

RE/PRICE/PHONE	QUALITY	SHIPPING COST/TIME	RETURN POLICY	PHONE/WEB EXPERIENCE	COMMENT
Thames & Kosmos M C3000 \$99.95 thamesandkosmos.com -683-5535	Best Overall. Set, for ages 12 and up, had 400 activities, an accessible manual and the most sophisticated selection of equipment.	We paid \$8.90, and the set arrived in four business days.	Within 30 days for credit. It must be in new and unused condition, and shipping costs aren't refunded.	No problems ordering off the Web site, from the kit's manufacturer. Product page has a lot of helpful details.	Set is also sold at Nature's Odyssey and DiscoverThis, for \$189.95.
Discovery Channel Store Discovery Chem-X 1000 Science Lab, \$39.95 shop.discovery.com -627-9399	Best Value. A classic chemistry set with 1,100 experiments for middle- and high-school students (ages 9 and up). Includes 10 chemicals and a plastic case.	Standard shipping cost \$7.95, within three to five business days. Ours arrived in four.	Within 30 days, in new condition. After that, for exchange or store credit. Customer pays shipping costs.	Store is affiliated with the cable-TV channel. Site has customer reviews on products, but this item didn't have any.	Shop sells lots of interesting gadgets, toys and DVDs, plus other science kits, like a bubble-gum lab and a crystal-growing kit.
Nature's Odyssey Raft Chemlab 1100, \$99.95 resodyssey.com -996-2474	Kit was almost identical to the Discovery kit, without a case. Manual was more confusing, since it covered two different models.	We paid \$6.95, and the set arrived in seven business days.	Returns must be sent back within 30 days of receipt, unopened and unused.	A call to the shop was answered by Michael Harless, company president. "It's a small company," he said.	Site carries a range of chemistry sets and has a neat collection of educational products. This kit is currently out of stock.
Smithsonian Store Discovery Chem X 5000, \$99.95 smithsonianstore.com -322-0344	Had two dozen chemicals and 1,500 experiments, but some were just variations on the same theme. For ages 10 and up.	Our delivery, for \$8.95, came in six business days.	For refund, replacement or exchange, in new condition only.	Shop sells items that "reflect the vast collections" in the Smithsonian Institution and the National Zoo, site says.	Item cost \$49.99 when we bought. It's on back order until Jan. 12. The company says kit is a "perennial customer favorite."
DiscoverThis.com Big Scientists Set 12, \$99.95 -438-8697	The relatively small number of experiments (17) were interesting. Some of the explanations were confusing. For ages 9 to 12.	Shipping cost \$5.95; product arrived in three business days.	Within 30 days of receipt, unopened, unused and in salable condition. Customer pays shipping.	Site carries over a dozen chemistry sets, including from Thames & Kosmos, Smithsonian and Skilcraft.	Set is part of a series. Retailer says the kits have been tested "extensively" at summer camps and after-school programs.

At the Discovery Store, had a clearer manual, with nearly identical experiments and similar testing equipment: chemicals, test tubes with rack, funnel, tweezers, pH paper, nine-volt battery cap, lab plate and more. Ms. Wood used the graduated cylinder, to measure liquids. Everyone liked the foam test tubes, which Warren, 11, mixed with isopropyl alcohol until they partially dissolved. Charlie, 15, said he would have liked to see bigger vials of chemicals, some experiments didn't require special equipment: One involved blowing up a soda bottle, an illustration of a gas/liquid mixture. Unlike the craft, the set also came with a

handy plastic carrying case with handle. For ages 9 and up, it's our Best Value. For children 12 and up, the Thames & Kosmos set came close to a real high-school chemistry lab. The set was by far the most expensive, at \$200, but it was the most comprehensive. Three Styrofoam cases held about two dozen chemicals and a wide variety of equipment, from an Erlenmeyer flask to multiple test tubes. The color manual, with photos and graphics, had clear and simple instructions for 400 experiments. The panel loved the range of chemicals, and began mixing them right

away—once they figured out how to get into the tough-to-open containers. (The manufacturer says it's a safety precaution.) They really had fun with the magnesium strips that burned brightly when lit on fire. The glassware and alcohol burner may require increased supervision; earlier in the test, the teenagers dropped some of the plastic test tubes on the floor. And not everything was included. When we made luminol, which glows blue in the dark, we had to go to the garage to find lye. It was a success anyway, getting "oohs" and "aahs" from the entire panel. It's Best Overall.

—Joanna L. Ossinger

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