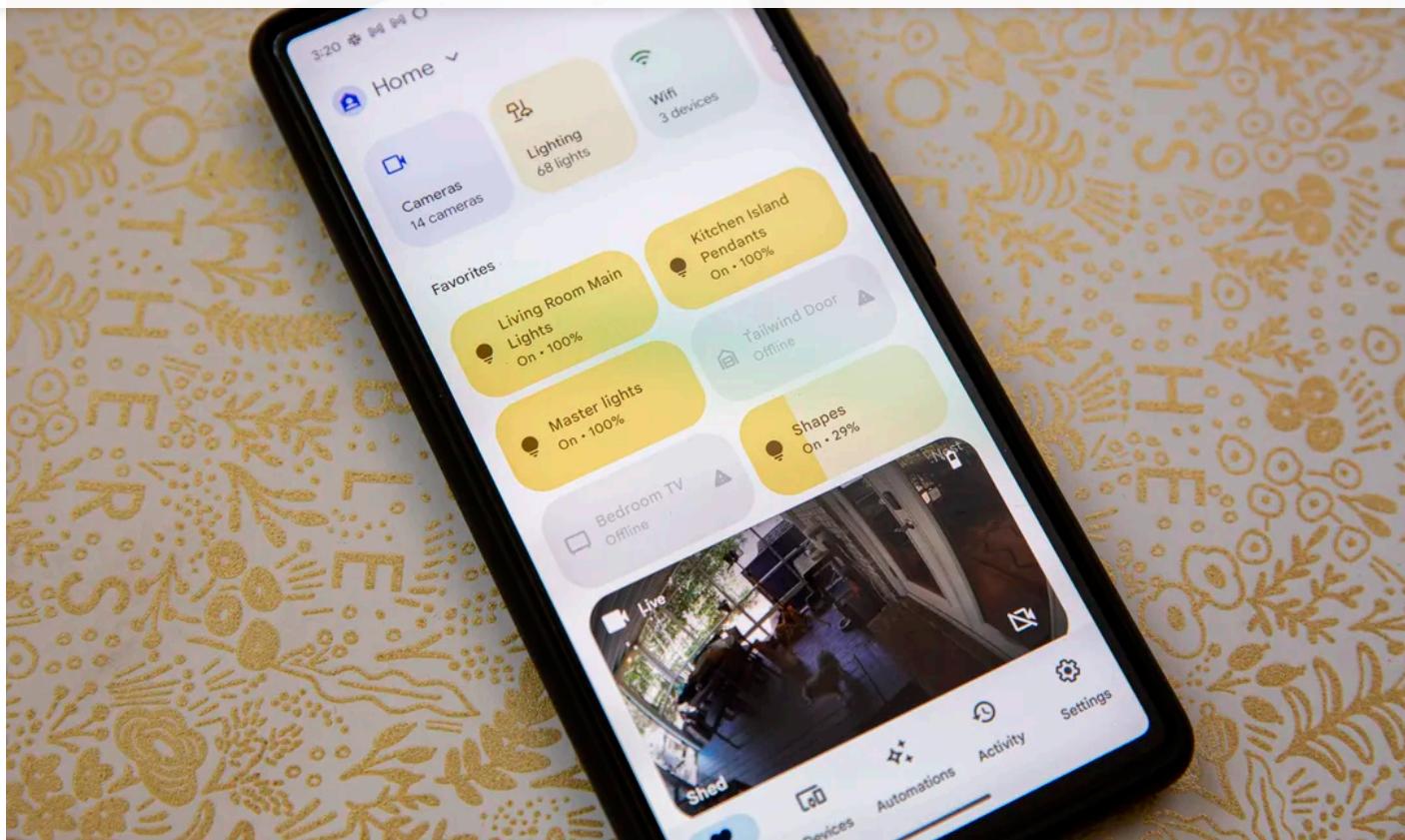
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having the shades lower, the lights turn off, the door locks lock, and the alarm system arm. For this, you need a smart home platform.

As a smart home reviewer, I am often asked which is the best platform to use. Is it Apple Home, Google Home, Amazon Alexa, Samsung SmartThings, or something else? I tend to tread carefully when making a recommendation. Picking a smart home platform is a commitment. This is something you're bringing into your home and will live with every day. I know from experience that it will make you both very happy and also drive you up the wall.

So, similar to how a therapist might guide you to the right decision, I'll help you choose the smart home platform for you by providing the tools you need to make that decision. I'll go over exactly what a smart home platform is, whether you need a hub, and give you my top tips for how to pick the best smart home platform for *you*.

## What is a smart home platform, and do I need one?

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*Google Home is a smart home platform you can use to control and manage multiple connected devices from a smartphone or tablet.* Photo by Jennifer Pattison Tuohy / The Verge

A smart home platform is a software framework that controls and manages multiple devices from multiple manufacturers, usually through a smartphone or tablet app. Most smart home platforms have a hardware component, such as a hub and / or a smart speaker / display (more on hubs in a bit). Of course, if you have a smartphone, you already have a smart home platform in your hand, although you'll want to add a hub or smart speaker for the fun stuff.

