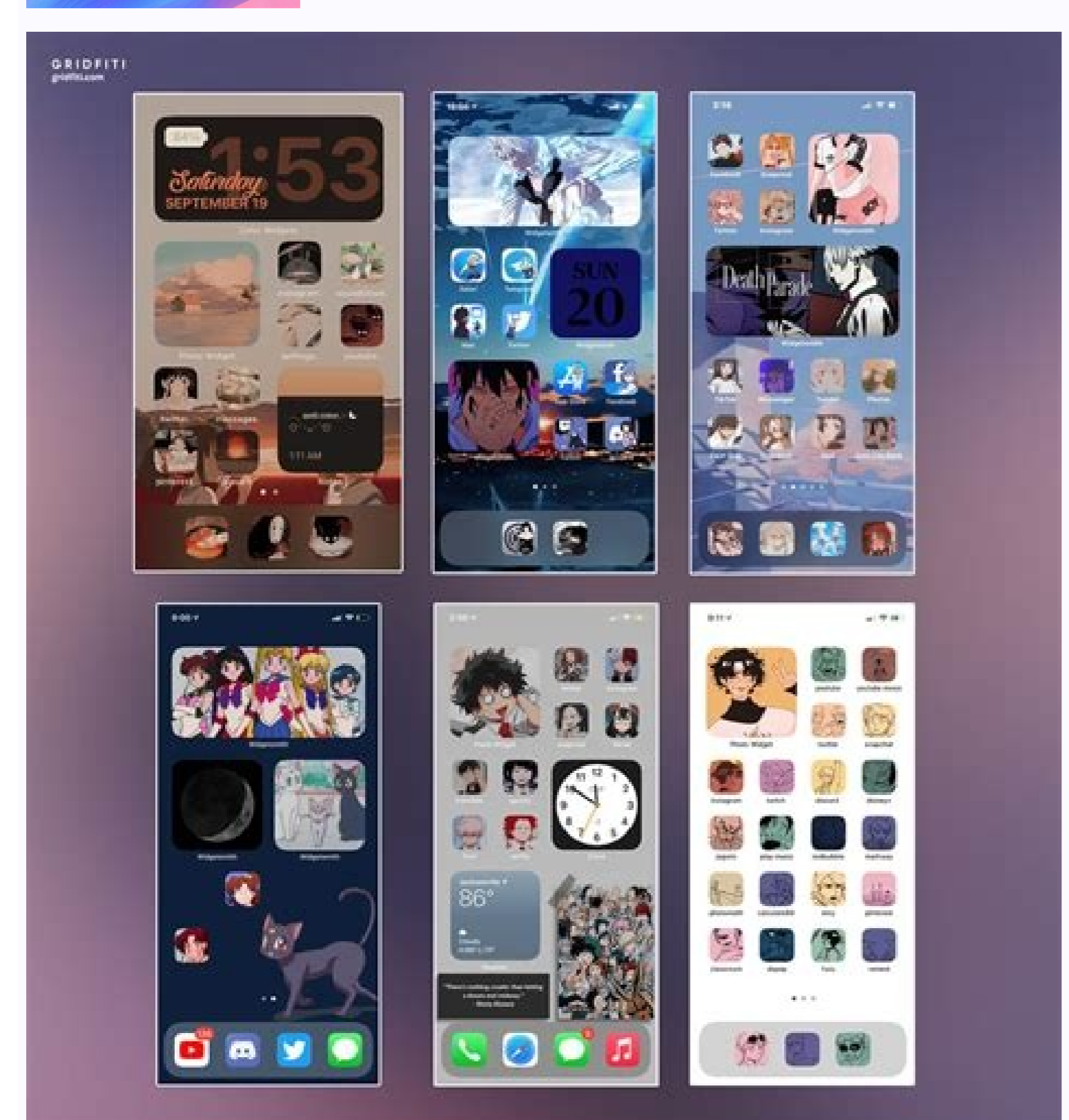
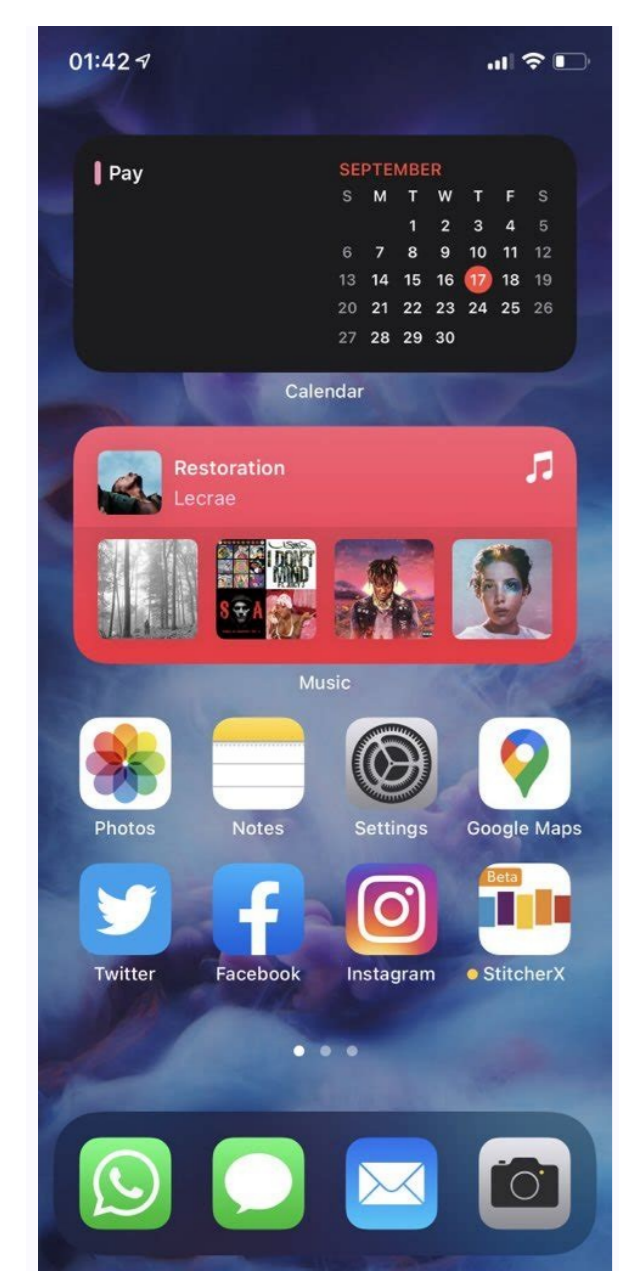


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One thing that truly sets Google's Android mobile OS apart from other mobile platforms is its ability to use home-screen "widgets." These applications sit on your Android device's home panels to display related information. You never have to open those apps unless you want additional details. Not all Android applications have widgets, but the best ones do. Some great Android apps even offer multiple widgets. Keep clicking for a list of Android apps with some of the best widgets — most of which won't cost you a dime. (And if you just can't get enough Android widgets, hit this link for 19 more widgets worth the space on your home screen.) There are Android apps with widgets, and there are widgets apps for Android with the sole purpose of providing information via on-screen icons. Fancy Widgets falls into the latter category, and though I admit it's not my favorite dedicated widgets app for Android (that honor goes to Beautiful Widgets, which I spotlighted in a past post), the app is worth a look. Fancy Widgets offers a variety of customizable widgets, in different sizes, that provide information on the time and weather. The app is free, but to access all of the customization options, you need to purchase the "unlocker" for \$2.59. Download Fancy Widgets for free on Google Play. You love your Android device, and you love your Starbucks coffee, so downloading the Starbucks mobile app and enabling the widget is a no-brainer. After you sign in to your Starbucks account, link a valid card and drop the widget on your home screen. Tap it, and the payment code for scanning instantly appears. The widget also has a location option to find all of the nearby Starbucks shops, and it shows your ongoing "star" reward progress. Download Starbucks Carry for free on Google Play. Google's Play store has its own valuable set of widgets that gives you quick access to all of your Play books, magazines, music and media. The basic Play Store widget just launches the store, the Play Recommendations widget suggests content that may be of interest — and my favorite Play widget, the My Library option, lets you pick the type of content you want on your home screen, such as music, books, newsstand (magazines) or movies and TV, and then shows clickable album, cover or movie-poster art. The Play widgets are part of the Android OS, so you don't need to download anything to access them. There's certainly no shortage of flashlight apps in the Play store. Honestly, most are very similar. The purpose is simple: Turn your phone or tablet's flash into a flashlight. My app of choice is the default Samsung Assistive Light widget, but that only works on Samsung Android devices. I use the Super-Bright LED Flashlight app on my Nexus 7 tablet, and it works well. Just drop the widget on your home screen and then tap it to both light up your flash and open the app for additional options. Download Super-Bright LED Flashlight for free on Google Play. I used to carry a separate recorder to conferences and events to capture interviews with sources. Then I found Easy Voice Recorder. A set of home-screen widgets let you quickly start and stop recording. The widgets are customizable, and you can choose a few different colors. The \$4 version gets you additional features, including stereo recording and Bluetooth microphone support. But the free app and widgets are more than sufficient for basic recording needs. Download Easy Voice Recorder for Android for free on Google Play. Groupon, the digital coupon service that's saved me countless dollars on meals and other goods during the past couple of years, offers an Android app and an associated widget that makes browsing relevant deals pleasantly simple. After downloading the app, signing in or just specifying a location, you can add the Groupon widget to your home screen, where it automatically updates and displays the latest deals based on your