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Classic Car Detailing Tricks By Kate Sullivan

Once you've obtained your dream car and restored it to perfection, all that's left is to take it to cruise-ins, concours, and other shows and rack up the trophies, right?

Wrong.

Even if your car is a pampered one, spending most of its time in a climate-controlled garage or enclosed trailer, rather than driving around on dusty roads, it still needs to be cleaned before the judges get to it. And every car, no matter whether you show it or not, could use a thorough detailing once in awhile – it simply helps maintain your car's appearance and operating health, and keeps it in tip-top shape.

Most of you already know how to clean your car, and how to detail it properly. You don't need to be told to start in a clean workspace, where you're not likely to create puddles or have a passing pigeon ruin your hard work. You don't need to be told to start from the top down, or to be gentle and use clean, soft cloths. You know that the clay bar is your friend, and that a random orbital buffer is a great invention.

Heck, you probably already have a set of favourite tools and chemicals that you use to get your car clean and bright.

But do you really know *everything* about detailing? Do you have an emergency touch-up kit for any dings or scratches that might happen on your way to a show? And do you really need all those fancy, expensive chemical cleaners and polishes?

Maybe, maybe not. Everyone has his own detailing style, and you'll need to find what works for you. But with these helpful tips and tricks, you may find your detailing arsenal expanding – and your car looking that much better in the process.

Tool Kit

You already have most of the basics down – buckets, wash mitts, sponges, a huge array of clean, soft cloths. You probably also have a few of the more esoteric tools of the detailer's trade – cotton swabs, toothpicks, old toothbrushes, bamboo skewers, an assortment of clean paintbrushes, a clay bar, and an arsenal of commercial cleaners for every surface.

A few additions to this kit, however, can make your life a lot easier, and keep your car happier.

Spray bottles for various cleaning solutions are incredibly handy. You can pick these up at the dollar store or discount store on the cheap, and fill them with homemade cleaners that do a better job than most store-bought ones, at a fraction of the cost. Just make sure to label the bottles with what you've put in them!

The best investment you can make is upgrading from paper towels or shop rags to microfiber cloths for cleaning your car. You can get these while you're at the dollar store picking up those spray bottles – they're sometimes even available in bundle packs, two or three for a dollar.

As their name implies, microfiber towels are made up of extremely fine fibers - about 100 times smaller than the diameter of a human hair. They feature soft surfaces that accommodate the "avoid scratches at all costs" mantra of a quality detailing job. Unlike cotton, which is a natural fabric, microfiber is a synthetic, usually a mix of polyester and polyamide fibers. Because of this, they have an increased ability to soak up liquids, and they can also be slightly statically charged, allowing them to grab and hold dirt, dust, and road grime. A dampened microfiber cloth is softer and less abrasive than a cotton one, making it perfect for cleaning glass or other easily scratched surfaces. A dry one can be used to soak up an immense amount of water, ideal for quickly drying off your car to prevent streaks. And microfiber dusters are indispensable for swiping across any surface you can see, snapping up and trapping particles of dust and debris to get your car as clean as possible.

Exterior

Brass and Copper

As anyone who's ever owned a Brass Era car can attest, brass fittings are a beast to keep clean and polished. Even the best commercial polish seems to last for only an instant before the metal starts to dull again – a real pain when you're trying to get the car ready for a show, and you've already spent three days pulling off dozens of brass fixtures and laboriously hand-polishing them.

Brass is an alloy of copper and zinc. It tends to oxidize, or tarnish, quickly when exposed to air, which is a major reason why most brass is given a clear coating of lacquer—it delays the oxidation. Over the century or so that your car has been around, though, any lacquer that might have been applied has long since worn off or been removed, meaning that your brass trim will oxidize almost instantaneously – right when you're done polishing.

Most conventional polishes like Brasso coat the raw metal with a thin film of oil to inhibit future tarnishing. Additionally, most metal polishes contain solvents and detergents to remove the tarnish, mild abrasives to polish the metal, and oils to act as a barrier between the raw metal and air. This isn't necessarily the best for your delicate brass parts.

Fortunately, there's some simple solutions that you already have in your house.

Plain white vinegar works well to remove tarnish and slow down the oxidation process. Just heat a small container of vinegar in the microwave for about 30 seconds, then dip a clean, soft cloth into it. Dip that moistened cloth in some ordinary kitchen salt and rub it on the brass, using a gentle circular motion. The mild acid in the vinegar will strip any tarnish from the brass and make it shine.

