

Make it shine

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Photo courtesy of Turtle Wax

Make your car look its best with automotive detailing tips from experts

by MARK RAY

Having your car professionally detailed can set you back several hundred dollars, especially if you pay someone to come to your home or office. However, you can get great results yourself for a fraction of the cost. If you're like Costco member Mike Schultz, you may even enjoy the

experience.

“For me, taking care of a car is therapeutic,” says Schultz (aka Dr. Turtle), senior vice president for research and development at Turtle Wax, a Costco supplier. “If it’s above 32 [degrees] and the sun is out, I’m washing my car.”

Schultz recommends that car owners follow a regular five-step regimen. Here are the details.

Clean the wheels and tires

The wheels and tires attract the most grime. Start there first to avoid splashing dirt onto the body.

“A lot of people think that cleaning the tires and wheels is just like running a wash mitt around the tire and wheel and you’re done,” Schultz says. “But actually it’s a little more complicated. Use a dedicated tire cleaner and then a wheel cleaner.”

In most cases, all you have to do is spray it on, perhaps do a little light scrubbing, then rinse and dry. For extra flair, spray on a wet finish after cleaning the rest of the car.

Clean the exterior

Rinse the entire car to remove loose dirt. Then, working from the top down, clean the surface using a foaming car wash and a wash mitt or microfiber towels. “I like to use a high-foaming car wash,” Schultz says. “It’s very slippery, so it adds some lubrication to get that soil off.”

Let the car air-dry for a few minutes, then dry the surface with clean microfiber towels, again moving from the top down—or use a leaf blower for a touchless approach. Next, walk around and check for bug stains or tar residue, which you can clean with a bug and tar remover. Then rinse and dry the area.

Wax the exterior

If you didn’t use a combined wash and wax product, you’ll want to wax the exterior. Spray wax is the easiest option. Just spray and dry—no elbow grease required. “You can do a car in about 15 minutes,” Schultz says.

Besides making your car sparkle, wax adds a protective barrier between your car and the elements. “Your clear coat, the clear top layer of paint, is only about 1.5 to 2 mils thick, no thicker than a sheet of paper,” Schultz says. “That’s one of the reasons you want to preserve it as long as you can.”

Although traditional paste waxes create a longer-lasting shine, Schultz says convenience has made spray wax the leading product on the market. Moreover, he says, today’s spray waxes are more durable than liquid ones.

Clean the interior

Open the doors, then wipe down the door jambs and other surfaces where the exterior paint continues. A damp microfiber cloth should do the trick.

Remove and clean the floor mats, vacuum the carpet and apply an interior detailer on hard surfaces. If you have leather seats, use a leather cleaner and conditioner to keep them in prime condition. It's important to use products that are right for your car's materials. For example, protective spray shouldn't be applied to steering wheels, clear plastic surfaces or woven materials.

"If you use a lot of high-silicone ingredients, you add an artificial shine that may detract from the look of the car," Schultz says.

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Clean the windows

Finally, clean the windows with an auto-specific glass cleaner, not an ammonia-based spray that could damage some surface materials. Use a thin microfiber cloth to minimize streaking. "I do the glass first on the outside, because it's the inside where all your streaks and swirls are going to show up," Schultz says. "If you do the outside first, it allows you to see the spots you've missed a lot easier."

Schultz recommends washing your car every week or two and waxing it when water no longer beads on the surface (or when you need some car care therapy). A good rule of thumb is to wax your car once every three months. Detail your car when temperatures are between 50 and 85 degrees and you're parked in the shade.

"With a car care regimen that you adopt, you can have that car looking new for 10 years or longer," Schultz says.

Paint predators (sidebar)

About 80% of the dirt that collects on cars is actually ground-up silica, sand and quartz—abrasive materials you don't want to rub into your paint. High-foaming car washes and microfiber wash mitts help prevent scratches.

Bird poop, bugs and tar can damage paint if you leave them on your car too long. "That's where a regular car care regimen can help, because you can get to those things that can damage your paint and get them off as quickly as possible," says Mike Schultz, senior vice president for research and development at Turtle Wax.—*MR*

