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Web Search Exercise

For this exercise, I wanted to search for growing pumpkins organically while still controlling pests. The first search engine I used was Google with initial results for “growing pumpkins” at 233,000. I then tried with the Latin name for pumpkin, searching “(cucurbita OR pumpkin) AND (growing OR cultivation).” The results were over 4 million. I had a similar number of results when I added “farming” to the second set of terms. I thought I was narrowing the search but the opposite was true. When I dropped “pumpkin” from the first set, I got a fewer results. Using just the Latin seemed to point to more sites about farming pumpkins. When I added “organic” to the search terms, the results were even fewer because sites that didn’t mention anything about organic growing were excluded. The next step was to include terms dealing with pests—I searched “(cucurbita) AND (farming) AND (organic) AND (pests OR bugs)” and the results narrowed to just under 7,000. The final set of terms I used included more specific Latin names for pumpkin: “(cucurbita pepo OR cucurbita mixta) AND (farming) AND (organic) AND (pests OR bugs OR fungus).” In Google, this final search yielded 171 results. Using scholarly names returns many more results that are scholarly, and of the top sites, there are several from the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service.

Yahoo followed very similarly to Google and there was a significant overlap of sites. However, I gather that Yahoo indexes fewer sites than Google because there were fewer results for each set of search terms. With the final set of terms, the engine

retrieved 59 results. There was some overlap here, too, especially with results from the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service.

AllTheWeb had the fewest number of results overall, and there was nothing that appeared in that search that I hadn't run across before. The overlap of results on all three search engines was very consistent. Pages were ranked in mainly the same order on all three. The final search yielded 53 results, and again, the National Sustainable Agriculture Information had the top two results dealing with squash boring bugs and how to control them.

I chose Dogpile as my metasearch engine. Since it crawls other search engines for their top results, I figured that I'd see similar results and the number of results would be enormous. I was disappointed that, in pulling the top results, Dogpile ended up pulling mostly shopping sites. Since Google and others show their shopping results before their web results, I saw a lot of results where I could buy pumpkin seeds to grow, but that is not what I wanted. Also, the return was very small. However, after narrowing my search down to the last set of terms "(cucurbita pepo OR cucurbita mixta) AND (farming) AND (organic) AND (pests OR bugs OR fungus)," there were a few that I hadn't seen, especially a very comprehensive result from the Alabama Cooperative Extension System and another from the University of Florida. Perhaps Dogpile pulled these from an engine I didn't search.

Clearly, all search engines have their strengths and weaknesses, but they're also very similar. For the three search engines I evaluated, the only significant difference was the total number of results. The metasearch engine yielded a few results I hadn't already come across, but the extensive shopping results that I got before I used the Latin name for

pumpkin were unhelpful. It is helpful to know a bit about what you are looking for before starting your search because the more specific you can be, the better quality results you will get. This was evident when I began using the species name for pumpkin. Overall, I think a search engine utilized properly can do a decent job of pointing someone to the results they seek. If that is not sufficient or time is limited, a metasearch engine may be used.