



Protecting an Investment

Keeping Wheels Clean

Clean, well-kept wheels don't just look good; keeping them scrubbed and polished can make them last longer. Here's some information your customers can use to protect their investments.

Keeping wheels clean isn't just about appearance: brake dust and road salt can etch wheels and permanently damage the finish. Simply taking the car through an automatic car wash is seldom enough.

There are dozens of wheel cleaners on the market; you need to find the right one for the wheels you have, and use it properly and regularly.

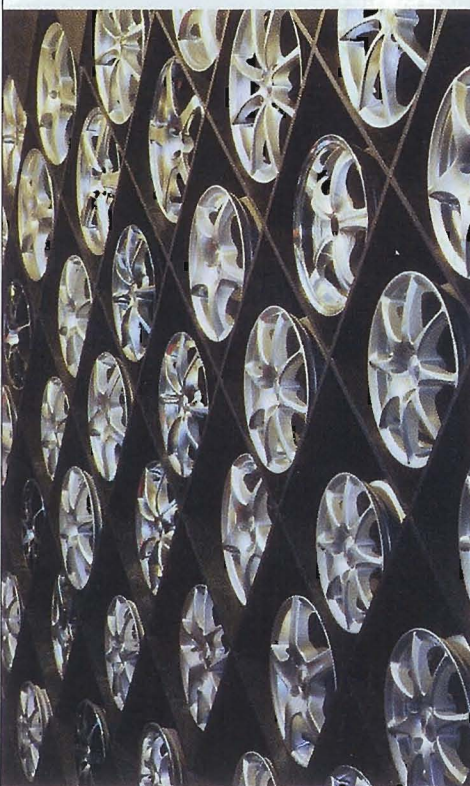
Brake dust and salt

Brake dust is the fine black dust that builds up on wheels; it's caused by the brake pads slowly wearing down as they do their job. Since the front brakes do most of the work, the front wheels tend to be more affected. Brake dust is sticky and needs to be scrubbed off regularly; don't let it accumulate, as it can eat into the wheels and eventually become impossible to remove.

You can buy brake shields, which fit between the brakes and the wheels to cut down on dust, but ask your tire dealer for recommendations: a poor design can cause heat build-up, which is hard on your brakes.

Road salt should also be removed as soon as possible, as it will also damage wheels. (Corrosion isn't just unsightly; it will eventually compromise the wheel's integrity and make it unsafe.) It's a good idea, if you can, to have a second set of plain steel wheels for winter use. Mount your winter

tires on them, and it's also easier to swap your tires in spring and fall.



Identify your wheels

When buying a cleaner, first identify your wheel material, and buy a product specifically made for it. Be careful, as some may look like metal, but are actually a plastic cap. You'll also need a brush; buy one with bristles that are stiff enough to clean, but not so hard that they'll scratch. Never use a wire brush, or one with harsh plastic bristles. A polishing ball (used with a drill) isn't a necessity, but works well for tight spots or a final buffing.

If you're not sure what to buy, ask your tire and wheel dealer for recommendations. No one likes scrubbing, but you get much better results than from spray-on-rinse-off products, especially on caked-on grime or brake dust.

When cleaning, read the instructions; if the product must be diluted, follow the proportions exactly. Making the solution stronger doesn't make it work better, and can cause spotting or damage.

Scrubbing up

Clean the wheels only when they're cool, and unless the product instructions state otherwise, wet them first. Clean one at a time, rather than spray all four and let the product sit. After scrubbing, rinse the wheel thoroughly, and then dry it to prevent water stains. If brake dust doesn't come off, try scrubbing again; don't use a harsher cleaner unless your dealer recommends it. When you're done, you can apply a coat of good-quality car wax to help protect the wheels.

There are a number of tire dressings on the market to improve the look of your tires, but choose carefully: some contain petroleum distillates, which can damage rubber over time. When in doubt, ask your tire dealer.

Wheels are an investment in your vehicle, and spending some time and elbow grease on their upkeep protects that investment. Keep 'em clean, and you'll keep 'em longer. ♦