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Best iPhone Alternatives: Android Smartphone Guide

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No new notifications You'll get updated when important things are happening, and when you engage with our community. I'll admit it: I think the base version of Google's Android platform is a little rough around the edges-especially when compared with the iPhone, which not only "just works," but is beautiful too. Sure, Android is cool because it's hackable and open-source: If you're willing and able, you can root your phone and make it look exactly as you want it to. That said, not everyone is comfortable with hacking a phone just to get a pretty interface. Luckily, you have some easy ways to make your Android device more attractive without hacking it. You'll find two types of wallpaper for Android phones: regular, static wallpaper, and dynamic, "live" wallpaper. Live wallpaper is nifty-especially when you're showing off your Android handset to iPhone users-but it can drain your phone's battery and bog down its software. The key to choosing live wallpaper is to make sure that isn't too animated. Excessive animation not only negatively affects your phone's system, but also makes your phone look cluttered and busy. Here are a few simple, appealing live wallpapers to get you started. Nightfall Live Wallpaper Free Developer: Jason Allen Price: Free In this wallpaper you get a slowly swirling purple-and-blue night sky, with a silhouette of trees in the foreground. The full version, which costs about \$1.50, allows you to change the foreground silhouette and turn the moon and stars on and off. Shake Them All Developer: Yougli Price: Free This cute wallpaper uses your phone's accelerometer to propel Android droids across the screen. You can customize everything from the color to how the droids react to things (they can respond to light, music, acceleration, and gravity). Wave Live Wallpaper Developer: Crazy Zen Lab Price: Free This soothing wallpaper is inspired by the PlayStation 3 and PlayStation Portable background waves. The free version includes 11 colors, three background types, and two touch-point icons, while the full version (\$1) gives you more color options and a few other interesting features (such as shaking the phone to change the color). Best Matrix Live Wallpaper Developer: A.O.I. Studio Price: Free Who doesn't like The Matrix? True nerds (like myself) might notice that the imagery here isn't completely identical to The Matrix's raining code, which uses backward Japanese characters-but it's still pretty cool. Aurora Live Wallpaper Developer: Ketsoyan Price: Free This simple, purple-hued wallpaper simulates the Aurora Borealis. Tapping the screen produces bursts of stars. You know those neat widgets that you can place on your phone's home screen? They're Android-only-nothing for iPhone users here. Of course, not all widgets are created equal. While most provide useful information, many are bulky and unattractive. Here are some widgets for your home screen that are both practical and classy. SwitchPro Developer: Droid Shogun Price: \$1 This widget remakes your home screen's toggle switches (for turning Bluetooth, Wi-Fi, and the like on and off). Not only are SwitchPro's switches nicer than Android's (and customizable), but you'll also find a lot more of them, including switches for autorotate, vibration/silent mode, and flashlight. BatteryTime Lite Developer: Motalen Price: Free BatteryTime Lite is a free battery-monitoring widget/app that puts a small battery icon on your home screen. The widget shows approximately how much charge your phone has left, and you can tap on the widget for more details. Clockr Developer: Zehro Price: Free Clockr is an absolutely gorgeous clock widget. It's not like your regular clock widgets: It's text-based, which means you see the time as, say, "eight fifty seven" instead of "8:57." This simple app is a great way to add a touch of modernity to your home screen. It's customizable, too-it offers multiple ways to display the time, as well as various color combinations. Text With Style If you're like me, you text a lot. And let's be serious: The Android texting app just isn't that attractive. Fortunately, some supercharged Android texting apps out there let you do things such as add backgrounds, colors, and even custom LED notification lights to your texts. These apps don't modify the original texting app-they're separate systems-so unless you enjoy being notified twice about text messages, it's a good idea to turn off your default texting app's notifications. Here are a couple of texting apps to check out. Handcent SMS Developer: Handcent admin Price: Free Handcent is a customizable texting app that lets you change the look of your texts. Handcent puts texts in bubbles-similar to the iPhone's texting interface-which can be easier to look at. You can