If your brass trim is stained, not simply tarnished, you can make a paste of vinegar, salt, and flour - dissolve 1 teaspoon of salt in 1 cup of white vinegar. Add enough flour - yes, the stuff you use to bake with - to make a thick paste. Rub this on the brass and let it sit until dry - somewhere between 15 minutes and an hour, usually. Rinse the paste off with more vinegar, and the stains should be lightened or completely removed.

To polish your brass or copper fittings once you've cleaned them, use ketchup. Just squirt some ketchup on a clean cloth and rub it into the brass. Let it dry, then brush off any extra with a soft-bristle brush and polish it up to a shine with a clean, soft cloth. The acid from the tomatoes and vinegar in the ketchup removes any remaining tarnish, while the sugar acts as a mild protective coating. The sheen won't stay for weeks, but it'll almost always last longer than commercial polish - and it's cheaper, too.

To really keep your brass protected and shining, wipe it down with a tiny bit of olive oil after you're done cleaning and polishing it. The oil creates a protective barrier against oxygen, which is the culprit in oxidation, and keeps your brass shining longer.

Keep in mind that you can't use any acidic cleaners on brass-PLATED parts - only solid brass and copper. For anything plated, stick to using a gentle oil soap. You can still protect the surface afterwards with a bit of olive oil, though.

Chrome

Chromium, a hard, blue-white metal, is often electroplated onto other metals to create a bright, shiny finish. The chromed layer can be purely decorative, or it can have a practical purpose like resisting corrosion, making cleaning easier, or improving surface hardness. In automotive applications, chrome usually combines all of these properties, creating a beautiful, durable surface on trim parts.

Unfortunately, while chrome is often more durable than parts made of the plain metal – usually steel – that lies beneath that thin chromium layer, it still tarnishes. And anyone who's owned a Fifties car, swathed in huge expanses of chrome trim, can tell you that all that polishing gets old quickly.

Most automotive chrome has undergone several plating procedures before the top level of chromium is applied. Steel parts are plated with copper, then nickel, in an effort to strengthen them for the outdoor use they'll endure. Finally, that thin layer of shiny chromium is applied, for additional durability and for a lustrous finish.

When you're detailing your chrome parts, therefore, you need to keep in mind that the layers of metal are very thin, and can be easily damaged by rough treatment.

The best way to clean chrome is with sudsy water and a soft cloth – never use abrasive cleaners, because they'll scratch and dull the finish. Just mix up a bucket full of water with mild dishwashing detergent, and get to work.

If you've got some really resistant grime on your chrome, dampen a clean cloth with vinegar and sprinkle it with baking soda, then scrub gently. This will get most gunk off, including bird poop, tar, and tree sap, without scratching the chrome.

For rust spots, the best tool for the job is a crumpled-up wad of aluminum foil. Crinkled the foil into a ball with the shiny side out, then rub it on the rusty area. The rust will come right off, and you can then clean and polish the chrome back to a from-the-factory shine.

Rather than using an expensive commercial chrome polish, buy a tube of cheap white paste toothpaste – not the gel kind, and certainly not anything with whiteners, breath fresheners, or other fancy gimmicks. Squirt a dab on a clean cloth, and start buffing away at your chrome. The toothpaste's mild abrasives will bring up the shine without damaging the finish.

One of the handiest tools you can have at a car show is a box of chrome polish wipes. These are pretty expensive, though, especially when you can make your own. Go to the dollar store and buy a box of baby wipes. Take them out of the container and fan them out on a clean surface – a couple of baking pans works great, and lets you move them around while they're drying out, a process that might take a day or two. When the wipes are dry, put them back in the container and pour ½ cup of baby oil or cheap olive oil over them. Let the oil soak in, put the lid back on the container, and keep it with your car-show kit. When you get to a show, just pull out a wipe and rub down your chrome – it'll start shining like new.

You can also use these wipes to shine up your brass fixtures or tires.

Glass

We've all used Windex on our car's windshields and glass from time to time, but there's a better, gentler way to tackle dirty glass.

