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Detailing your car like a pro – How to get your car ready for show season

[Mark J. McCourt \(http://blog.hemmings.com/index.php/author/mark/\)](http://blog.hemmings.com/index.php/author/mark/) on Aug 24th, 2012<http://assets.blog.hemmings.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/wax-application-buffer1.jpg>

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*[Editor's Note:
While much of
the Hemmings
Editorial
department is
floating in the
Mediterranean*

YOUR CAR READY FOR SHOW SEASON) ✉ (MAILTO:?SUBJECT=ARTICLE FROM HEMMINGS - DETAILING YOUR CAR LIKE A PRO – HOW TO GET YOUR CAR READY FOR SHOW SEASON&BODY=CHECK OUT THIS ARTICLE ON HEMMINGS HTTP://BLOG.HEMMINGS.COM/INDEX.PHP/2012/08/24/DETAILING-YOUR-CAR-LIKE-A-PRO-HOW-TO-GET-YOUR-CAR-READY-FOR-SHOW-SEASON/)

(<http://www.hemmings.com/events/cruise>) this week, we thought we'd run some of the articles from the Hemmings Getting Started in the Collector-Car Hobby guide



(<http://blog.hemmings.com/index.php/2009/11/17/hemmings-getting-started-guide-now-available-as-a-free-download/>) for our blog and Hemmings Daily readers. Our regular publishing schedule will resume Monday, August 27.]

There are few things more pleasurable than admiring – and driving – a freshly cleaned vehicle. Whether your collector car of choice is indeed a car, or a truck, a motorcycle, van or tractor, the effort that it takes to “detail” a vehicle is certainly rewarded by the results.

Consider the area in which you’ll do your cleaning; you won’t end up needing to move the vehicle in the middle of the process, and you won’t be straining to reach it with the hose or extension cords. Even shade will keep the paint cool, and an artificial light source that can be trained where it’s needed and doesn’t require hand-holding is also helpful for working in foot wells and under the hood.

Detailing a vehicle can be a time-consuming procedure or it can be a quick and simple task; determining how much attention your vehicle requires and what you plan to do are the next steps. If it’s a daily-driven classic or is stored outdoors, there may be bird droppings or sap on the paint, and you may find tar on the lower panels and brake dust on the wheels. The interior may be dirty or stained and filled with wrappers, receipts and more. If it is a weekend driver or show car that is covered and garaged, the paint and brightwork could be clean, yet dusty, and these surfaces may exhibit swirl marks or scratches.

Interior

A powerful vacuum cleaner is a great tool to thoroughly sweep the floor, door pockets and any pleats or crevices in the seats. Most shop vacs have optional accessory kits with crevice tools and small brushes for cleaning the interior.

Remove stains with carpet cleaning solution or foam, the same kind used on house carpets. Scrub vinyl mats with soapy water and air-dry. If your vehicle has leather upholstery, give it good slatherings of leather conditioner and leather protectant to clean and feed the hide.

A soft bristle brush works wonders for dusting tight corners, and a can of compressed air or cotton swabs dipped in interior cleaner will remove dust from vents. Crud stuck in the console can be removed with interior cleaner and a flat-blade screwdriver wrapped in a shop rag. The dash top absorbs a lot of light and heat, so shield it with a light coat of UV-resistant protectant.

Exterior

If you’re planning a quick wash and spruce-up of your existing finish, you should use a dedicated

mild liquid car wash; if you're going to polish and wax the exterior, you can instead use a small amount of liquid dish detergent, which will effectively strip the wax off of the paint. A cool surface will give you the best chance of washing and drying the car without causing wash liquid to evaporate and leave spots on the surfaces. Hose the car down with an easy stream of cool water, working your way from the roof down to the wheels so that dirt and contaminants flow away.