tweak the bubbles, text, background, and text-entry box with colors and fonts. Handcent also allows you to change the color of your LED notification light, and it gives you the option of having pop-up notifications when you receive texts. ChompSMS Developer: ChompSMS Price: Free Although ChompSMS is very similar to Handcent, I find it slightly more aesthetically appealing. This app also puts your texts in bubbles, and lets you change the look of your texts with colors and fonts. You can change your notification light color here as well, and choose to receive pop-up notifications when you receive texts. ChompSMS also lets you turn ads off-providing that you donate \$6 via PayPal. If you want to customize more than just your phone's home screen, you might think about downloading a home-screen-replacement app from the Android Market. Such apps let you replace your phone's default launcher with a customized dock, change the way your app drawer works, and make over your phone with custom icons and themes. ADW.Launcher Developer: AnderWeb Price: Free ADW.Launcher Is a free app that lets you personalize your home screen and app drawer. It replaces your desktop launcher with a customizable dock, where you can drag and drop apps. It also has options for simplifying the look of your phone: You can hide the notification bar, hide icon labels, and modify the number of rows and columns on the desktop. Themes for ADW.Launcher are available, too-you can make your own or download premade themes from the Android Market. Themes usually include custom icon packs and custom docks. The paid version, ADWLauncher EX (about \$3.30), has even more options. LauncherPro Developer: Federico Carnales Price: Free Another home-screen-replacement app that allows you to customize your Android phone, LauncherPro lets you increase the number of home screens (up to seven), hide app drawer apps, and loop your home screen. LauncherPro also offers themes, icon packs, and a scrollable shortcut dock, as well as an Expose-like feature that lets you see all of your home screens at once. LauncherPro Plus Unlocker, the paid version of LauncherPro (about \$3.50), features exclusive widgets. Now you have some good ideas for customizing your phone's interface. That said, you don't have to install every single one of these apps right away-play around with styles, colors, and widgets, and see what looks best. LAS VEGAS - CES is not a big show for big-name phone makers, which leaves room for smaller players to make a splash. One such company is Planet Computers, which is showing off its crowd-funded Cosmo Communicator.Like the company's earlier Gemini PDA, the Cosmo (\$799, \$569 for early orders) is definitely a throwback to the Nokia Communicators of old, with a laptop-like design and chunky physical keyboard. But Planet Computers has made a number of enhancements.For starters, the keyboard is now backlit, and there's now a 2-inch OLED display on the outside that displays notifications. And because it's a touchscreen, you can do things like make calls without opening the main 6-inch display. There's also a fingerprint sensor on the front and NFC for payments.MORE: Best Smartphones - Here Are the 10 Best Phones AvailableThe Cosmo Communicator now has beefier specs on the inside, too, including a MediaTek Helio P70 processor, 6GB of RAM (up from 4GB) and 128GB of storage. The company says that the device will run Android 9 Pie, or you can opt for Linux or Sailfish OS.I didn't get a chance to try the 24-MP main camera, but the 5-MP selfie cam looked a bit grainy on the preproduction sample of the Cosmo. The 4,220 mAh battery is certainly robust, but it also has a big device to power, so we'll have to see how it fares in our web surfing battery test.My biggest complaint with the Cosmo is the weight. At 11.2 ounces, this is easily the heaviest smartphone out there. But then again, this is more than just a typical phone, and some people may be willing to deal with the extra bulk in exchange for a real keyboard.The Cosmo Communicator should be available in June, but you can order one now on Indiegogo. We hope to bring you our review as soon as units become available.Photos: Tom's GuideThe Most Anticipated Smartphones — New Phones Coming Out The iPhone X set the stage for \$1,000 flagships back in 2017. Samsung's Galaxy Note 9 wasn't far behind, with the phone launching at \$929. Ever since then, phone prices have been regularly trending upward, and the latest Android flagships now start off at \$1,000. The regular Galaxy S20 retails for \$1,000 (opens in new tab), with the Galaxy S20 Ultra starting off at \$1,400. Then there's the Verizon-exclusive Motorola Edge+ - which also costs \$1,000 (opens in new tab), and even Xiaomi is getting in on the action with the Mi 10 Pro, which retails for €999 (\$1,080) in the UK.Sure, the corresponding hike in prices is attributed to improved hardware, with