A smart speaker adds hands-free voice control to your smart home, and the voice assistant you choose will likely dictate the platform you use. A smart display also adds touch controls for smart home devices.

**To avoid frustration, my advice is to pick one platform and stick with devices that work with it.**



The advantage of a smart home platform is organization. It allows you to put all your connected devices in one app where you can organize them by groups. This

makes controlling things much easier. For example, grouping all the lights in the kitchen into a “Kitchen” group means you can hit a smart button or say, “Turn on the kitchen lights” and have all the lights turn on.

A smart home platform is also essential for creating automations (also known as scenes and routines) that make your home “smart.” These can run devices automatically based on certain triggers, such as time of day, when an action happens (motion in a hallway, a door locking), or a command to a voice assistant. Automations can do one task or many. For example, at 9PM every night, lock the back door; or, when the front door unlocks between 5PM and 8PM, have the smart speaker play a playlist, turn the lights to full brightness, and adjust the thermostat.

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You don’t need a platform to use smart home devices. If you have a couple of smart gadgets that largely look after themselves, such as a smart thermostat and a smart door lock, and you don’t mind using a couple of different apps, then don’t sweat it. But if you want to manage all your devices with one app, control them in groups using your voice, and maybe connect them all together into smart home automations, then picking a platform is pretty important.

Many devices can work across multiple ecosystems — for example, Nest security cameras work with Alexa smart displays, Ring doorbells work with Samsung smart fridges, and Ecobee thermostats work with every platform. But cross-platform compatibility is still complicated. Despite the new smart home standard Matter that’s designed to fix this (more on this later), we’re sadly still a long way from the point where you can buy any smart device and plug it in, and it will just work with your smart home.

## The Verge can work across multiple ecosystems, but cross-platform compatibility is still complicated

To avoid frustration, my advice is to pick one platform and stick with devices that work with it. I would also consider buying Matter devices when available, which work with all the major platforms. This means if Matter does succeed in making interoperability a nonissue, migrating to another platform will also be easier.

## Four things to consider when picking a smart home platform



If you have Amazon's smart thermostat, then the Alexa smart home platform will be a good choice. Photo by Jennifer Pattison Tuohy / The Verge

For most people, one of the four mainstream DIY smart home platforms — Amazon Alexa, Apple Home, Google Home, or Samsung SmartThings — is the best place to start. There are other options — the open-source Home Assistant, professionally installed solutions like Crestron, Savant, and Vivint, and smaller DIY platforms like



these will fit your needs, I'd recommend starting with one of the generally less expensive, more mainstream options.

To help choose which one will work for you, ask yourself these questions:

### Which smartphone do you use?

Your smartphone comes with a smart home platform built in. If you use an iPhone, then Apple Home is an excellent option. Samsung Galaxy users will find SmartThings integrates really well with their devices — the same with Google Pixel and the Google Home platform. While Amazon doesn't have a phone (its Alexa app works on iOS and Android), if your family uses Amazon's Fire tablets or already has an Echo Dot, Alexa will fit in well. But keep in mind that while you can easily use Alexa, SmartThings, or Google Home with an iPhone, you can't use Apple Home with Android.

In short, the more personal computing devices you already have in an ecosystem — smartwatches, tablets, laptops, plus media devices like speakers or streaming sticks — the better that dedicated ecosystem will work for you. If you're in a household with multiple different smartphone ecosystems, you'll need a platform or platforms that works with everyone's devices.

### Which devices do you already own?



The next thing to consider is which smart devices you already own. All of the major players have key pieces of hardware that allow their platforms to do more in your home. If you have a smart speaker or streaming device from Apple, Amazon, or Google, you've got a good foundation for building your smart home on that platform. These add voice control and can act as a hub for controlling your devices when you're away from home.

If you already have a smart device like an Amazon smart thermostat or Google Nest video doorbell, you should consider that platform first. Similarly, if you already have some smart lights, a smart lock, or maybe a smart security system, check to see which platforms your existing devices are compatible with before picking your platform. However, remember that many smart devices work across multiple ecosystems, so you aren't necessarily stuck with the one you started with.

## Which is your favorite voice assistant?

Do you love Alexa's fart jokes? Are you a Google search addict? Do you like your voice assistant to be pretty but not so smart (\*cough\* Apple)? The three main voice assistants are Amazon's Alexa, Apple's Siri, and Google Assistant (sorry, Bixby!), each of which has a distinct "personality." The one you get along with best will be key to picking the platform you want to use. (Samsung SmartThings works with both Alexa and Google Assistant).

All three work well for smart home management, letting you control connected devices with your voice. "Hey Siri, turn on the lights." "Hey Google, turn on the TV."



