

Macworld How to control folder opening behavior in the Finder

Apple's settings for folders don't seem to function as described.

Mac 911 By [Glenn Fleishman](#), Contributor, Macworld APR 11, 2025 2:00 am PDT



Image: Apple

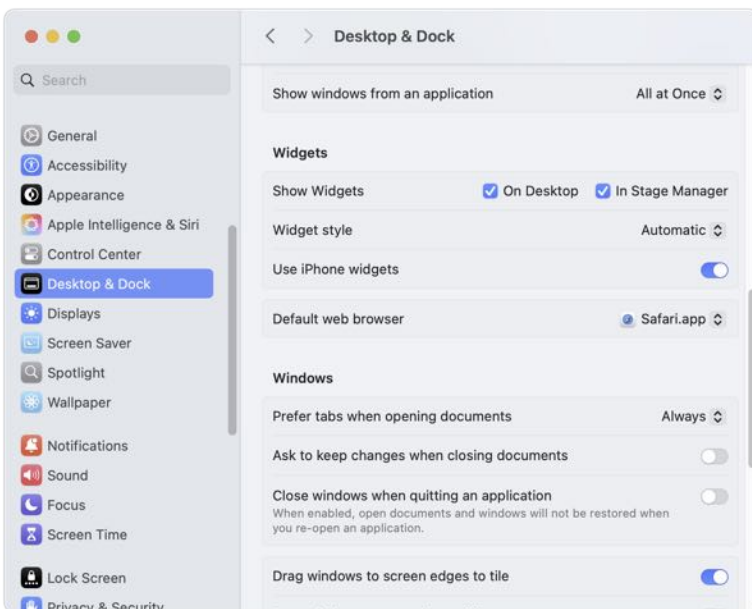
The Finder is one of the most customizable elements of macOS. However, Apple's two interrelated settings for how folders open a Finder window don't seem to have any effect and haven't for years. Despite this, you can take control to get the desired outcome.

You may want one or more of the following behaviors to happen when you double-click a folder within a Finder window, which may vary depending on what you're trying to accomplish:

- Its contents replace what you see in the Finder window.
- A new tab opens in the window with the double-clicked folder's contents.
- A new window in the Finder opens, showing the contents of the double-clicked folder.

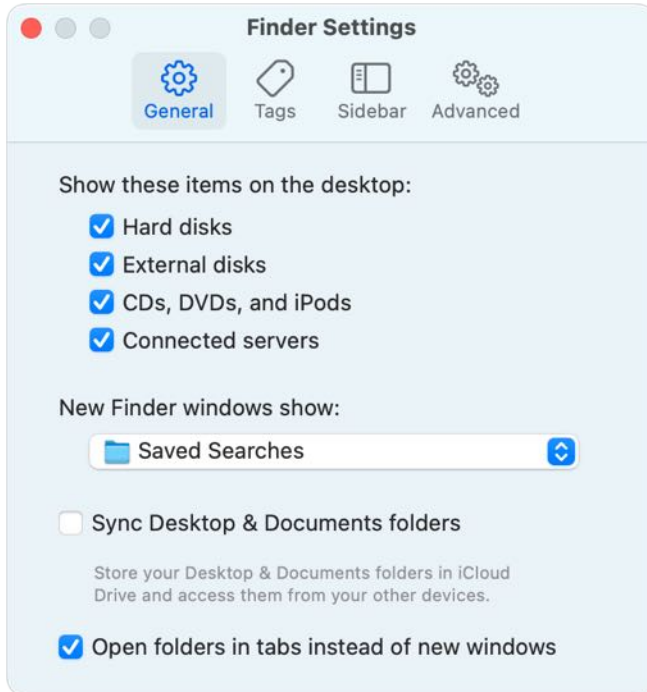
How it's supposed to open folders

If you search Apple's support documents, you find that [the company says you control this in two ways](#):



- Via **Apple > System Settings > Desktop & Dock** by choosing a value from the "Prefer tabs when opening documents" menu: **Always, Never, or In Full Screen.**
- Via the Finder setting in **Finder > Settings** in the General tab labeled **"Open folders in tabs instead of new windows."**

The Desktop & Dock setting for Windows should let you control window behavior, but appears to have no actual effect.



Finder settings let you control how tabs open from folders.

The outcomes *should* be like this:

- With the General setting “Prefer tabs...” set to *Never*, double-clicking should open folders in a new window; *Always*, in a new tab; *In Full Screen*, in a tab when you have a window set to full-screen mode.
- With the Finder setting “Open folders in tabs...” checked, double-clicking should open folders in tabs, as it says; otherwise, in new windows.

Forum posters and readers alike find this is not the case and has never been. In testing, I cannot get the promised behavior to work at all.

But there are workarounds. Apple even hints at one on its support page, but its description of how it works is incorrect.

How you open folders the way you want

Regardless of how you have Desktop & Dock and Finder settings configured, here’s how you can achieve what you want in a Finder window. It hinges on whether the Finder toolbar and sidebar are visible.

You can change whether they appear by using *View > Hide Sidebar* (Command-Option-S) or *View > Hide Toolbar* (Command-Option-T). The sidebar cannot be shown if the toolbar is hidden.

With the toolbar and sidebar visible, here’s how folders behave:

- **Replace the window’s contents:** Double-click a folder within the window.
- **Open the folder in a new window:** Hold Command and double-click a folder (Finder settings “Open folders...” unchecked).
- **Open the folder in a new tab:** Hold Command and double-click a folder (Finder settings “Open folders...” checked).

- **Open a folder in a new window and close the previous one:** Hold Option and double-click a folder. The current window disappears, and a new one opens with the contents of the double-clicked folder. (The new folder has no active Back button in the toolbar.)

This changes when you hide both the toolbar and the sidebar. Here's what your actions result in:

- **Open the folder in a new window:** Double-click a folder within the window (Finder settings "Open folders..." unchecked).
- **Open the folder in a new tab:** Double-click a folder within the window (Finder settings "Open folders..." checked).
- **Open a folder in a new window and close the previous one:** Hold Option and double-click a folder. The current window disappears, and a new one opens with the contents of the double-clicked folder. (The new folder has no active Back button in the toolbar.)

The "Prefer tabs" setting doesn't seem to have any effect in the Finder.

I've also found that the Finder sometimes loses track of these settings. When testing the toolbar shown/hidden options above, I discovered that the expected behavior stopped working. I had to hold down Option, click the Finder in the Dock, and choose Relaunch. Only after forcing the Finder to relaunch did the folder behavior resume functioning as I explain just above.

This Mac 911 article is in response to a question submitted by Macworld reader Jeff.

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Glenn Fleishman's most recent books include Take Control of iOS and iPadOS Privacy and Security, Take Control of Calendar and Reminders, and Take Control of Securing Your Mac. In his spare time, he writes about printing and type history. He's a senior contributor to Macworld, where he writes Mac 911.