



Beating Back The Big Chill

In seasonal storage an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Lately, that equation has increased to maybe several pounds. With gasoline becoming more fragile every year, and newly compounded motor oils being less compatible with old cars, we have new reasons to protect our cars. But first, let's review a" the possible hazards of automobile storage:

Condensed moisture, exposure to salt-laden air, ultra-dry conditions, ultra wet conditions, lack of proper lubrication from newer motor oils, deterioration of stored gasoline, rodents, skim rusting of naked metal parts, battery acid leaks, dried out oil seals, industrial (or tree sap) fallout and UV deterioration from sunlight are some of the hazards.

Sound daunting? Not really. These demons can be tamed in less than an hour of prevention before putting your car away, and at low cost.

Our vintage car customers often called in spring needing a tow because of starting problems. Here's how to prevent these and other problems with your stored cars:

If your car will be out of use for more than three months, change the oil and do a chassis lubrication, fill it with fresh gas (preferably with no ethanol), add fuel stabilizer, pump up the tires, hook up a battery trickle-charger, nourish the leather and vinyl, drive it until it's hot, and switch it off. Don't re-start it until you intend to go for a drive.

Here's the fix list:

Moisture:

Any empty space in a fuel tank is a cavity for moisture-laden air to condense into water. That water runs down the sides of the tank, and settles in the bottom. This causes rust, and may mix with gas to make the car run poorly in the next use. Excessive humidity in the storage area can also cause mildew on fabrics, and skim corrosion on bare parts such as brake drums and fasteners. Generally speaking too much humidity is anything above 65%.

Most fuel stabilizers also "dry out" water from the fuel. Naked metal parts which are easy to reach can be treated with a squirt of protectant such as LPS3 or whatever your marine store carries. Get two humidity gauges and average the readings to be assured that the moisture level is OK in your garage. If not, it can be remedied with humidifiers or de-humidifiers, or air conditioners or heaters. If you live in a cold climate, a little bit of heat in your garage does a lot of good. Cars don't need to be warm; they just need to be dry. I keep my garage heater set at 45 degrees in winter, which keeps it dry. If you fire up your car to move it a few feet then shut it down, water will lie in the exhaust system for the rest of the winter.

In exceptionally dry atmospheres, such as in the desert states, leather and vinyl can get brittle, so it's a good idea to treat these materials. There are expensive leather oils and very expensive ones. Use the latter.

Covers:

Car covers that breathe are best for indoor storage. I don't use covers indoors at all, unless the car would be exposed to direct sunlight or paint overspray. I enjoy looking at the cars all winter.

Fuels:

Twenty-five years ago, stored gasoline would last two years before becoming unstable and thickening enough to harm carburetors. Now, its three months from the time it leaves the ground. The recent addition of ethanol to gasoline may degrade rubber and plastic parts in the fuel systems of older cars. Gasoline suppliers believe that E10 or 10% ethanol is OK, but it's too early to tell. The best precaution is to change fuel filters seasonally, or use a see-through filter you can monitor. If you see little chunks of rubber (or anything else) you'll know what your carburetors are drinking. Fuel stabilizers are available at most hardware stores and marine stores. Read the labels. Some will claim to be upgraded for use with ethanol fuels. Consider using stabilizers in all your less-used cars, all the time. For long storage, most experts now advise draining the fuel from the tank, then running the engine until it stalls. Put a rag in the tailpipe to discourage rodents.

Motor oils:

Much has been written in the motoring press lately about the new oils not having enough zinc to lubricate our old cars. Apparently zinc is not compatible with catalytic converters. I use any oil made for diesel engines, any oil with an API service rating of "SL", or any oil labeled for old cars.

Batteries:

If your car uses a conventional lead-acid battery, it can be disconnected and stored in a warm place. If a discharged battery goes below freezing, it becomes useless. Easier yet, hook it up to a miniature trickle charger (battery tender), and leave in the car.

Wildlife:

Mothballs are effective deterrents to mice and squirrels. There are electronic devices which emit a high frequency to discourage rodents, too. Not only do rodents like to nest in old cars, but some love to gnaw on wiring insulation.

Mid-winter:

I try to find a nice day in mid-winter when the salt has been washed off the roads by a recent rain, and take the cars for a drive. If put away hot and dry, your car will benefit from this winter break. The fluids will all circulate, and mechanical parts will be re-coated with their respective lubricants.