Acadiana Sky

If you talk with knowledgeable amateur astronomers, you'll find that the category of "department store telescope' is *not* a compliment. Be *very* wary of telescopes from department stores and toy stores. You'll be safest with a reputable telescope specialty store, and unless you live in a very big city, that likely means purchasing over the Internet. Telescopes with diameters under 70 mm are seldom a wise choice. Don't go wild, though. If you are a beginner, don't get a telescope for intermediate or advanced amateurs. It's not uncommon for beginners to spend thousands of dollars on a telescope that is so complex and unwieldy that they can't figure out how to use it.

So what's this going to cost?

Some of the most popular telescopes for beginners who are seriously interested teenagers to adults are Newtonian reflectors on Dobsonian mounts, with diameters of 6" (150 mm) to 8" (200 mm) and standard diameter eyepieces. Depending on the bells and whistles that you want, expect them to cost about $350 – $800. Treat them well, and they will last a lifetime. Most telescopes under about $350 are toys, and will work like toys.

If you just can't afford that, you will probably end up with a tabletop telescope. There are some decent choices there, but you will need to have a sturdy table (a shaky TV tray is not adequate), and the telescopes are hard to aim straight overhead. If you get one of these, be certain it's a Newtonian reflector. If not, the eyepiece can be blocked by the mount and table when pointing high overhead, and it's awfully hard to look through them when that happens.

A group called Astronomers Without Borders offers perhaps the best of the lot, the 5" (135 mm) OneSky Reflector at $250. Beyond that, there are some small but nice tabletop Dobs ranging in diameter from about 3" (75 mm) to 4.5" (114 mm) in the price range from $75 – $150. All are Newtonians, and all will outperform the typical department store telescope. Do your homework, choose your supplier and telescope wisely, and you can find an affordable telescope to enjoy for years to come.