

Preparing your vehicle for winter



BY JEANA BABCOCK

Winter is coming! I've heard from many people that this winter is predicted to be worse than last winter. How could it possibly be worse? Last winter was enough to make me wonder why I live in Minnesota. But then again,

I asked this question to many last spring and most answers were a combination of 'because we are hearty' and 'our weather keeps the riff-raff out.' I don't know if I'd rather be hearty without riff-raff or warm with riff-raff but we live here now so let's be ready and embrace what's to come.

OWNERS MANUAL

If you haven't read yours, it's time to unearth it and blow the dust off. Discover the things you don't already know. Maybe there's an exciting feature you've been missing out on! But more importantly, find your maintenance guide. Be sure all of the recommendations are taken care of so you can sail smoothly through winter this year ... let's face it, it's the only sailing us Minnesotans will be doing!

ENGINE PERFORMANCE

Is your check engine light on? What do you do about it? Last week a customer of mine told me that her daughter's CEL came on. She advised her to take it into the shop and have it diagnosed, but her father told her to just wait until it made noise. A while later, the engine blew up ... maybe mom did know best.

Are there any engine performance symptoms you notice besides the light? Hard starts, rough idling, stalling, diminished power, etc? Cold weather can make all of these worse. Most people wait until the really cold weather hits before addressing these symptoms. Why wait? Addressing early symptoms of a possible bigger problem can save you time and money!

FILTERS

Dirty filters – air and fuel – can make your engine less efficient and burn more fuel. If you haven't changed yours recently, perhaps now's the time to at least inspect their condition.

OIL

When was your last oil change? Make sure you are not going over the recommended time/mileage before your next one. Your engine does not appreciate dirty oil. A full synthetic oil can increase gas mileage, protect your engine better during the extreme winter temps and give you the opportunity to go more time before your next oil change. Your vehicle will appreciate the extra pampering and so will your wallet and schedule.

COOLING SYSTEM

We can be certain that we will all be cool this winter—freezing cold actually. But what about your engine? Just because it's cold outside does not mean your engine stays that way. The level, condition and concentration of the coolant should be checked periodically. I'm told that some DIYers in the south simply add water if the coolant is low. Do you know what adding water does here? It freezes! Frozen coolant is a tragedy for your vehicle.

Besides the coolant, don't forget to have your drive belts, clamps and hoses checked regularly.

TRANSMISSION

Transmissions are often neglected until a major failure. Be sure to have yours checked and get a transmission flush at prescribed intervals to prevent a costly repair.

HEATER/DEFROSTER

Isn't it nice to get into a toasty warm car in the winter? How is your heater working? And what about your defrost? Having these components serviced before the really cold temps hit will ensure your comfort and increased visibility and safety.

VISIBILITY

Speaking of visibility, are your windshield



wipers ready for the falling snow? Remember that using them to remove ice buildup will shorten the life of your wipers. Be sure you have a scraper in your vehicle to take care of the ice before you drive. And how is your washer fluid? The roads get nasty with salt and sand – washer fluid is a must in Minnesota.

Do you have any burnt-out bulbs, brake lights included? Remember, all of your lights exist to keep you and other drivers safe. And how are the lenses of your headlights? Hazy or dull? This can decrease visibility considerably so you may want to get a professional headlight cleaning.

BATTERY

When is the last time your battery was replaced? Are the connections clean and free of corrosion? Checking your battery's health before winter months is a good idea. And for emergency situations, it's also a good idea to keep a set of jumper cables and/or a battery charger in your vehicle.

WINTER TIRES

A must-have for our wintry roads is a good set of winter or all-season tires. What do your tires look like? Examine the tread depth,

uneven wearing and cupping. Check the sidewalls for cuts or nicks. Rotate them as recommended—a good rule of thumb is to have them rotated at every other oil change. Remember that tire rotations and alignments are a maintenance item. Don't do them when you notice a problem. Do them to prevent a problem from occurring.

SAFETY ITEMS

Are all of your all of your suspension components in good condition? Adequate suspension is important to be sure your vehicle is handling well on the road. And what is the condition of your brakes? Brake repairs are not an option—they must be completed in a timely fashion for your safety and for other drivers. If it's been a while since

you've replaced your brakes, getting them inspected can prevent more costly repairs due to neglect as well as protect you and your family on the roads.

CRITTERS

Perhaps it's a bit unorthodox to mention rodents in an article about vehicle maintenance, but I just want to remind you of this possibility. During last year's cold winter, there were a lot of mice looking for nice, warm homes. They were grateful to find them in many of our customer's cars! And when they found their nice, new, warm home, they went about redecorating—chewing all sorts of wires, moving insulation, etc. Be aware that this is a possibility and keep your eyes open for unwelcome vehicle guests.

Is the Farmer's Almanac always correct in what's been predicted for the winter? Does it matter? We live in Minnesota. We know it will be cold. Let's hope for a short winter but prepare for a long one by preparing your vehicle for what's to come.

Article courtesy of Babcock Auto Care.