Strive to maintain tires, brakes, finish

By Steven Parker
special writer

THERE WAS a time when turning the hose on the trusty family buggy was all it took to get your car ready for a night on the town.

But paint and tire care for cars has gone high-tech. And today's braking systems, using new materials and computer-controlled electronics, are so sophisticated, most of us can barely comprehend how they operate, much less how to maintain them correctly.

So the three basic systems that keep your car or truck in tiptop shape — paint, tires and brakes — deserve a bit more of your attention than you may have paid them in the past.

● FINISH FIRST

You might be surprised to learn that car and truck paints have been completely reformulated over the last decade. These new chemical processes have made paint care something that might be more suited for a chemical engineer than a typical car owner. But lacking your own personal chemist, here is a look at how and why paints have changed — and how to care for them.

The enamel paints that widely in the auto industry until the start of the 1980s had a lot going for them. Mostly, they had a lot of paint going for them. Cars and trucks were painted by being sprayed with layer after layer of colored paint. This made for a great finish on the car if cared for properly, but it also created lots of problems.

The process added considerably to air pollution problems, and automakers spent time and money developing a new method for painting cars that would cut down on pollution.

That method is called clear-coating. Instead of painting with many layers of colored paint, only a few layers of color are sprayed on. Then they are covered with several layers of clear-coat paint, which serves to seal the paint and protect the surface.

Clear-coating's main problem is that if scratched or damaged in any way, the clear coat tends to show off that damage much more vividly than the old enamel paints. This is because the clear coat, when scraped or scratched, reflects that surface problem in a much more pronounced way than the old-and-polluting enamel paint methods. Clear coat, simply put, is delicate.

How to care for clear-coat paints?

First, determine the condition of the paint. Has your car been waxed in the past year? Do you live in a bad environment for the clear coat (heavy pollution, high heat, salt from snow-covered roads, acid rain and factories in your area)?

If the paint is generally in bad condition, it is probably best to start the cleaning process with a moderately abrasive cleanser. Don't rush to the kitchen and get out the scouring powder. You need to use products specifically formulated for cleaning the clear coat without scratching the delicate finish.

Harry Robinson, a consumer relations representative for Armor All Products Corp. of Aliso Viego, Calif., said his company and others like it offer several different kinds of waxes and cleansers formulated for the new clear-coat finishes.

"Armor All has three waxes available. Armor All wax is formulated for clear-coat paint. Raindance is a bit more abrasive and longer lasting, and Rally is best for older vehicles or those needing the most intensive cleansing," Robinson said.

"For instance, the cleanser in our top-line wax is the same product jewelers use to clean gemstones and rings. It's non-abrasive, but it would not be appropriate for an enamel paint car, only for clear coat. Be sure to check the labels."

Robinson said waxing a car once a year is a good rule of thumb, but if conditions dictate, you may want to do it more often. Just check the label first so you do not ruin your paint job.

How best to apply the wax?

"We supply applicators with our wax and so do some other manufacturers," Robinson said. "It's safe to use either a sponge or terry-cloth applicator, whichever you prefer."

● TIRE TIME

When it comes to tire care, basic rules apply. Tire rotation is still a good idea, especially if it is recommended in your owner's handbook.

Proper balancing of your tires is essential, of course. Have this work done at the appropriate shop or at the dealer if still under warranty.

Most new cars come with a manual from the tire manufacturer (which also contains your new car tire warranty). Following the instructions there should give your tires a nice, long life.

Remember, the sportier a tire is, the less comfortable a ride it will give, and it will probably have a shorter life than you might expect. Luxury car tires last a long time and give a smooth ride, but they do not provide the same handling that a sport tire

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AAA Michigan

Using too much antifreeze can raise the freezing point and diminish its effectiveness.

Antifreeze: a vital protective

TOO MUCH of a good thing can be bad when it comes to filling your car's radiator with antifreeze, AAA Michigan reports.

"If too much antifreeze is put into the cooling system, it will raise the freezing point and diminish its effectiveness," said Paul Gliesman, AAA Michigan Emergency Road Service manager.

"Antifreeze must be diluted with water before it can be used effectively," Gliesman said. "A mixture of 50 percent antifreeze and 50 percent water is recommended to ensure protection to 36 degrees below zero."

For protection beyond 36 degrees below zero, motorists can use a mixture of two-thirds antifreeze to one third water, Gliesman said.

AAA MICHIGAN offers winter drivers these tips on antifreeze used to keep a car's cooling system from freezing, boiling and corroding:

- Check the level of radiator fluid in the cooling system every time the gas tank is filled. Marks on the radiator overflow tank indicate the proper level. If it's low, a mixture of antifreeze and water should be poured into the overflow tank.
- During winter, use an antifreeze hydrometer monthly to test the fluid's freezing point.
- Change the radiator fluid and flush the cooling system every two years.
- Read the automobile owner's manual thoroughly to see if a special type of antifreeze is needed for your vehicle. Some cars require a special type of antifreeze compatible with aluminum engine parts.