Protect the finish

A clean car keeps

From the moment you drive your car off the dealer's lot, it begins to depreciate.

You can cut down the loss you'll take by keeping the vehicle in good condition — including the body.

Next to an engine that works right, bright looks are what brings the most resale dollars. Many factors — bad weather, sand, sun, salt deposits and various residues — wear away at the paint, causing dullness, mottling and rust.

Take care of that surface by:

• Don't delay washing and waxing your car when it's new. The modern acrylics and enamels used today need to be kept clean and protected from the very beginning.

• If you car is left outside in bad weather or if there's been salt buildup, it should be washed every week. If it's kept in a garage or is used in seasons or climates less conducive to corrosion, once every two weeks is enough.

• Don't wash a car in direct sunlight.

• All detergents are specially formulated to provide necessary lubrication as well as cleaning your car. Commercial hot sealer waxes that contain Carnauba and silicones play an important part in helping to prevent rusting and keeping a good coat of protection on your car's finish.

• Polyethylene filament brushes are best for car cleaning. Stay away from hard brushes and don't use steel wool to clean chrome. Use chrome cleaner with a sponge or soft cloth.

• Carbon black (the gritty black residue caused by diesel smoke), bug residues, tree sap, and bird droppings are all damaging to a car's finish and should be removed as soon as possible.

• Tars and ceratin oils used on roads can be removed with a special chemical solvent. Follow the directions carefully, then wash your car immediately afterwards.

• Moisture causes rusting. Since dirt attracts and traps moisture, keeping your car clean is you best insurance against rusting.

• Change windshield-wiper blades every three months to prevent smearing in the rain.

Dirt traps moisture that can rust out your car. Murray Sanford applies the finishing touch of a thorough wash to Joe Przybylski's car. Regular washing and waxing will keep the paint finish shining. (Staff photos by Gary Caskey)

Six quick checks to keep you going

How long has it been since you gave your car more than a quick once-over? If you have to pause to remember, you have put it off too long.

Following is a list of car checks that should be made periodically:

1) *Fluids:* Check engine oil; transmission oil, power steering fluid and coolant. Never remove the radiator pressure cap when the engine is hot.

2) Battery: Check for corrosion on terminals, a common cause of starting trouble. Also check the water level. If you have to add water, use distilled water. When working near a battery, be sure there is no open flame. Batteries emit explosive hydrogen gas.

3) Drive belts and hoses: While the hood is up, take a good look at them. Frayed or worn belts should be replaced, as should soft, brittle or bulging hoses.

4) Windshield wipers: Check them out. The rubber will become brittle with weathering and age and may be worn to a point where wipers smear or streak the glass. How's your supply of washer fluid?

5) Tires: Invest in a good tire gauge and use it frequently. If you haven't checked tire pressure since summer, you're likely to find them underinflated. Even a couple of pounds of underinflation can cost up to three percent in fuel economy.

6) Lights: Finally, as a part of your periodic inspection program, make a walk-around check of all your lights, including turn signals.

If you have no one with you to help check brake lights, you can do it yourself in broad daylight when another car is behind you at an intersection. Just tap your brake pedal and look for the reflection of your brake lights in his headlights.

Toothbrush is handy

After you've washed your car, use an old toothbrush to clean behind and next to the chrome. Salt builds up there and it usually won't come off without scrubbing.

While working on the car, take a look in the trunk. Take out any unnecessary winter tools, sand and chains. Recheck your emergency flares, blankets, jack, spare tire and first aid kit.

Don't ignore the ignition system

Electronic ignition systems that are standard equipment on many new cars were designed to help keep emissions low. But they still require periodic maintenance.

Largely due to requirements stemming from emissions control, the car makers began using the electronic ignition systems to provide more voltage to fire a wider-gapped spark plug.

The new systems don't use breaker points and condensers. Used instead are magnetic components that trigger the system for secondary voltage. However, many of the components of the electronic system are the same as in conventional ignitions and maintenance requirements are not too dissimilar.

The condition of the coil, distributor cap and rotor must still be checked. Correct timing is critical to proper operation.

Spark plugs are still subject to fouling. And ignition wiring can still deteriorate or suffer damage, causing misfire.

Those extras use more gas

How your car is equipped affects fuel consumption.

Options like air conditioning and — to a lesser extent electrical accessories such as heaters, defrosters and radios — use more gasoline. When the air conditioner is on, mileage drops five to 14 percent. Air conditoning also adds weight — about 100 pounds — to a car, increasing fuel consumption even more. If you have an air conditioner, use it sparingly.

• An automatic transmission can be a gas-using option. Manual transmissions generally use less gas, particularly in small cars, although this may not hold true in situations where frequent shifting is required.

• Power steering also uses a bit more fuel.

Some options can help conserve gasoline:

• If you want air conditioning, for example, a light exterior car color combined with light interior upholstery will reduce heat build-up and keep your air conditioner from having to work so hard. Tintead glass also helps.

• Fuel injection usually saves gasoline by more uniformly and efficiently distributing the fuel than carburetors.

• Top quality radial tires usually will result in a five to 10 percent fuel saving because rolling resistance is reduced. Steel-belted radials generally are even better than fabric-belted radials.

• If you'll be doing a lot of open-road driving, a cruise control option may be worthwhile.