"Hey, unlock the door." All can be used with a smartphone or tablet, but for smart home control, they work better with a smart speaker or display so that anyone in

your house can summon them.

Smart speakers and their screen-toting siblings also have more functions. They can work as home intercoms, listen for things happening in your home when you're away (such as smoke alarms or glass breaking), and function as a chime for a video doorbell. With a screen, they can also show livestreams from a security camera: "Hey Google, show me who is at the front door."

## Which features do you want?

Along with automating your gadgets, a smart home platform can add new abilities to them. Deciding what you want your smart home to do for you will help you choose which platform will fit your needs. We have deep dives into each platform coming this week, but here are some examples of features each platform does well:

- Apple Home's HomeKit Secure Video platform provides a secure way to use connected cameras in your home, with all the processing done locally on an Apple TV or HomePod before being securely stored in your iCloud account.
- Samsung's SmartThings Energy is an energy management system that monitors your home's energy use (through compatible devices — largely Samsung appliances for now) and provides proactive tips to help you save energy.
- Amazon's Alexa Hunches feature uses AI to learn your routines and suggest helpful actions — such as reminding you if you've left your door unlocked at night.
- Google Home's presence-sensing feature can automatically adjust your home based on whether there is anyone in it.

## What's a smart home hub, and do you need one?



*The Apple TV 4K Wi-Fi + Ethernet is an Apple Home Hub, a Matter controller, and a Thread border router.* Photo by Chris Welch / The Verge

You don't *need* a smart home hub to run a smart home, but it can do more with one. A smart home hub is the brains of your smart home platform, managing and controlling your devices in your home. While the smart home app on your phone largely does the same thing, when you leave the house with your phone, your smart home has to rely on the cloud to operate. With a hub in your home, everything on the platform can still run automatically and, in some cases, run locally on your home network. This means your lights will still turn on even if the internet is down.

The traditional smart home hub has been a small plastic box packed with home automation radios that you plug into your router and which acts as a translator for devices that use different smart home protocols, such as Z-Wave, Zigbee, Bluetooth LE, Thread, and Wi-Fi. But the concept of a hub has changed in the last few years, and that type of multi-radio hub is more suited for advanced setups, particularly if you want to use Z-Wave devices. Some options include Hubitat, Homey, and the Aeotec Smart Home Hub.

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## What Is Matter?

Matter is a new smart home interoperability standard designed to provide a common language for connected devices to communicate locally in your home without relying on a cloud connection. It is built to be secure and private, easy to set up, and widely compatible.

Developed by Apple, Amazon, Google, and Samsung (and others), Matter is an open-sourced, IP-based connectivity software layer for smart home devices. It works over Wi-Fi, ethernet, and the low-power mesh networking protocol Thread and currently supports over 20 device types. These include lighting, plugs and switches, thermostats, locks, security and environment sensors, refrigerators, dishwashers, smoke alarms, air quality monitors, and more.

A smart home gadget with the Matter logo can be set up and used with any Matter-compatible ecosystem via a Matter controller and controlled by them simultaneously, a feature called multi-admin.

Amazon Alexa, Google Home, Samsung SmartThings, and Apple Home are some of the major smart home platforms that support Matter, along with hundreds of device manufacturers.

Today, hubs have become more general-purpose, and all four platforms have variations on the concept. The Apple TV and HomePods are Apple Home Hubs, Samsung SmartThings has hubs built into its TVs and other devices, and Google's Nest Hubs are smart displays that support Thread. Amazon Alexa's Echo (fourth-gen) speaker and Echo Show 10 (second-gen) smart display are smart home hubs because they support Zigbee, unlike the company's other smart speakers and displays. If you use any of these platforms, having one of these hubs will expand the functionality of your smart home.



It's worth quickly mentioning bridges here, which are sometimes called hubs, just to confuse things further. Generally, a bridge controls one protocol and is

manufacturer-specific — such as Philips Hue's bridge which controls its Zigbee-based smart lighting system, or Aqara hubs which control its smart home devices. Bridges can connect to smart home hubs to add their devices to that platform.

All the major platforms have added Matter controller functionality to their existing hubs, meaning you may already have one in your home. Matter controllers do the same thing as a smart home hub — they connect devices (specifically, Matter devices) to each other and to the internet and allow you to control them through a smart home platform. A key benefit of Matter is that it works locally in your home over Wi-Fi and Thread protocols.

Matter is not a smart home platform, nor is it technically a protocol. Rather, it's a new communication standard designed to make it easier for smart home devices to work together and with every platform. You can use Matter devices with Apple Home, Google Home, Amazon Alexa, Samsung SmartThings, Home Assistant, and others. This is designed to make it easier to buy connected devices because if something works with Matter, it should work with all of the major smart home platforms.

The smart home can be a daunting prospect, and a smart home platform makes it easier to get started with connected devices and to get the most out of them.

Whether you choose Apple Home, Google Home, SmartThings, Amazon Alexa, or another option, picking a platform can take your home from automated to smart.

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