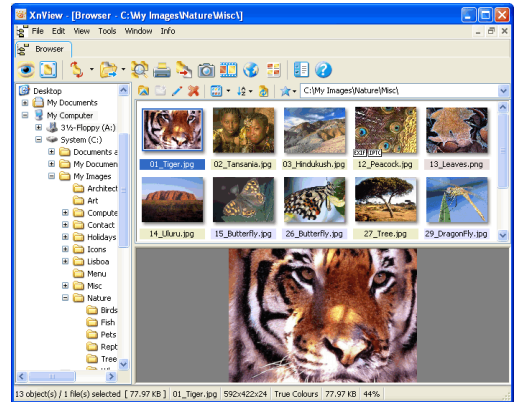


Digital Darkroom - free and low cost programs for digital photographers

By Martin Lamprecht

The question of what image editing and organizing / workflow software to use at various skill levels, is something often asked by photo amateurs new to digital photography. Listening to the advanced photographers and watching image editing presentations,

one could be forgiven to think that the only software programs for photographers are **Photoshop**, **Lightroom** and **Aperture** (for Mac users). While these are very capable programs that those who use them would not want to be without, there is certainly a number of very interesting alternatives out there, some with similar capabilities and feature, available at a fraction of the cost. On a personal note, I find it a bit disturbing when people use terms like “photoshop-ing (Xerox-ing, FedEx-ing etc.) something”. Why would I promote companies for free who



nearly dominate their markets, helping them crush competition (which helps me as a consumer)? This is not a rant against Photoshop at all, but rather an attempt at pointing out that there are still choices and alternatives that I consider worthwhile recommending. Some of them lower cost programs that are excellent and made right here in Canada for the world markets. Again, Photoshop is great and unless you are already a Pro and are sure that this is the program you want to use in the long term, I recommend getting into the easier **Photoshop Elements** first. This program has more than enough features for most photographers and is affordable.

Here are some suggestions for free programs, followed by recommendations for low cost programs that serve advanced amateurs and pros.

Free Programs for the learning photographers

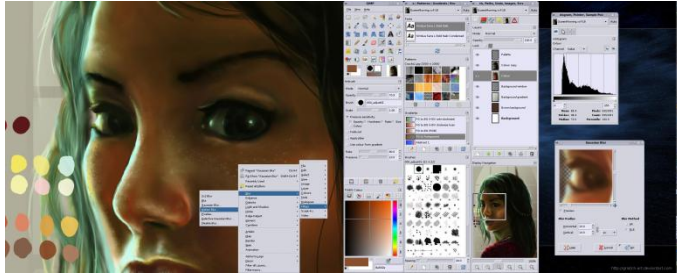
What if you want to start out and not spend ANY money on software? Well, there are very good freeware programs that cost nothing to download and use.

Most of us have heard of, or used, Google’s **Picasa** (<http://picasa.google.com>), possibly the most popular ‘freebee’ photo program, thanks to the marketing power of Google. It is free and fairly good for many essential image organization and editing tasks. Personally, I never quite warmed up to its interface and tool set. It tends to be a bit patronizing by going into your computer’s hard drive without asking and searching and tagging anything that it ‘thinks’ should be organized and displayed. But it is worth a try, to see if this works for you.

My favourite free image editing program is **XnView** (<http://www.xnview.com>). It has a clean and easy-to-understand interface and quite a nice set of tools for most things you want to do with your image files, including batch processing (like resizing a batch of images to a smaller size for e-mails, slide shows

or uploads). There is a slide show tool and much more, all supported with a detailed and illustrated on-line tutorial.

Another freeware program that I have used and found quite user-friendly and easy is **IrfanView** (<http://www.irfanview.com>). Like XnView, it has a clean and simple interface that makes it easy to get started.



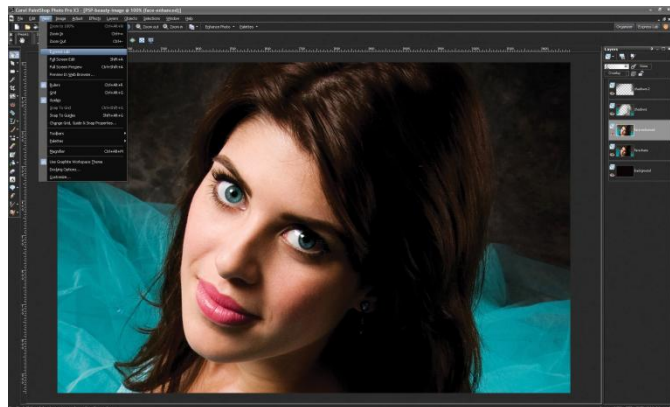
A free image editor with tons of high end features is **GIMP** (<http://www.gimp.org>), a product of the Open Source programming world. It is available for Windows, Mac and Linux (the free operating system from the Open Source community, for which it had been developed originally). This, like Open

Source programs in general, is more for the computer tinkerer among us. The reward is a full featured program for high end users, all for free.

