

Ever wondered what to do with the vinegar left in the jar after all the pickled onions have been eaten? Here's an idea: soak your old hard drive in it to destroy any data securely.

Vinegar was offered as one solution to the question of how to make sure that no-one can get your data off your old hard drive when you dispose of it.

The need for security arises now that everybody is (or should be) aware that personal data can be recovered from old drives for the purpose of identity theft and fraud. The criminals are not fussy about who they rob and there are those who are prepared to make a career of it.

There are instances of firms disposing of computers that still contain personal information about staff or customers such as credit card details or medical records. Even seemingly unimportant stuff like birthdays, anniversaries, previous addresses or names of pets can give criminals a chance. Pets names as passwords are common.

When you highlight files and say "Delete" from the Recycling Bin, the files are not actually deleted at all. The system merely removes each file's name and its address from the index (the File Allocation Table, or FAT). The space it occupies is now available to be over-written by a new file. If you simply delete all the files in this way and discard the disk, they are all still there - not indexed, but easy to recover by experts.

The answer is to overwrite the disk with nonsense. You can buy software that will do it for you. At a little more expense it will overwrite the disk several times because a single overwrite is not usually sufficient. Some users reformat the disk for better security although it is still not perfect.

The measures so far (except vinegar) leave the disk in a usable condition and the recovery of the data troublesome and expensive, but not impossible. If you use a shredder to destroy bank statements and such, note that shredded documents were, albeit with great difficulty and patience, re-assembled by students in the Iran hostage crisis. Such effort is most unlikely to be applied in normal circumstances.

However, you might want the peace of mind that comes with knowing that the data is beyond recovery. It can be done. After wiping the disk as described, you take it apart and cut the internal metal platters into pieces. Some people drill through the whole drive to destroy it. The Web tells us that some people even shoot them with a rifle (not here, of course) or drop them into corrosive acid.

I prefer a satisfying low-tech solution. Don protective glasses; put the drive on a large rock and clout it severely with a heavy sledgehammer.

