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Wildcard SSL: one certificate for every subdomain, and when you do not need it

Security

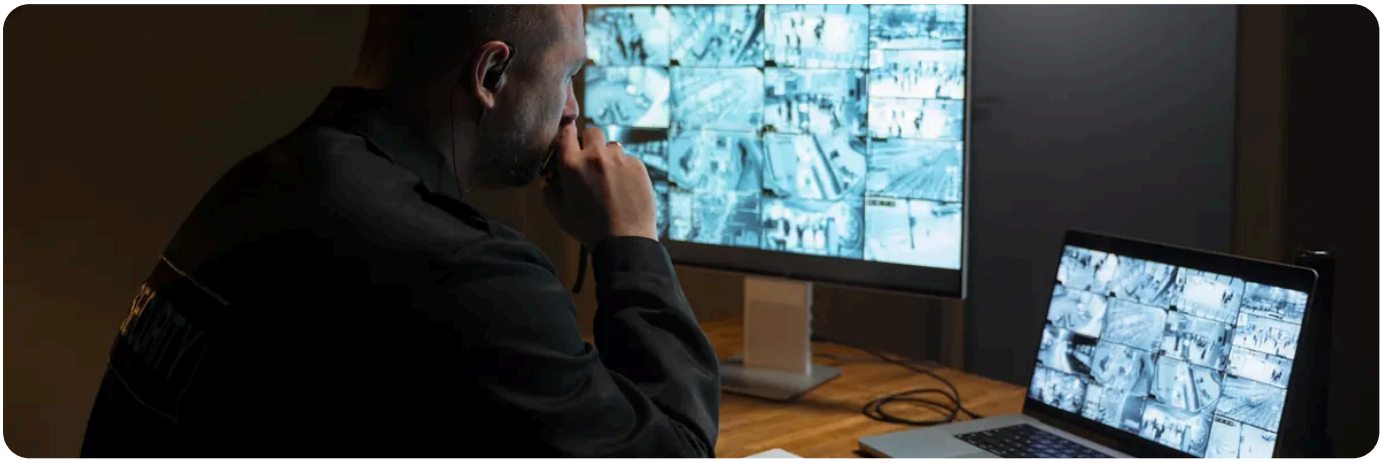
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Wildcard SSL: one certificate for every subdomain, and when you do not need it

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The short answer: a **wildcard** certificate (with an asterisk) covers every subdomain one level down, such as `shop.example.com` and `blog.example.com`, without listing them one by one. **You almost never need one:** the ordinary free certificate covers the domain and the subdomains that exist, and each new subdomain gets its own.

What the asterisk covers, and what it does not

Address	Covered by *.example.com?
shop.example.com	Yes.
blog.example.com	Yes.
a.shop.example.com (two levels)	**No.** The asterisk only covers one level.
example.com (the bare domain)	**Not** on its own. The certificate is usually requested for both: `example.com` and `*.example.com`.

When it makes sense

Your situation	Do you need a wildcard?
You have the site, the blog and the shop on three subdomains you created by hand.	No. Each has its own free certificate. See **If the free certificate does not renew**.
Your software creates a new subdomain for every customer (`customer1.example.com`, `customer2.example.com` …).	**Yes.** You cannot request a certificate for every subdomain that is born.

Your situation	Do you need a wildcard?
You want one certificate to manage instead of several.	You can, but you do not have to. Weigh the extra validation work, below.

The validation is different

To prove the domain is yours, the ordinary certificate leaves a file on the site. **A wildcard cannot:** the certificate authority requires you to create a **TXT** record in the domain's DNS. This has two consequences.

1. **The DNS must be editable by you or by a program.** If the domain uses the registrar's DNS or Cloudflare's, that is where the record is created. See **DNS records: A, CNAME, MX, TXT and TTL**.

2. **Renewal needs the TXT too.** Creating it by hand at every renewal is not practical. On a VPS, `certbot` has plugins that create the record for you for several DNS services; see the certbot documentation for yours.

Mind the key:
A wildcard serves any subdomain. If the private key leaks, whoever holds it can pose as all of them. Treat it like a password and do not copy it to machines that do not need it.

A paid certificate (**DV, OV or EV**) can also be a wildcard. Before buying, ask us whether your case justifies it: very often the free certificates are enough. To install a purchased one, see **How to activate and install a paid SSL certificate**.

NEED A HAND?

Need a certificate for automatically created subdomains? Open a ticket saying how your software creates them.

Open a support ticket →

SEE ALSO

- **The free SSL certificate did not renew: why AutoSSL fails and what to check** →
- **What is an SSL certificate and why does it matter?** →
- **Pointing a subdomain to another server or service: A record or CNAME** →

CAA records: who may issue certificates for your domain →

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