

Preventing Rust By Richard Lentinello

If you own an old sports car, or European sedan for that matter, especially one that was built prior to the 1970s, then you know all too well how poorly these cars' bodies were protected against rust and corrosion. A quick pass of the spray gun was all that protected the bare steel rocker panels and undercarriage from the elements. Add in the fact that all imported cars were subjected to the salt air for several days during their shipment to these shores, and it becomes all too apparent just why they rust quicker and with more severity than their American counterparts.

If you're not after a perfect, 100 percent factory-correct restoration, but still want your old British sports car or German sedan looking like it just rolled off the assembly line, there are several almost indistinguishable "modifications" you can do that will make all your hard restoration work look better and last far longer without degrading prematurely. Although they employ the use of certain non-authentic supplies and parts, most folks, and a few judges, will not be able to tell the difference.

So here are just a few of the more popular hidden upgrades that are gaining in popularity.

Brake Lines: Although mild steel brake and fuel lines look authentic, stainless steel lines are far superior. Besides retaining a new appearance for years to come, they won't rust on the inside, thus reducing the chance of splitting and endangering you and your passengers. A quick polishing every few months will keep the lines looking brand new.

Coil Springs: No matter how many coats of enamel you coat a coil spring with, the constant stretching and contracting of the coiled metal will eventually cause the paint to crack and trigger the onset of rust. Instead, consider having your coil or leaf springs powdercoated. You can choose from a variety of colors to maintain a factory-correct appearance. Powdercoating is a very durable finish, and--in either gloss, semi-gloss or satin finishes--will give your springs a factory-new appearance that will last for years.

Suspension Components: Although many folks are choosing to have their suspension components powdercoated too, the more common method is to use a durable hard paint such as a quality urethane mixed with a hardener. For the ultimate paint finish, use a base-coat/clear-coat system, with an extra coat or two of clear for added protection. However, if you prefer a more factory-correct appearance, have your suspension arms coated with bluing. This is the chemical that gunsmiths use to protect gun barrels. Bluing penetrates the metal so it becomes one, unlike paint which is just a non-integral coating.

Frames: Complete frames and sub-frames are also being powdercoated today, but as with suspension components, if you prefer paint use urethane enamel instead. And just because a light, thin coat was applied when your car was new, that doesn't mean that you should do the same. Give your frame all the protection it needs; use multiple coats of quality zinc-based primers, sealers and urethane paints.

Nuts & Bolts: For fasteners that are exposed to the elements, such as those used on suspension A-arms, anti-roll bars, sub-frames and brake assemblies, it pays to use cadmium-plated nuts and bolts. They will retain a shiny appearance for several years, and will resist rusting, making future disassembly of those components a breeze. If your car is equipped with irreplaceable fasteners, then consider having them plated, but this can get expensive.

Screws & Washers: One of the easiest things you can do during a restoration to enhance the engine compartment is to use stainless steel screws and washers. They look just like plain steel ones, but they won't rust. Use stainless steel fasteners with sill plates, headlamp bezels and other trim pieces, especially those holding the exterior trim in place, to prevent unsightly rust stains.

Rocker Panels-Interior: Whether or not new rocker panels were installed during the restoration, drill small holes on each end and squirt in oil to help ward off rust, then cap the holes with a small rubber stopper.

Rocker Panels-Exterior: Because cars built prior to the 1980s had rocker panels that were only coated with a thin layer of paint instead of being well protected with a rubberized finish, that doesn't mean that you can't do the same to your old car. Available from auto body suppliers in aerosol cans, a thin coating of this rubberized finish will provide excellent protection that will add years to a rocker panel's life span. And unless someone bends down for a close inspection, no one will notice it.

Undercarriage: The best way to protect the underside of the floor pan is with 3M's Body Schutz. This fast-drying, textured coating is a tough material that effectively protects the metal against stone chips and road abrasions while providing sound deadening quality. Best of all, it's paintable, so after it dries it can be top-coated to match your car's exterior color, thus giving your old car that new-car, original-equipment appearance.

Exhaust System: If available, go with stainless steel. Even if a stainless steel muffler isn't available for your particular car, at least use stainless steel pipes, clamps and fasteners.

If done correctly, every one of these tips will help ward off rust and add life to your car, which, in the end, will provide you with additional years of enjoyable use. And isn't that what owning an old car is all about?

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