

Preparing Your Vehicle For Winter Storage

As much as we don't like it, Canadian winters are a fact of life. Along with that goes the task of preparing your car for winter storage. Now, depending on where you live in this great country of ours, there are two schools of thought on how to properly prepare your car for the coming winter months. They are:

- Park it, but run it every other week or so
- Put it into hibernation and leave it alone until the arrival of Spring.

Store it or start it?

Should you start your vehicle up once a week or so during the winter? There are arguments on both sides of this issue, but in my mind, it comes down to one question: How long will your vehicle be stored for? If you are only looking at two or three months of storage, this may be an option. If you are storing your vehicle for longer, I would strongly recommend putting the vehicle properly away and leaving it until next year. The reasons for this are simple: it's a well known fact that starting an engine is hard on it - cold weather starting is even worse. Why needlessly punish your engine?

If you are going to fire up the engine occasionally, here are a few pointers to keep in mind:

- Run it in a well ventilated area. Carbon monoxide can build up quickly.
- Run for a minimum of 20 minutes to allow the engine to come up to normal operating temperature. This will allow the oil to circulate and will also open up the thermostat so that your radiator antifreeze circulates as well.
- Crank up the air conditioner and/or heater and run them for 10 minutes or so. Again, circulating fluids is what this is all about.
- If your vehicle has power steering, you may want to turn the wheels a few times to keep the fluids flowing.

Storing your vehicle

There are a number of things to do to properly store your rod for winter. Doing it right can take up the better part of a day or two. Take the time to do it right. It will make a difference when it's time to fire it up in the Spring.

Gas and Oil

Change the oil and filter so that no contaminants are left behind. Add fuel stabilizer to your gas prior to filling the tank so that it mixes well. Run the engine long enough so that the stabilized gas makes it through the entire fuel system. Topping up your tank will help to prevent corrosion and adding a stabilizer will make sure your gas remains gas and doesn't turn into gunk.

Wheels and Tires

Overinflating your tires by about 5 pounds will help prevent flat spotting over the winter. Clean your wheels thoroughly inside and out to remove brake dust and other dirt, then apply a good coat of wax to both sides for protection. Put a coat of tire wax on the tires to keep them moisturized and prevent cracking. On a vehicle that I recently purchased, the tires had very little tread wear but had cracks in the sidewalls caused by UV rays and improper storage.

Exterior

Wash and wax your car to provide an extra layer of protection to your paint. For more information on taking care of your car's exterior, see our article on washing tips.

Vinyl and Rubber

Use a good conditioner on all vinyl and rubber parts to prevent them from drying out. There are lots of good products out there to help with this. The best that I've seen so far are wax based and will last a lot longer than most of the "this will make it shiny" sprays.

Interior

Now's the time to clean the interior thoroughly. Clean the glass, shampoo the carpets, dig in between the seats to see what's there, clean the upholstery, and get into all the nooks and crannies you've wanted to get at all year. Why? Well there's no time like the present to get rid of a season's worth of dirt, and besides, when Spring comes along, you want to be able to drive your car, not scrub it. Make sure everything is spotless and when you're done, put in some cedar (chips or boards) and silica gel to absorb any excess moisture. I wouldn't recommend using mothballs since the smell can be hard to get rid of. A good source of silica gel is as close as your nearest department or grocery store. It's called kitty litter. There are a few companies selling it as the latest and greatest thing for your cat. While it does work great in Fluffy's litter box, it also works great at absorbing excess moisture in your car.

The engine

Gas and oil have already been covered, but there's still work to be done under the hood. Degreasing and cleaning the engine is a good idea so that you can see if there are any leaks that require maintenance. Check all hoses and wires to make sure everything is in good condition and replace any that need to be. The last thing to do is to make sure the internal components of the engine remain lubricated and don't corrode. There are a number of engine storage products that are designed to keep moisture and corrosion out while your engine is parked for an extended period. Some of these are known as "fogging" sprays, hence the term "fog it and forget it." One product that I like requires that the engine be idling at operating temperature while you spray the contents into the carburetors for about 30 seconds until the engine chokes. I also remove the spark plugs and spray a little into each cylinder for good measure.

Remove the battery

Remove the battery so that you can clean the battery tray and connections to remove any acid or build up that may have accumulated. Your battery should be stored some place relatively warm (not hot) and away from kids, animals, and sources of heat or sparks. Place the battery on a block of wood (metal or concrete can discharge it) and put it out of harm's way. When Spring rolls around, it will need to be placed on a trickle charger prior to being put back in your car.

Change the brake fluid

Brake fluid will absorb moisture and needs to be changed occasionally. Changing it prior to storage means your car gets put away with uncontaminated fluids.

Seal any openings

Seal up the exhaust tips to prevent any corrosion inside the system, but more importantly, to keep mice, bugs, and other pests out. Make sure all windows, vents, and any other openings that may exist are closed. You don't want your vehicle to become a winter home to unwanted pests so seal everything up and periodically check under, in, and around your car to make sure nothing has found a new winter home. The only thing worse than finding a rodent in your car, is finding him after he's been in there for a few months.

Convertibles

If your car is a convertible, store it with the top up. A folded top can dry out and crack over the winter. Keeping the top up also provides one less method of entry for unwanted pests. Be sure to clean and condition the top prior to storage to prevent it from drying out.

Jack it up or leave it down?

The purpose of blocking up your car is to prevent flat spotting of your tires and to take some of the strain off of the suspension. Whether you put blocks under your car or not is up to you, but if you do, make sure the blocks are under the frame and not the springs. Use something solid and stable, like axle stands, to support your car. This will help to prevent unfortunate accidents while your car is stored and when your getting ready to bring it out again.

Cover your vehicle

Cover your vehicle with a quality car cover that allows air to circulate. Plastic sheeting is not recommended as it keeps moisture in and can stick to your paint. A good car cover will protect your car from dust, scratches, and ultraviolet light.

Don't forget about your vehicle over the winter

Periodically check on your vehicle to make sure it's safe and secure. Check underneath, under the hood, and inside for fluid leaks or unwanted guests. Putting your vehicle away for the winter accomplishes one objective - preserving your car and your investment. Take the time to do it properly. You'll be glad you did.