5 Connected Objects to Smarten Up Your Home

Mashable

Imagine waking up in a fully automated home. The light on your nightstand gradually begins to brighten, your blinds unfold to welcome the morning light, coffee brews in the kitchen and music begins to play, all without you lifting a finger.

Until recently, even partially automated homes were exclusive to the domains of engineers and home owners wealthy enough to hire them (or creative students with some extra time on their hands). But now those systems are becoming more affordable and easier to manage, thanks in part to Kickstarter-fueled interest in "The Internet of Things," as well as integrations with SMS, smartphones and web-based applications like Twitter and Dropbox.

We rounded up five objects to help smarten up your home. We've focused primarily on affordable, tested devices already available on the market, but also included a few high-ticket and soon-to-be-released products to ignite your imagination. If you're interested in more DIY, check out *Lifehacker*'s roundup.

Ninja Blocks **[1] ($199)**

Kickstarter-funded Ninja Blocks are wirelessly connected mini-computers embedded with a range of sensors that can detect humidity, temperature, motion, light and distance, among other things. Using Ninja Blocks' accompanying software system, you can communicate with a range of systems through SMS, Twitter, Foursquare, Evernote and more. You could, for instance, program your Ninja to text you when someone rings your (wireless) doorbell; turn on the light by talking to Siri; tweet at you when your pet's water bowl runs dry; or, when motion is detected in your garage, take a photo from your webcam and upload it to Dropbox.

Introductory kits cost $199 and will resume shipping in March.

More affordable alternatives include Knut [2] and Twine [3], both of which cost $99 but have fewer sensors and capabilities than Ninja Blocks. You can purchase a range of add-ons sensors [2] and connected devices for the Knut, however, including sensors for moisture and water pressure, as well as a magnetic door switch, for $25 apiece.

Lockitron **[4] ($179)**

Imagine being able to open and close your front door with a tap on your phone. Come May, you'll be able to do that with Lockitron [5], a $179, Internet-connected device designed to fit over your deadbolt.

You can lock and unlock your doors from anywhere using a two-button iPhone app or a text message. You can authorize family members (and visiting guests) so they can open your doors, as well. Sensors alert you when someone has unlocked or knocked on your door. It's easy to install and unlike many other home automation systems, doesn't require any internal wiring, and thus, works in renters' homes, too.

Nest 2.0 **[6] ($249)**

Nest is an intelligent, elegantly designed thermostat system from the creators of

Apple's iPod. You can adjust the temperature using the dial on the thermostat or on its companion apps for iOS [7] or Android [8] devices. Over time, the app will learn your preferences -- shutting off the heat when you head for work, for example, and ticking up 10 degrees when your kids come home from school.

"Teach it well and Nest can lower your heating and cooling bills up to 20%," its creators pledge.

A basic unit costs $249 on Nest's website [9]; thermostats are also available at Amazon.com [10] as well as at Apple and Lowe's stores. The company also offers professional installation [11], starting at $119 for one thermostat and $25 for each additional unit.

Bitponics **[12] (est. $395)**

Bitponics, a Kickstarter-backed "personal gardening assistant," aims to give hydroponic plant growers better control over their soil-free indoor gardens, via an Internet-connected sensor device. You can use Bitponics' software (still in development) to devise plans for growing different kinds of plants, determining the amount of light hours your plants need each day, when to replace your nutrient solution, when to run your water pumps, etc. Sensors for temperature, humidity, brightness and pH will log data about your plants and alert you when something's wrong.

Bitponics pledges to release its first batch [12] of systems (priced around $395) in September.

Kohler Numi Toilet **[13] ($6,400)**

At $6,400, Kohler's Numi Toilet (brilliantly reviewed [14] by Sam Grobart in *The New York Times*) is a bit out of the average homeowner's budget. Nevertheless, it's an impressive device: It has a motion-activated lid for hands-free opening and closing and an integrated air dryer and deodorizer. Plus, it heats both the seat and foot area. Ambience lighting and built-in speakers, which can be pre-programmed or connected to an MP3 player via remote docking station, round out the experience.

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