

# Desktopia BACKGROUND MENU



This month, Jo Moskalewski presents one possible solution to the eternal search for the ultimate desktop background

I like fast food as much as the next person – it's convenient and saves me time that I'd much rather spend in front of my computer – but can you live on burgers and noodles, day in, day out? What we need is a bit more variety in our diets, and the same applies to your desktop.

## Aperitif

At some point you're bound to get tired of looking at your once-perfect desktop and will yearn for a change of wallpaper. But what are you going to try this time? Do you replace the funny picture of tux with your sweetheart again, or would it be nicer to run through the colour spectrum from yellow to purple? You can avoid the agony of choice by appointing ChBg (Change Background) as your desktop chef.

On the basis of your specifications, ChBG cooks up a scene on the desktop background. This can consist of graphics, colours and so-called gradients (which will be familiar from the image processing program Gimp), finely flavoured with a pinch of chance. If you so choose, a new sequence can be served every few

## desktopia

Only you can decide how your Linux desktop looks. With deskTOPia we regularly take you with us on a journey into the land of window managers and desktop environments, presenting the useful and the colourful, viewers and pretty toys.

minutes. If this has whetted your appetite, visit the ChBg Web site <http://chbg.sourceforge.net>.

## The full works

Unfortunately, ChBg is not exactly tailored for simple systems. The installation requires certain components to be installed on your system, such as the GTK+ library (at least version 1.2), which is also used by Gimp and GNOME. Other ingredients you'll need include libpng, libz (often also known as zlib) and imlib (alternatively gdk-pixbuf). These are libraries, which make their functions available centrally to diverse applications (and thus ChBg). Complete RPM packets can now be installed via the distribution's own packet manager or else with the command `rpm -i chbg-1.5-*.rpm`.

If on the other hand you access the ChBg packet with the uncompiled source code, your hard disk will not only have to keep the normal packets for the necessary libraries in stock, but also the respective associated Devel-packets (developer packets). It is only with these that programs which use a corresponding library can be compiled out of the source code; with "normal" packets only complete binaries can be executed.

If all the requirements have been met, unpack the archive by entering `tar -xvzf chbg-1.5.tgz` and change to the newly added source directory using `cd chbg-1.5`. In order to compile and install the source code there, all you need under ChBg is the well-known command sequence `./configure, make and make install`.

## Season to taste

Now you can check the taste of what has just been installed: the program starts after you enter `chbg` from an X-terminal (e.g. xterm). Once started, it first

