

search engines

As the World Wide Web continues to grow, there are millions of Web sites with the information you need. A majority of them are as worthless as my short game.

Finding exactly what one wants on the Web can be difficult, especially when you don't know exactly what you're looking for. In hopes of making the search for relevant information a little easier, we took a few search engines out for a test drive.

Before you start typing away to locate valve stems, replacement heads for sprinklers or the knob that broke off the greens mower, it would serve you well to get as specific as possible.

For our not-so-scientific study, we visited seven search engines and gave them all the same four searches—Golfdom, Lesco fertilizer, Novartis fungicide and Toro greens mowers. With that in mind, let's get to the results:

Yahoo! (www.yahoo.com) – It's the granddaddy of search engines, but it's increasingly not as accurate as it used to be. Yahoo!'s main page is a collection of news, weather, entertainment, advertisements and offers for free e-mail. That's fine, but it can seem like a gussied up lobby, instead of the nuts and bolts of a card catalog; remember we are trying to find things. Only the Novartis search yielded excellent results, while the Toro greens mowers search gave us a couple authorized dealers in Denver and Mount Aetna, Penn. Not quite what we wanted.

AltaVista (www.altavista.com) – Probably the best of the big search engines, it allows you to look for new

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search groups and product. AltaVista hit dead on for the Golfdom, Lesco and Novartis searches, and ranked the Toro site we were looking for third. One nice feature of AltaVista is its link to "more pages from this site" which can really help you hone in on what you want.

HotBot (www.hotbot.com) and Lycos (www.lycos.com) – Both sites are not as attractive as the other sites, and they gave nearly identical results not only to each other but to Yahoo! as well. HotBot has an extremely annoying feature at the top of the results page that will search on one of its partner's pages for your search term.

I'm sorry, but I don't need the extraneous junk that some of these sites give me because they are beholden to their advertising partners. Just give me the information I want and get the heck out of my way.

ProFusion (www.profusion.com) – ProFusion usually searches a number of

other search engines and then gives the results. Be prepared to get some strange results. For the "Golfdom" search, the first site listed was for Gobi, a company that provides computers. For the "Toro greens mower search," the actual Toro site was listed seventh. And for "Novartis fungicide" the best site was listed ninth.

Google (www.google.com) – Google is the best and quickest search engine. Unlike most of the others engines, it's not littered with news, pictures, multimedia and flashing ads. The best feature on Google is its "I'm feeling lucky" button, which will take you directly to the first site listed on the search. It saves the user a ton of time because if you're pretty sure what you're searching for, you won't have to scroll through 10 pages of matches to find the one you want. Of course, if your search terms are off, you may be directed somewhere you don't want to go.

For "Golfdom" and "Toro greens mowers," however, we were rewarded with dead-on results. For the other two searches, we got decent results.

Remember, it's not what you are searching for that counts, it's how you are searching and the reliability of the search engine. As you use the sites, you will begin to tailor your searches to the particular site.

Mark Luce, a free-lance writer based in Lawrence, Kan., uses search engines to find rare brands of beer.

