

Underneath the Apple Logo

by Craig Savage

In the top left corner of the Macintosh's main menu sits a picture of an apple. Using your mouse to click on that apple lowers a menu of desk accessories (DAs), small applications that I find invaluable. The typical Mac user's DA menu might include different types of calculators, a contact database with built-in phone dialer, Notepad, Scrapbook, a spell checker, a thesaurus, Find File, and dozens of other can't-live-without productivity enhancers (not to mention the not-so-productive games and puzzles).

What makes these DAs so handy is that you can access them at all times, regardless of what program you are in. The data generated in them can be cut and pasted into other applications with just a few clicks of the mouse. For instance, when you get a figure on your calculator, you can cut and paste the number onto an invoice, letter, or spreadsheet. Scrapbook, a DA that comes with the Mac, lets you store logos, headings, and boilerplate text that can be cut and pasted over and over.

Some Handy DAs

The following are several of my favorite DAs, some of which I use daily.

Calculator Construction Set. This is a calculator "erector set," complete with number keys,

function buttons, and paper tapes that you configure any way you please. It's also available in pre-made calculators such as Blue Print, which lets you work in feet and inches (see Figure 1). Calculator Construction Set (Dubl-Click Software, 9316 Deering Ave., Chatsworth, CA 91311; 818/700-9525) also includes Rafter Man, Stair Maker, Architect, and Surveyor. These calculators are set up for specific tasks. Rafter Man, for instance, provides some shortcuts for computing rafter design.

Customizing these calculators will save you time and help make your figures more accurate. They are also invaluable if you do a lot of estimating. For example, a drywall contractor could set up a key that multiplies the lineal feet of a wall by eight for exterior walls, and another button that multiplies by sixteen for interior walls. The results can be printed on your "tape" and then cut and pasted onto an invoice.

Other calculator DAs emulate popular calculators, like the Hewlett Packard 12-C or the Texas Instruments Business Analyst II. If your keyboard has a number pad, these DAs can help you free up some desk space by getting rid of your desk calculator.

Simple Span. This is probably my favorite DA. Simple Span and its companion, Back Span (Arch Software, 1549 Teakwood Ave.,

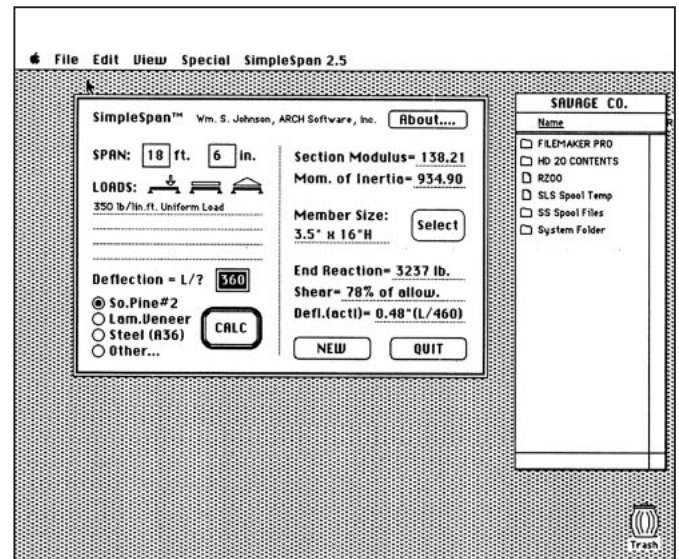


Figure 2. Simple Span calculates simple beam sizes, as well as spans for floor joists, roof rafters, and girders. This screen appears right over the screen of the program you're working on.

Cincinnati, OH 45224; 513/681-1642), are beam stress and sizing programs that take full advantage of the Mac's Graphic User Interface. You can call up Simple Span during whatever program you're in the middle of, which, in my case, is usually the Excel spreadsheet. The Simple Span screen conveniently pops up directly over your other work, which avoids a lot of moving from file to file (see Figure 2).

Simple Span is used for simple beam calculations, including three different load types: point, uniform, and increasing. Simple Span can also be used to calculate the span of floor joists, roof rafters, and girders. Back Span is used for cantilevered beams.

