How to Store a Car—Preparation Tips for Vehicle Storage

People have many reasons for putting a car into storage: prevent winter damage, military deployment, extended honeymoon, archeological dig, overseas job, and love. That’s right, love. There may come a time when it seems more practical to sell the car before setting out on the adventure, but what if you just absolutely love that car?

Whether it’s a 67 Mustang your mom drove off the show room floor, or a Toyota Prius you finally paid off, or the family RV that’s loaded with memories, you’ll want that car when you get home. And you’ll want it in good shape.

Before you put your vehicle into storage, some preparation needs to be done so that the car degrades as little as possible.

“In my way of thinking, long-term storage is anything over a month. In 30 days, lots of things can start going wrong if you don’t store a car right,” says Don Mallinson, President of DC CarCare in Washington, IL. “Unrestored classics like my 58 Impala didn’t survive to win national championships by being stored improperly.”

Location, Location, Location

Naturally, the first thing to consider when looking for a vehicle storage area is location. Protecting the vehicle from the outside elements is paramount. “The most important thing and the top of most lists is to select a dark and dry place to discourage rust, corrosion, and sun damage,” says Donald Mayes, car enthusiast and former New York mechanic. Ideally, you want to store the car indoors in a facility that is clean, dry, secure, and has electricity.

If left to the elements, you may find your baby littered with rust and rodents or their dropping (or their offspring.) Mayes adds that you want to “prevent bugs, rodents, and other critters from establishing residence in the interior, engine compartment, and HVAC ducts. Setting the air conditioning to “recirculate” should close the ventilation system off to the outside and help stop rodents from gaining access to the interior. If this is a big concern, closing off the air intake and tail pipes will keep bugs and other critters out of the engine as well as block the circulation of moist air which can lead to corrosion of critical components.”

A garage or indoor storage facility would be the first choice, but if you’re self storage location happens to be outdoors, then your best bet is to use a weatherproof car cover. This will help
maintain the paint and limit exposure to sun and rain. However, car enthusiasts seem to agree that car covers can also trap moisture and grit and harm a perfect paint job. Choose your cover carefully.

**Cleanliness**

A clean car comes through self storage better than a filthy one. Most people will overlook this detail when they are trying to decide how to store a car. Yes, the engine and battery need attention, but so does the interior and exterior of the car. Clean the interior thoroughly, “leave nothing behind. Vacuum, dust, clean... the more spotless your car is, the better it will handle storage,” according to Canada’s *Tech Guys*, featured *Diesel Car Magazine* and *Our Canada*. “This is essential to preventing mold, mildew and critters from overcoming your precious interior.”

Once the interior is spotless and fresh, take the time to wash and wax the exterior from top to bottom. “Don’t skip areas such as the door-jambs, and under the hood. Leave no painted surface untouched,” say Tech Guys, and “be sure to polish any chrome surfaces to help preserve the gorgeous luster.”

**The Nuts and Bolts**

When you are back from that honeymoon trip around the world, or you are invited to drive that gorgeous car in the St. Patrick’s Day parade, you will want it to start. There are careful steps you can take to make sure the internal workings of the car are maintained.

- **Fuel Systems**— Mallinson suggests fresh fluids. “Oil and filter, anti-freeze, power steering fluid, tranny fluid and brake fluid should all be changed right before storage. A week or two before storage is OK except the oil, make that as fresh as possible.”

- **Gas tank:** The tank should be full with fresh, quality fuel. “Fresh gas will last a full year if kept at a fairly stable temperature below 80 degrees,” says Mallinson. However, if you have concerns, then you may want to use a gasoline stabilizer like Sta-Bil or Pri-G to slow down gas deterioration.

- **The Battery**— The car battery should be either disconnected, connected to a battery maintainer, (also called a trickle charger or battery tender), or removed completely from the vehicle. “Completely removing the battery from the car will prevent corrosive battery acids from escaping and damaging the car,” says Mayes.

- **Tires**— Consider using plastic sheeting to prevent moisture from degrading the tires and be sure tires are at their proper air pressure. Resting the vehicle on blocks or a
jack stands can help keep the tires from “flat-spotting” while in storage. However, the jacks should “support the car at the outermost points of the suspension so the springs and shocks/struts are in a natural state,” says Mallinson, warning against unnatural stress on the suspension.

- **Breaks**—Disengage the parking break before storage. It may stick to the brake drum and cause future issues. For manual transmissions, leave the gear in neutral. Car stands or wheel blocks should keep the car from rolling.

- **Insurance**—Insurance regulations for inactive vehicles can vary state to state. It is important to do your homework and check with your insurance company.

- **Registration**—Depending on how long the car will be inactive, you might need to file an Affidavit of Non-use with the DMV. This can vary state to state, so check with your local DMV.

Finally, give the car one last, farewell drive. This will get everything warmed up and circulated with the fresh new fluids. Consider adding bait traps in and around the garage or storage unit to keep critters away from your car. Ultimately, cars are meant to be driven, but if they are prepped properly they can and have survived short and long term storage successfully.