preferences. You can scroll through deals without opening the app, and you simply tap the widget when you find a Groupon you want to purchase. Download Groupon for Android for free on Google Play. The could-storage widget that's right for you depends, of course, on your cloud-storage service of choice. Google's Drive storage service integrates nicely with Android, so if you don't already have a horse in the race, you might want to check out Drive, which has a valuable home-screen widget. Dropbox and Box, two more popular online storage services, also offer Android apps with widgets. Some of the options offer more features, but all of them make it simpler and faster to access your cloud and upload files from your Android device. Download Google Drive, Dropbox and Box for free on Google Play. The Mint.com Android app makes it simple to monitor your various bank, credit, loan, investment and other finance accounts in one place. The associated widget lets you view all or some of your data (based on your preferences) right on your Android home screen. Just tap the widget's refresh button when you want the latest information. The service uses the same encryption as most banks, and it's certified secure by TRUSTe, Verisign and RSA so you don't have to worry about security - though you should definitely password protect your device if you enable the Mint widget. Download Mint.com Personal Finance for Android for free on Google Play. The official WordPress Android app makes it simple to post new blog entries, approve comments, make changes to existing posts and check stats while on the go. And the QuickPress widget lets you open a new blog entry form without opening up the app and navigating to the new post option. Just tap the QuickPress widget, enter your text or media, push it live and you're good to go. There's no quicker way to update your WordPress blog with a new post. Download WordPress for Android for free on Google Play. Fitness aficionados will find a new before you can use it. Just open the Google app and, if you're not prompted, find the Now option in the app's settings.) The Now widget is part of the Android OS, so you don't need to download anything to access it. Triplt is by far my favorite travel service and associated mobile application, and the Android widget makes it even more valuable. There are two Triplt widget size options, large and small, so you see as much information as you want - or as much as you can fit on your home screen. The widgets update with relevant information as you need it during your travels, including travel times, airlines, flight numbers and lodging information. You can tap sections of the widgets for details on specific travel information. Download Triplt for Android for free on Google Play. Many of the official apps from professional sports leagues have widgets including, MLB At Bat and NBA Game Time. But those widgets are sport-specific. If you want a widget that provides at-a-glance scores for your favorite teams across sports leagues, you'll appreciate theScore. The app itself provides a ton of information on most professional sports, and the widget is customizable so you see what you want when you want. (ESPN ScoreCenter for Android is another worthy sports widget I recommended.) Download theScore for Android for free on Google Play. Al Sacco was a journalist, blogger and editor who covers the fast-paced mobile beat for CIO.com and IDC Enterprise, with a focus on wearable tech, smartphones and tablet PCs. Al managed CIO.com writers and contributors, covered news, and shared insightful expert analysis of key industry happenings. He also wrote a wide variety of tutorials and how-tos to help readers get the most out of their gadgets, and regularly offered up recommendations on software for a number of mobile platforms. Al resides in Boston and is a passionate reader, traveler, beer lover, film buff and Red Sox fan. Widgets, widgets, widgets. Has there ever been an Android feature so full of promise that's gone unloved by Google for