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# Shade-tree mechanics suffering in computer age

BY KEN VAN STEENRISTE

As automakers add expensive tech-nology to enhance the performance of new cars, do-it-yourselfers and hobbyist mechanics are getting squeezed out

new cars, do-tryourseners and noboy-ist mechanics are getting squeezed out-of the equation.
"It's virtually impossible for the aver-age person to do trouble-shooting," said Ted Moraitis, Service Manager at Jack Cauley Chevrolet, 7020 Orchard Lake Road, West Bloomfield.

Moraitis explained that while service people are equipped with special equip-ment and computers costing thousands of bollars, the average person wouldn't even know how to operate that gear.
"Someone at home wouldn't have the tools to perform diagnostic work, and even if they did buy those tools, they have to be programmed and they would have to undergo hours of train-ing just to learn how to operate them, he said.

Pressure to increase vehicle's fuel

ing just to learn how to operate them, he said.

Pressure to increase vehicle's fue economy and performance have been the contributing factors to the rise of computer-controlled components, according to Maraitis.

"Car companies are under a lot of pressure from the EPA with increasing emissions regulations. That's been a real factor in all of this," Morattis said.

Veterans of the automobile maintenance industry are very familiar with the frustration incomprehensible technology can generate for the drivewy mechanic.

"I've seen people buying a lot of stuff

"I've seen people buying a lot of stuff they don't need because they don't have a \$6,000 laptop to perform a diag-nostic test," said Dennis Razz, a certi-

nostic test," sand Dennis Razz, a certi-fied mechanic and manager of Harthun Auto Parts, 20723 Evergereen Road. Repair bills can skyrocket because of trial-and-error techniques that have taken the place of bigh tech computer components and performance tests. Razz explained that many auto prob-

lems encountered today are due to faulty computer sensors, which cost upwards of \$100 each to replace.
"We see people all the time come in and buy the wrong thing, then they



It's no game: Jim Cook, a service technician at Jack Cauley Chevrolet, reads the responses from a Tech 2, a hand-held computer that interfaces with the computers in the car to diagnose problems. The use of such computers puts engine repair out of the reach of your backyard garage mechanics.

come back a half an hour later and buy a different sensor. People end up buy-ing a lot of stuff they don't need," Razz said.

But then there are those who tinker under the hood, not to save money or because they have to, but just because they enjoy it. What will become of the old-fashioned car enthusiast in the computer are?

old-fashioned car enthusiast in the computer age?
"You can still modify or add to a car, you just have to know ahead of time what you intend to do and how you can do it. That's why a lot of people collect and modify older cars, because they were built simpler," said Berry Hensel, a Canton resident and president of a Detroit-area club for Camaro collectors. Hensel, who designs powertrains for General Motors, has been working on cars for more than 20 years. He's seen a lot of designs come and go, and

knows that changing technology has forced ear enthusiasts to change their techniques as well.

"If you've enjoyed tinkering all your life and you get a brand new car, you just can't anymore. Your basic tune up is pretty much gone for the shade-tree mechanic," Hensel said.

Many collectors choose late model cars that were built before technological gadgets became commonplace. Sometimes, they just have to get creative under the bood.

"I once had a 1983 Malibu that I was trying to change the spark plugs on. I eventually realized that I would have to take the right front wheel off to get up and under at the plugs, they were so tucked under there, Hensel said.
The good news is that cars actually require a lot less maintenance today than they did ten years ago because of

increasing precision in production techniques. Jobs like Hensel's spark plug replacement rarely even need to be done on modern automobiles.

Most manufacturers have taken a lot of the basic maintenance out of the ears. Spark plug are good up to 100,000 miles, many cars don't need tune ups

for that long, either," Moraitis said.

But when those maintenance-saving devices break-down, owners who aren't tech-savvy sometimes get highly irri-

"How can I explain to someone who doesn't know what I'm tolking about that their car is on a hoist because of a broken sensor. The only thing that matters to them is that they're sitting next to a tow truck driver." Mornitis explained.

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