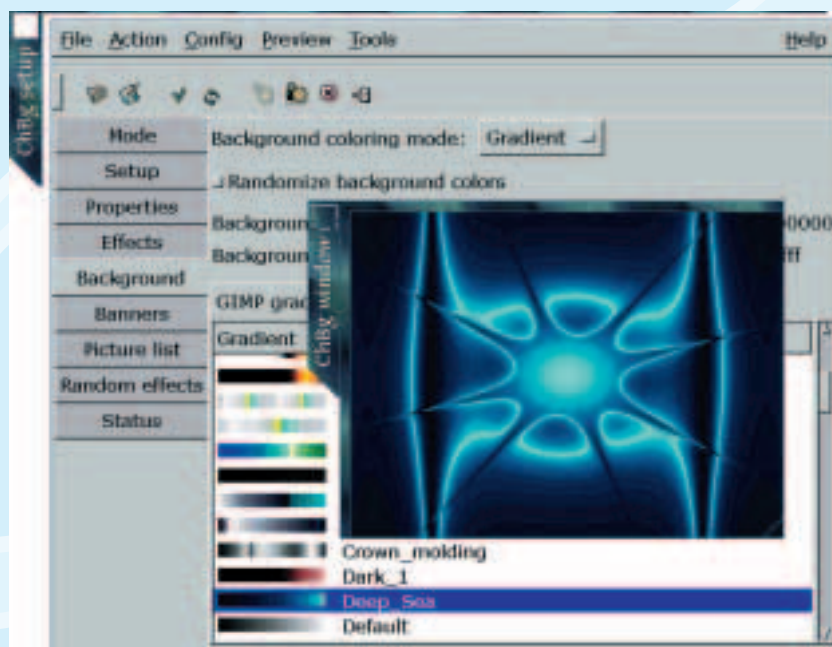


Figure 1: Colour selection for effects – output in a window

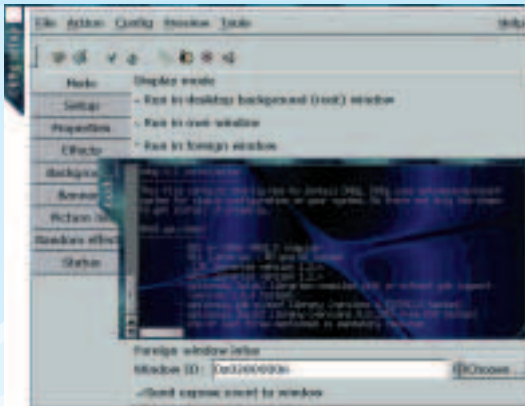


Figure 2: Even an rxvt can be used for output

presents us with the configuration screen, which can also be called up manually using the command line parameter `-setup`. You should now do some serious experimentation with this configuration window. It takes a bit of practice for the interaction of the options to become clear. Not because the author has cooked up an inadequate interface; it's more that the countless levers, switches and recipes lead to ever more different results.

ChBg can serve its creations itself in an *rxvt* (an *xterm* alternative), as Figure 2 shows. Anyone trying this must not start off the *rxvt* with any colour options – it's too easy for a newly-generated background to make a font unreadable, and the *rxvt* window has to go for recycling. Colour selection with ChBg is also a time-consuming undertaking when you do this.

The original idea of ChBg was – like a slideshow – to display changing graphics on the desktop background. However, images often have a different format than the desktop and so ChBg is also capable of expanding the scene by a decorative and randomly generated border. Now this “frame” can also be used as a freestanding background graphic: The menu item *Cycle blank screens* in the *Setup* tab makes this possible. The pre-set tool-tips explain how it works (Figure 3). The *Picture list* must not display any entry, and in the *Effects* tab the *Background shading effect* must be set at *Random*. Another mouse click on

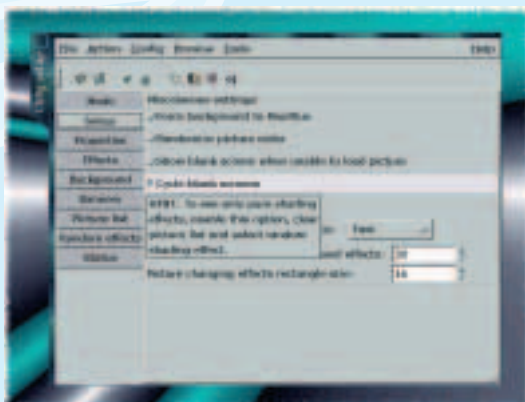


Figure 3: Additional effects can be used even without background graphic

Action/Start, and a unique desktop background is computed and displayed.

### Fast food

Cooking your own soup in this way is huge fun, but the declared goal at the start of this article was that of no longer wanting to bother about a new background. As such the whole thing has to be automated. If acceptable settings have been found, simply save your recipe. The menu item *File/Save scenario...* does this at the touch of a button. If you now start the command

```
chbg -scenario recipe file
```

then you will no longer see a configuration window, and the desktop background periodically changes according to your specifications.

If the graphical configuration interface does appear then your scene probably doesn't contain graphics even though ChBg is expecting one. This can be remedied by using a transparent GIF, as contained on the cover CD, which obviously can't be seen.

If you intend the background to change several times during an X-session, you will need a corresponding number of dummy graphics. This is to do with the fact the ChBg goes off duty once it reaches the end of the *Picture list*. A repeat function is thus right at the top of the wish list for future versions.

### Something special

Unfortunately, the KDE team has some highly individual ideas about the proper guests to invite to the table, and so a frameless window is painted over the usual desktop background (which in turn serves KDE2 as background). This is why there is simply nothing to be seen of the culinary arts of ChBg in KDE. However, there is still the option of diverting the output (instead of onto the desktop behind the KDE desktop) into a PNG file. This can then be used with KDE2.

The simplest way to get the tool to start automatically is via the *Autostart* function of your graphical user interface. In your case, this could be a special folder, menu item in the configuration of your window manager or else the file `.xinitrc` or `.xsession`. If you want to change quickly to other settings – no problem: ChBg can cope with all the options via the command line cue. `chbg -help | less` or the manpage (`man chbg`) will explain.

### Marks for taste

Although this tool requires a bit of practice in order to master it (despite the fact that the author has clearly devoted a lot of thought and effort to it) the end result on the desktop still works. What's more, because it's so fascinating anyone who uses ChBg will clear away their entire desktop from time to time just to see what has been created.