To arrive at a beam size using Simple Span, first type in the span, then click on the loading icon. That will bring up a box that you fill in with the type of load. In the example in Figure 1, I used 350 pounds per lineal foot, equally distributed, and then clicked on the southern pine wood species. Next I clicked on the calculate button and Simple Span figured the section modulus and the moment of inertia. Finally, you are led through boxes that let you optimize the beam size. You can then print out a diagram and an analysis before returning to your other work.

Convert Units. This DA is

great for unit comparisons. For example, I once wrote an article on Swedish prefabricated housing and needed to calculate the metric equivalent of some R-values. I wasted hours thumbing through conversion tables and pounding the calculator trying to covert BTUs to Joules and Joules to cords of western hemlock. With Convert Units (GraphicText Applications Inc., 815 Princess Ave., Vancouver, BC V6A 3E5, Canada; 604/255-8077), this could have been accomplished with three clicks of the mouse.

Acta. Documents produced with Acta (Symmetry Corp., 8603 E. Royal Palm Rd., Suite 110, Scottsdale, AZ 85258; 602/844-2190) resemble the formal outlines you had to produce in high school English class. Acta actually creates highly detailed, easily accessible lists that may help in tracking a job or just in planning your day.

The lists are capsulized for easy reference. But click on one of the items in the list and it expands into a series of nested topics. For example, the main topic could be a job name, such as Smith. Click on Smith and the list expands to 16 topics ranging from general conditions to subs to inspections. Each of these may have countless subtopics and sub-subtopics. So with three clicks of the mouse you can move from job name to paint

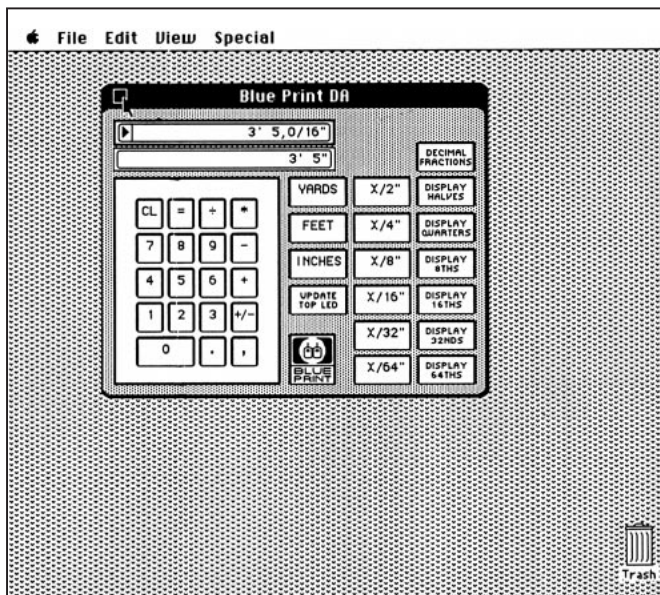


Figure 1. Blue Print is a computerized desk accessory that helps you calculate in feet and inches.

subcontractor to paint colors. All the information you need, from the most general to the most detailed, can be accessed with a few clicks of the mouse. Acta is also a great place to store phone numbers, which is why the new version has a built-in phone dialer.

On Location. This DA is pure magic. On Location (On Technology, 155 Second St., Cambridge, MA 02141; 617/876-0900) essentially turns your hard disk into a database. It lets you speed to any file you need on your hard disk by simply entering a key word or text from that file. The file is found within one or two seconds.

Once the word is located, you are shown the path to the file that contains the word. You can open the file immediately in a text format or you can launch the program. This is especially useful if you're searching for an invoice or some text from a contract. It's also a good, fast substitute for the Mac's desktop. On Location lets you print, copy, move, delete, rename, and make new folders without having to go to the Finder.

Other Favorites

I often use WordFinder, a quick and easy thesaurus. And almost every day I bring up Desk Draw, an elegant and cheap drafting tool for simple shop drawings. Lots of users tell me they like Address Book Plus, a telephone directory and automatic dialer. Others swear they couldn't live without Calendar Maker, a glorified appointment book, or Init Picker, which lets you organize initial documents. I normally have about ten DAs installed at a time, but some people have hundreds and need to use a special DA, called Suitcase, to handle them all. DAs are like your favorite small hand tools. You go to them when you need to do a specific job and then you carefully put them away when you're done. ■

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