so very long? Okay, so maybe there has been — erm, lots of times, actually. But even so, Android's widgets system is a perfect example of an exceptional advantage that Google basically buried, abandoned, and left on the brink of extinction up until its sudden revival in this year's upcoming Android 12 release. (And that revival, by the way, is happening for no apparent reason whatsoever. Just a totally random, unprompted change of heart after a decade of indifference. Riiiiiiiiight.) Google may have more or less given up on widgets for a while, but the good news is that the Android developer community has been chuggin' along and coming up with creative new ways to embrace widgets all this time. And you don't have to wait until Android 12 to step up your own Android widget game and give yourself some fresh and fruitful paths to make the most of your phone's framework. Here, my dear, are a few fantastic ways to put your favorite Android widgets to use and change the way you get stuff done on your phone. (And if you've got a Chromebook, by the by, be sure to check out this crafty hack for bringing widgets into that environment as well.) Android widget enhancement No. 1: The on-demand home screen pop-up Widgets are a wonderful way to interact with all sorts of info without ever having to open up apps, but having too many widgets can quickly lead to a cluttered and overwhelming home screen. Well, here's a neat way to give yourself the benefit of a widget while still maintaining a neat and minimal space for working: An excellent app called PopUp Widget 3 lets you create an on-demand pop-up widget (get it?) that looks like a regular ol' icon on your home screen but then loads any widget you want when you tap it. See? JR You can even get really wild and set up a single icon that opens multiple widgets at the same time — like your inbox and your calendar together. JR Not bad, right? PopUp Widget 3 costs two bucks and doesn't require any special permissions or manners of access. And it's pretty simple and self-explanatory to set up. Once you install and open the app, it'll walk you through adding in whatever pop-up widgets you want. You can choose the name and even the icon associated with each one along with its precise placement on your screen and how much the screen behind it should dim when it's loaded. The app will offer to add the shortcut directly onto your home screen for you then, or you can also find all of your Pop-Up Widget creations by pressing and holding the main Pop-Up Widget icon in your app drawer. And that, my widget-loving wallaby, is but our first winning widget possibility, Android widget enhancement No. 2: The on-demand universal pop-up If you like the idea of having a widget on demand but would rather have it be available to summon from anywhere instead of just from your home screen, this next wacky widget option is just the thing for you. It comes from a spectacular app called Edge Gestures, which works in conjunction with Pop-Up Widget 3 to take that same concept and make it universally accessible. (I told ya it was wacky!) When you first install Edge Gestures, the app will prompt you to enable it as a system accessibility service and to grant it the ability to display over other apps. These permissions sound scary — and they should! — but in the case of this specific utility, they're absolutely appropriate and necessary in order for it to operate. The former is the only way an app is able to create a custom system-wide gesture, which we need for this setup to work its magic, and the latter is how your widget is able to be shown on top of whatever else you're doing. (If you're at all worried, note this: Edge Gestures doesn't request any other system permissions, including the ability to access the internet. That means it would have no way to send any information off of your device and to any theoretical bogeymen lurking in the virtual shadows, even if it wanted to. But it seems safe to say that it doesn't. The app is reputable, it's been around for quite a