Waxing Your Car

Polishes & Cleaners

Polish has come to be almost a generic term that refers to the detailing process as a whole. You might hear someone say "Scott spent three days polishing that car" when in actuality the three days were spent doing a number of detailing tasks.

Polishing, as it applies to car detailing, refers to the act of restoring gloss by removing contaminants, restoring valuable oils and smoothing the paint surface. Most polishes accomplish this by being a mild abrasive and some do it by way of a chemical reaction.

Our options

We have three basic choices when it comes to treating paint surfaces:

- Polish
- Cleaner
- Rubbing compound

Each of these work by removing unwanted paint, in very small amounts, from the surface of the paint. They vary in their "aggressiveness". Rubbing compound removes the most amount of paint for a given application while polishes remove the least, with cleaners somewhere in between. Obviously, removing paint should be taken seriously. The trick is to use a product with the right amount of aggressiveness. For this reason, we recommend starting with an application of polish. If the polish does not seem to have enough of an effect, try an application of cleaner. Using an orbital buffer will make the job go much faster. However, the polish or cleaner should be designed for machine use. If a cleaner or polish application doesn't get the job done, rubbing compound may be the solution. Rubbing compound is a strong abrasive however, and should be taken seriously. For that reason, we recommend that you turn the task over to a professional.

Polishes serve to remove contaminants on the paint surface. This can include airborne pollutants, tree sap, bird droppings and so on. For many detailers, this function can best be accomplished by claying.

You're decision to use polishes or cleaners will depend on the condition of your paint and so it is difficult to give any hard and fast recommendations. If the paint looks dull after washing, a polish application could be the next step. If the paint is very dull, to the point of having a certain amount of roughness to the texture, then an application of cleaner is in order. Prime candidates are cars that have not been detailed for a long time and used or even new car

purchases.

Swirls

Swirls are those nasty circular lines that show up in bright sunlight and go a long way towards preventing your car from looking "right". They are best thought of as microscopic scratches and are usually the result of poor detailing practices. There is a reason why "avoiding scratches" is rule #1!

There are a number of swirl removal products available. Some are basically polishes that work by dulling the edges of the scratches; this might not remove the scratches entirely but it can help out the situation considerably. Others work as fillers, placing material in the scratch so that they effectively disappear. Wax and glazes perform a similar function. If you are not satisfied with the results of your swirl remover treatment, consult a detailing professional.

Oxidation

The finish of a car is always wet, even if it is dry. To make sense of this statement, consider the fact that paint needs certain oils to keep its fresh glossy look. Ultraviolet rays from the sun and smog can dry up these essential oils, and the result is a dull and flat finish known as oxidation. If you could look at oxidized paint under a high powered microscope, you would see a surface that looks dry and cracked like the desert.

When it occurs, oxidation appears as dull and dry spots on the finish and usually is first noticed on the flat horizontal areas of the car. If paint residue appears on your wash mitt, you definitely have an oxidation problem. The solution to oxidation is to remove the uppermost surface of dead paint. To do that we have three basic choices:

Important Notes:

- Since cleaners and polishes removes paint, they will also remove the wax on top of the paint. Be sure to rewax any area that has had a polish, cleaner or rubbing compound treatment.

- You won't often need to use a polish or cleaner if you diligently follow the advice in auto detailing: If you wash your car regularly and maintain a good coat of wax, contaminants won't have the chance to ruin the cars finish.

- If you have any concerns about your cars surface, consider consulting a detailing professional. Shop around for one with experience and who knows their car surfaces. They'll be

able to tell you exactly what your car needs depending on its situation. Paying them to do the work has the distinct advantage of knowing the job will be done correctly. You can then regularly wash and wax the car, having gotten off to a good start by having your paint professionally prepared.

WAX on WAX OFF

Once you are comfortable with the condition of the paint, it is time to think of a coating of wax. Wax functions as a paint preserver by helping it to retain certain oils which reduce oxidation. It also serves to protect from environmental hazards such as bird droppings, tree sap, smog and the sun's ultraviolet rays. And it gives paint the depth, gloss and richness that can make all those detailing hours worthwhile.

Wax is available in three forms: liquid, paste and spray. As a general rule, liquid wax goes on easier, but does not last as long as the paste products. Which one you use is your choice. Our only recommendation is that you choose one with a high Carnauba content. Unfortunately, there really isn't any way to determine Carnauba content other than to say that if it is prominent on the label, it's a safe bet. Avoid spray waxes as they are too thin to be of any real use.

We recommend a single application of wax. Don't try to put on a thick application with the intent that you won't have to wax as often because it won't work. You'll mostly end up with an excessive amount of wax residue to remove, making the job more difficult. You are better off waxing more frequently. You can use the round applicators that come with some waxes or are available separately. A damp rectangular kitchen sponge makes a good applicator, as its shape seems to be able to handle the detail areas of a car. A second application on the nose and hood, where the wind quickly wears off the wax will give you a longer lasting wax job.

What Goes On, Must Come Off

When the wax is dry, remove the residue using only a very soft cloth. Microfiber towels are ideal. As soon as the cloth movement feel has resistance, find a fresh surface. Using an orbital buffer will speed the job up nicely. A straight (non orbital) buffer would be even faster, but if you are not careful you risk "burning" the paint. For that reason, we recommend our fellow non-professionals stick with an orbital buffer. Always keep an eye on the surface of the cloth you are using, since any dirt or foreign objects can cause scratches.

If you find yourself struggling to remove the wax residue, then you have probably applied to much wax to begin with, which is a common mistake of novice detailers. If you have applied the correct amount of wax, the residue removal will be minimal.

The hard part is removing the wax residue from the various creases and edges. The edges of the doors, trunk, hood and so on are easy; just open them and go over the area with a soft cloth. Fixed items, such as side marker lights, badges, radio antennas, windshield

washer nozzles, etc. are more difficult.

Some detailers use a soft bristled toothbrush.
This approach works, although we urge caution as scratches can occur if you are not careful. A toothpick can be effective sometimes. It might even be worthwhile to remove some items (badges, side marker lamps, license plates for example) before applying the wax. One Corvette owner we know modified the badges on his car to make them removable with wingnuts whenever a wax job came up.

How Often?

We recommend that you wax your car once every two to three months - more if the car is exposed to harsh conditions. When it comes to deciding if it's time for a new coat of wax, the time-honored water beading test can't be topped. While you are doing the wash pre-rinse, notice how the water drops bead up. If the drops are more than one-half inch diameter, or if the water tends to form "sheets" as in the photo on the left, then a new wax job is a good idea.