Commercial programs for advanced photographers (low cost / high value – made in Canada)

Corel PaintShop Photo Pro X3

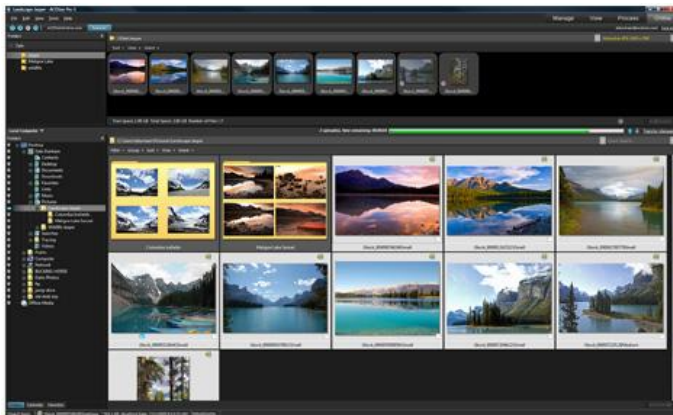
In early February 2010, Corel (www.corel.com) released its newest version of **Corel PaintShop Photo Pro X3** (could they come up with a more complicated, easy-to-forget name?). Since I have used the earlier versions, I had my boxed retail product within a few days, eager to find out how it has evolved and improved. In its early days, the program has undergone a colourful development history in the hands of various owners. Finally, Corel bought it from Ulead a few years ago and started to do some major overhaul of the product. I used and liked the X2 version, but found that it took long to load. Consequently, I rarely used it. The new version is much improved in this and many other ways. The value for the money is incredible. I am seeing some promotional offers directly from Corel for C\$90.00 for the full program and C\$70.00 for the upgrade from earlier versions. For that, you are buying a refined, feature-rich program that could make you forget PhotoShop all together. It is easy to learn with the help of the "Learning Center" that guides you every step of the way, while getting familiar with the many features (it can be turned off, once you no longer need its guiding hands). While it is easy to learn and use, it is no stripped-down budget program. It has everything you may ever need,



including layers and masks. There are tools for batch processing of many tasks, RAW file management, a “Smart Carver” tool to cut objects out and paste them on new backgrounds, vibrancy tool, and the list goes on. Until recently, I thought that one limitation I would have to accept at the lower price of PaintShop Photo Pro is the inability to use the many third party plug-ins from companies like NIK. Neither Corel nor NIK and others promote this much, but PaintShop Photo Pro is compatible with plug-ins that are compatible with Photoshop. In fact, I tried this out with the NIK Color Efex Pro plug-in and it worked perfectly. This expands the possibilities with this Corel program tremendously, but it also gives you an opportunity to blow \$600.00 on plug-ins for a \$90.00 host program! PaintShop Photo Pro X3 even has HD video tools.

ACDSee Pro 3

For some time, my “bread & butter” photo managing and editing program has been **ACDSee Pro**, also a Canadian product (this one from B.C.). The recently released version 3 has undergone a major upgrade



to make it one of the best photo workflow products in the market at any price. It now vastly improves the RAW image workflow and has an expanded set of rich editing features, including the ability to correct lens flaws. It also makes batch processing very easy, has slide show and web page creation tools. It is a bit more expensive than the above Corel product, at \$190.00, but can often be had for less during promotions, somewhere in the \$120.00 range (my upgrade was under

\$90.00). I like the program’s fast start-up and easy ‘slide sorter’ interface that gets me organized with my images quickly and easily. Like the Corel product, it uses ‘non-destructive’ image editing processes. I found that the latest version forced me to re-learn many steps in photo editing workflows, as the interface and tools have had a major rework. But in the end, it encourages shooting in the superior RAW image format, with its new streamlined and expanded workflow features.

I have come to use both of the above programs for my image file handling and editing, very much like other photographers use both Photoshop and Lightroom as complementary tools in their digital darkroom. **ACDSee Pro 3** is my day-to-day initial editing program, for viewing, organizing, batch processing and editing. I also use it to create my image galleries that I upload to my photography website. For editing tasks that go a bit deeper, I go to **PaintShop Photo Pro X3**. So, they have become my lower cost Lightroom and Photoshop clones and I will likely never miss anything those costly products have.

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