long while, and it has a large number of overwhelmingly positive reviews.) Where were we? Oh, right: Once you're inside the Edge Gestures configuration area, you'll be able to select exactly what gesture you want to use for pulling up your widget. I'd think carefully about finding something that won't interfere with anything else, like the system-level Android gestures, and that'll be convenient to access without being a command you're likely to trigger by mistake. So, for instance, you might make the gesture a simple swipe downward along the left side of your screen. To do that, you'd find the "Swipe down" option within the app's "Left" tab, and you'd set it to "PopUp Widget" — and then create or select whatever PopUp Widget item you want. And remember: You can select one widget or multiple widgets, too. Prepare yourself for some serious oohing and ahing: JR As you can see, this opens up a whole new world of mobile multitasking potential. I mean, really: How could you not love that? The final thing worth doing is going into all the other gesture options in that same configuration area and tapping "Clear" for each of 'em to get rid of Edge Gestures' default actions. I'd also go into whichever side of the screen you aren't using — left or right — and tap the toggle to turn the gestures for that side off entirely. That way, you won't inadvertently activate any gestures that you don't actually want or need. Oh — Edge Gestures costs two bucks to use. And we've got one more intriguing possibility to think through yet... Android widget enhancement No. 3: The floating bubble Here's an interesting twist on that same on-demand Android widget idea: If you like the notion of having a widget always available but aren't so keen on the hidden gesture concept, an app called Overlays will let you create a small floating bubble that you can position anywhere on your screen and then tap to pull the widget up when you want it — just like with Android 11's Bubbles system for messaging. Check it out: JR By default, Overlays gives you a bunch of its own little widgets to choose from, but the real power comes from adding in widgets from the Android apps you actually rely on. To do that, tap the "Triggers" tab at the bottom of the Overlays configuration area, then tap the red plus button in the lower-right corner of the screen. Select "Manual," then type in whatever name you want for your widget and tap the icon to pick any icon you like. Tap "Save," then select "Widget" and find the widget you want from the list. At that point, you'll see a preview of the widget; move or resize it if you like, then hit the arrow in the upper-left corner of the screen to exit out of that interface. Last but not least, tap the name of your newly made widget on the screen that comes up next to change its status to "Always on." As soon as you head out of the app and back to your home screen, your fancy new widget should pop right up. All you've gotta do is tap the little downward-facing arrow in its corner to minimize it down to a bubble, which you can then press and hold to move anywhere your widget-worshipping heart desires. Overlays can also create widgets that automatically appear based on context — so you could have something show up every time you connect to a certain Bluetooth device or Wi-Fi network, for instance. To explore those options, just follow the same steps from above but pick "Event" instead of "Manual" when you reach the "Triggers" tab configuration. Overlays is free with an optional \$4 in-app upgrade that removes some ads from the configuration tool and unlocks a handful of advanced features. And there ya have it: three wacky, wild, wonderful ways to make widgets even more wow-inducing. Some days, you've just gotta love Android and the creative thinking it enables. Want even more Googley knowledge? Sign up for my weekly newsletter to get next-level tips and insight delivered directly to your inbox. Copyright © 2021 IDG Communications, Inc.

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