Bringing Your Car Out Of Winter Storage

The work that you do to prepare your car for coming out of storage is just as important as the work done to get it ready for storage. See the Winter Storage link for details on that process. Taking your time and doing the job right will help you on the road to many years and miles of trouble-free driving.

Winter is winding down and it's time to bring your car (truck, motorcycle, or other motorized vehicle) out of storage. Before you jump in and turn the key, there's a lot of work to be done in order to get your car ready for that first start-up and test drive.

Change the oil: Oil will build up condensation over the winter months. It can also become contaminated with water and acids that can lead to premature bearing failure and rust inside your engine. Before starting your car, change the oil and filter.

Charge the battery: Even if your battery has been on a trickle charger over the winter, test it and give it a fresh charge up to full strength.

Check/replace ALL fluids: As with your oil, other fluids can also be prone to water and other contaminates. Check all fluids (brake, coolant, transmission, windshield washer, rear end) to ensure that they are clean and the levels are where they should be. Winter storage can be hard on all fluids and they should be changed more frequently than on your daily driver. Even if you don't do a lot of summer driving, fluids can break down and cause damage. Consider replacing all fluids on a 2-4 year cycle. A handy way to remember is to change all fluids every leap year or every even-numbered year.

Check/replace all filters: Check all filters (air, PCV, fuel) for dirt or contaminants and replace them if necessary.

Bleed the brakes: Also make sure the master cylinder is topped up from a new, previously unopened can of brake fluid. When doing the next step (tires) check your brake shoes while the tires are off. Also check to make sure all four brake mechanisms (disc or drum) are functioning properly with no fluid leaks or cracked hoses.

Check the tires: Block the car up on axle stands and take off all four wheels. Carefully check your tires for sidewall or tread cracks. If you find any, replace the tire and consider replacing all four. Regardless of their condition or mileage, tires will degrade over time. Bridgestone recommends a maximum tire lifespan of 10 years, regardless of mileage. Also check your tire pressure and, if you haven't already done so, take them to a tire shop to have the air replaced with nitrogen. You'll get better tire pressure retention, cooler running tire temperatures, and less temperature fluctuations. All this will lead to improved handling, better gas mileage, and a longer tire life.

Lights!: Do a walk-around with an assistant and check all lights to ensure that they are working properly. Replace any bulbs that are dim or burnt out. Now is also a good time to walk around the car to ensure that everything is as it should be on the car and there is nothing stashed around or under it that could cause you grief when you move the car.

Lubricate your cylinders: Starting your engine is when you cause the most wear. If your car has been sitting for an extended period (3 or more months), your cylinder walls are more than likely bone dry. Remove the plugs and squirt some oil or upper cylinder lubricant into the cylinders. This is also a good time to check the wires for cracks and the plugs for wear or build-up and replace them if necessary.

Turn the engine over, but don't start it: With the battery charged and the spark plugs or coil wire removed, turn the engine over several times. This will help to lubricate the cylinders (assuming you didn't skip the last step) and will also prime the oil and fuel pumps.

Prepare for ignition: The battery is in, the plugs are in place, the wires reattached, and the fluids have been changed. Remove the breather and prime the carb with Ez-Start or similar engine starter fluid. Gasoline isn't recommended as it can spray back and catch fire. The flames may look cool to the casual observer, but they won't do the paint or rubber on your classic any good at all. They can also wreak havoc on the garage.

Add gas de-icer to the tank: Condensation can build up in your tank even if it was full when you parked it. If you added a fuel stabilizer to your tank, your gas should be good but it will still break down to some extent. Gas de-icer will help improve combustion so that you can burn off any bad gas or water in the tank. Make sure the de-icer that you use is the proper type (carb or fuel-injected) for your car.

Fire it up: When you do finally start the car, let it warm up slowly and let it come up to operating temperature without revving it. The easiest way to to this is to adjust the idle speed on the carburetor, but remember to set it back once the car has warmed up. Replace the air breather and let the car run for a few minutes. If it's still up on blocks, check the brakes and transmission by putting the car in forward and reverse gear. Use caution when doing this so that you don't pull a "Bueller" and have your car go flying off unintentionally. Shut the car off and check for fluid leaks. While the car is off, double-check the oil level.

The test drive: Fire it up again, double check the brakes, and take it for a 20-30 minute run. Try to go somewhere with little traffic so that you can drive without the stop and go congestion. Take along a cell phone or a buddy in another vehicle in case of break down. Listen to your car for any odd or unusual noises and lightly test the brakes and steering.

One final check: Once you return home and have shut your vehicle off, check again for any fluid leaks. Once it has cooled off, give it the first wash and wax of the season and get ready for another fun summer of safe and fun cruising.