Keep the wash mitt clean, rinsing it frequently. Wash the car from top to bottom, starting with the horizontal surfaces. Switching to the horizontal panels, start from the front and work your way back, from the glass and top of the fenders down to the door's center point. Once the vehicle's upper surfaces are clean, rinse and tackle the mid-doors down to the sills, as well as the front and rear bumpers and valances. Save the wheels and tires for last, and it's best to tackle them with a second wash mitt that you won't use on your paint the next time you wash. If your wheels have a coating of brake dust, dedicated wheel cleaner will likely remove the residue. Whitewall or raised white letter tires will gleam after a rub with a steel wool soap pad.

Dry the car from top to bottom with a soft cloth or chamois, paying attention to trim and other things that can trap water that will later run out and smear your wax. Use your damp drying cloth to wipe down the door jambs, hood and trunk channels. If you've still got tar or sap to deal with, now's the time to use a fresh soft cloth and some bug and tar remover or other solvent to clean those areas.

Clay bars are designed to glide over a surface lubricant and pick contaminants up off the paint. If you run your hand over a freshly washed panel and feel some grit or resistance, this is the material that a paint-cleaning clay bar will remove. Wet the area with a liquid spray wax or detailing spray and rub the clay back and forth, folding it to expose clean areas as it gets dirty.

If your paint is oxidized and chalky, or simply dull, you'll want to polish it to bring back the shine; remember that polish brings the gloss, but it doesn't offer protection against the elements. Always follow up with a coat of protective wax.

You can apply and remove polish and wax by hand, or you can use a buffer. A random orbital buffer is the best choice. Regardless of your application method, remember that a little wax goes a long way. Move the applicator or buffer pad in an up-and-down fashion before turning and doing the same from side to side over the same area. Fresh 100-percent cotton or microfiber cloth towels won't harm the paint as you remove wax by hand or touch up areas your buffer couldn't reach. Use a soft natural bristle brush to sweep wax dust out of emblems and crevices. If your vehicle has plastic or rubber trim or window moldings, or a vinyl convertible top that would benefit from a UV-resistant protectant, spray the treatment on a soft cotton rag before applying it to the trim.

Inside Tools:

- Vacuum cleaner with narrow attachment
- Soft bristle brush
- Old toothbrushes
- Old kitchen sponge with scrub side
- Cotton swabs
- Cotton rags or microfiber dust cloths
- Shop rags
- Flat-blade screwdriver

Inside Supplies:

- Carpet cleaning solution
- Fabric-safe cleaner/degreaser
- Upholstery shampoo

Leather cleaner/conditioner
Rubber and trim dressing or protectant
Glass cleaner
Old newspapers for wiping glass
Can of compressed air

Outside Tools:

Deep bucket (holding five gallons or more)
Wash mitt
Stiff bristle brush and soft bristle brush
Old toothbrushes
Steel wool pads with integral soap
Drying towels (100 percent cotton) or chamois
Clean cotton rags or microfiber cloths
Random orbital (dual-action) buffer

Outside Supplies:

Automotive car wash solution
Paint-safe degreaser for road tar and tree sap
Multi-surface wheel cleaner
Whitewall cleaning solution
Glass cleaner
Paint-cleaning clay
Polishing compound
Polish
Wax (natural carnauba-based or synthetic)
Rubber and trim dressing or protectant

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CrownCoupe64 says: August 24, 2012 8:25 am

Interior and exterior titles appear to be switched

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Nancy Bianco says: August 24, 2012 8:38 am

Good catch. Thanks.

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Rich Collins says: August 24, 2012 9:21 am

Never, never use dish-washing soap to wash you car – much too harsh. There are better ways to remove old wax.

I've found that using a good quality paint sealant prior to wax really extends the life of the protection. I used paint sealant with no wax a couple of years ago on one of my Porsches and it is still doing its job. If you want to go for some depth then you can add wax after putting down a base of sealant.

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Patty K says: March 27, 2013 7:06 pm

Can you point me in the direction of a good sealant?

➤ [Reply \(http://blog.hemmings.com/index.php/2012/08/24/detailing-your-car-like-a-pro-how-to-get-your-car-ready-for-show-season/?replytocom=5433170#respond\)](http://blog.hemmings.com/index.php/2012/08/24/detailing-your-car-like-a-pro-how-to-get-your-car-ready-for-show-season/?replytocom=5433170#respond)



Ron says: January 2, 2014 10:36 am

I've been using dish detergent for forty years and won awards several times for appearance. Dish detergent isn't going to effect it if you rinse well. Put a paint sealant on it and wax it. Done.