phones these days sporting much better displays with high refresh rates, larger camera modules with dedicated telephoto lenses, and 5G connectivity. The new connectivity standard alone has led to a \$100 to \$200 increase in prices from the previous generation.Android phones now have much better hardware, but the software update cycle is unchanged from previous years.And while Android flagships are substantially costlier now and feature much better hardware than a few years ago, one art that hasn't changed is software updates. Most brands are still only committed to offering two platform updates and security updates for three years, and that's true even for \$1,000 flagships. That needs to change.As my colleague Joe Maring pointed out, the software experience is more important than any other spec in 2020. Hardware has been commoditized for some time now, and if you want a phone with the latest specs, you don't have to spend \$1,000. Regardless of how much you've paid for your phone, if the software is sub-par, you're going to have a bad experience.In that context, software updates matter more than ever. New platform versions bring a host of new features, and while Android 10 did not introduce many visual changes over its predecessor, there were a lot of changes under the hood. But with brands only committed to two Android version updates, only phones released in the last two years will get the latest Android update — leaving tens of millions of devices out in the cold.Android phones have fared poorly against the iPhone in this area for years, and while Google tried to change that by requiring brands to offer at least two platform updates, not all manufacturers have complied with that rule. Motorola typically commits to only one platform update, and it took endless user backlash for the brand to agree to delivering two updates to its Edge+ flagship.Source: Harish Jonnalagadda / Android Central (Image credit: Source: Harish Jonnalagadda / Android Central)Because of the egalitarian nature of Android, there's not much Google can do to enforce these rules. Google is instead leading by example by extending the software support on its Pixel phones. Google delivered the Android 10 update to the first-gen Pixel XL, making it the third platform update for the phone.The Pixel software update page clearly mentions that the Pixel 2 series will get platform version updates until October 2020 — guaranteeing Android 11 for the devices — with the Pixel 3 and Pixel 4 series also slated to receive three platform updates.Google is committing to three platform updates for Pixels. Brands like Samsung need to follow suit.By ensuring that Pixel flagships get three platform updates, Google is offering at least one more version update than the rest of the field. It still isn't the same as the four or five years of updates that Apple delivers to its iPhones, but it's a good starting point nonetheless. The issue here is that Pixel phones make up a tiny fraction of Android phones globally, and realistically, a brand like Samsung needs to take the onus to drive the change on Android.Samsung is the 800-pound gorilla in the room, and if the South Korean manufacturer changes its policies around updates, other device makers will have to inevitably follow suit. Samsung does a decent job rolling out updates to its flagships, but it doesn't fare so well when it comes to its mid-range and budget Galaxy A phones, particularly in Asian markets. There have been several cases in the past where the brand delivered just a single platform update to its budget phones.With the \$399 iPhone SE (opens in new tab) changing the paradigm for value, it's high time Android manufacturers extend software support on their phones. The iPhone SE runs the latest A13 Bionic chipset, and that means it will get updates for at least four years. This gives it a distinct advantage over every other Android phone in the sub-\$500 segment.The new reality is that people are using their devices for longer than ever before. With budget and mid-range phones increasingly sporting much more robust hardware, there's no reason to upgrade your phone on a yearly basis. For instance, the Galaxy A71 is powered by the Snapdragon 730, and the hardware itself is good enough that it will easily last three or more years without any issues. But Samsung is committed to two version updates and a further year of security updates, delivered once a quarter.To sum it up, Android device manufacturers need to start rethinking their strategy around updates not just in the flagship segment, but also in the mid-range category. The launch of the iPhone SE is a wake-up call for the industry as a whole, and it has highlighted the gulf that exists between Android and iOS updates. We'll just have to wait and see if it acts as a catalyst for Android manufacturers to raise their game.

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