➤ [Reply \(http://blog.hemmings.com/index.php/2012/08/24/detailing-your-car-like-a-pro-how-to-get-your-car-ready-for-show-season/?replytocom=6124742#respond\)](http://blog.hemmings.com/index.php/2012/08/24/detailing-your-car-like-a-pro-how-to-get-your-car-ready-for-show-season/?replytocom=6124742#respond)



Ron Peters says: August 24, 2012 12:10 pm

A shameless plug for my book on this very topic. Prepare to be Judged – How to Get Your Car Ready for Show. The difference is that I focus on all the details that you should be aware of and not on specific detailing processes.

It's available at your favorite online book seller.

➤ [Reply \(http://blog.hemmings.com/index.php/2012/08/24/detailing-your-car-like-a-pro-how-to-get-your-car-ready-for-show-season/?replytocom=5082145#respond\)](http://blog.hemmings.com/index.php/2012/08/24/detailing-your-car-like-a-pro-how-to-get-your-car-ready-for-show-season/?replytocom=5082145#respond)



Scotty G says: August 25, 2012 7:05 am

Thanks very much for providing these helpful-hint stories.

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Kevin Preston says: August 25, 2012 12:19 pm

Here is another few tips about clay bars. I am producing a video that documents this.

Recently, and I have never seen this on a car this bad, my sprinklers left water spots on my 2006 Taurus. I hadn't driven my car for a few days, just been home bound with big work projects. Anyhow, it was really bright, hot and sunny, in the 100s. I came out one morning and the water spots were so bad, that they actually had "ridges" on them, and would NOT BE REMOVED. I tried washing when it was darker and cooler, waxing them out, polishing them out, even using an electric buffer. Not only did they not come out, they didn't improve one bit.

So I thought, hmmm, let me try my clay bar on this. Sure enough, with some elbow grease, they all came out. A little "shadowing" remained, which was completely removed with a good waxing, which you need to do when you clay bar. Like anything else, there is some technique to it. Clear coats are WEIRD, and seem like they are a grit magnet, at least in Southern California. To be honest, I never got the upside of all these clear coats. They don't look so great. I miss the old days when you could simply use wax and a good pad and get out just about anything in your paint.

Another tip...I once masked off the front of my Fiat so that I could paint the inside of the grill cavity and protect it. But I only covered the car back to the windshield. I didn't even notice until a few days later that the whole top of the car was gritty...yep, primer had billowed up unseen and settled on the top of the car, then heat had adhered it to the paint.

About an hour with a clay bar, and unbelievably, that surface was cleaned better than it was before.

Keep several on hand, to save you from unexpected things, and your own foolishness!

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Paul C says: September 19, 2012 1:27 pm

Got water spots ... use white vinger and a sponge ... sponge it on & rinse it off ... water spots dissolve and you are ready to wash ... and prepare to clay, polish, & wax.

Also, may want to think about a two bucket washone with soap & water ... one with clear water to rinse your soapy mitt in before re-dipping it in the soapy water ... keeps the soapy bucket cleaner.

Don't let your polish or wax dry ... do a small area and wipe it off before it dries ... job goes a lot

faster with less effort. Micro towels are priceless for this ... change them often using multiple per car.

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Steve Harrod says: October 25, 2012 10:49 am

Just finished detailing my winter ride.91 explorer. I shoot the wheel wells with flat black spray paint.looks nice.

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Robert says: October 25, 2012 3:11 pm

I know brother about water spots. I live in Vegas and the water here is so hard it will cut a diamond. We need a filter on the outside spicket just to wash a car. Which is illegal here due to water shortages but almost everyone has a 20,000 gal pool. Go figure, most car dealers rape you 1,500 for paint sealed and they won't sell you a car with out it. Any Idea what that bogus product is.

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