First, you'll need a clean, empty spray bottle. Fill it 1/4 of the way with plain white vinegar, then top it up with warm water. You can also add ½ cup of sudsy ammonia and a tablespoon of liquid dishwashing detergent, if you like, but the vinegar-and-water mixture works just fine.

A thorough glass cleaning is actually a three-part process. First, wash the glass with soap and water along with the rest of the car. Then spritz on your cleaning solution on both the inside and the outside of the glass, and wipe it off again – a squeegee comes in really handy here. Your last step is a dry pass, again both inside and out. Use a clean cloth or paper towel without any cleaner on it. Whatever you do, don't use a paper towel with a design printed on it!

A good tip to ensure that you get rid of any streaks is to buff the glass vertically on the outside, and to use horizontal strokes on the inside. That way, when you check for streaking, you can easily see which side needs to be cleaned again.

At one point, detailers swore by using crumpled-up newspaper to shine up glass. Don't do it! Most newspapers have switched to using soy inks when printing – while old newspapers might have gotten your glass clean and shiny, today's inks will run and transfer onto glass.

Older cars almost inevitably suffer scratches to their glass. But replacement glass can be hard to find, or incredibly expensive, so it helps to be able to treat minor scratches yourself, rather than replacing a piece or going to a specialist.

Superficial scratches are easy to treat with the same non-gel toothpaste you just used to shine up your chrome. Squirt the paste onto the scratched area and gently rub it in, making sure the entire scratch is liberally coated with toothpaste. Let the toothpaste harden – this should only take a couple of minutes. When the toothpaste is dry, white, and slightly powdery, wipe it off with a soft cloth. Buff the scratched area in only one direction, rather than using a circular motion or just flailing with the cloth – this will keep you from adding new marks to the glass. In most cases, when you have only a light scratch, this will eliminate it entirely.

For scratches on the deeper side, head to the spice aisle of your local supermarket. Look for ground mustard, usually sold in yellow tins; you can also get this at a lot of natural foods stores and places like Asian or Indian markets, where it'll probably be sold by the ounce, really cheaply. Make a paste by mixing a tablespoon of dry mustard with a few drops of plain white vinegar – keep adding a few drops of vinegar at a time until a nice, thick paste forms that smells like the strongest mustard you've ever encountered. Slather the mustard paste onto the scratch in your glass, let it dry, and then buff it off with a clean, dry cloth. The scratch should be minimized.

You can use these same cleaning and scratch-removal tricks on more than just windshields and backlites – they work just as well on glass lenses over instrument panels and gauges, or glass lenses on headlights and turn signals.

Plastic

While plastic has been around since 1855, and wholly synthetic plastic has been in use since the development of Bakelite in 1912, its use on cars only really exploded in the 1930s. After that point, more and more trim pieces and even body panels began to be made of various forms of plastic, all of which today have to be cleaned and preserved.

Thankfully, clear plastics can typically be cleaned with the same kind of gentle, effective homemade cleaner we just used to shine up our car's glass.

A vinegar-and-water solution will bring the shine back to your headlight lenses and instrument lenses, and it'll even clean the clear vinyl windows on your convertible. Just spritz the cleaner on and buff it off with a clean cloth or paper towel.

For a cloudy plastic lens, the best treatment is a combination of plain white toothpaste and baking soda. In a dish, mix a hefty squirt of toothpaste with a spoonful of baking soda to make a paste. Rub it onto your headlights with an old toothbrush or a sponge and buff thoroughly, then wipe it away with a cloth dampened with vinegar. Your plastic headlight lenses will magically lose that dull, filmy patina of age and be clear and transparent again. The same trick works on your instrument panel and gauges.

Some detailers swear by clearing fogged plastic headlight lenses with non-acetone nail polish remover. I don't recommend this, because there's a chance that even a non-acetone product could drip and strip the paint.

Those chrome-polish wipes we made also work to keep your headlights clear and gleaming. The oil will lubricate any microscopic cracks, restoring the luster to your headlights, and will also protect them from road grime and debris.

Radiator

When you're detailing your car, don't forget to clean the radiator. No matter how much or how little your car is driven, debris collects in the radiator, and it's often tricky to get out – but the best-presented engine bay and grille won't really shine if there's a battalion of bugs lodged in your radiator.

So when you're done washing the engine bay, pick up a can of compressed air – the kind used to clean out computers and keyboards – and give the radiator a blast, preferably working from the engine side out. This should dislodge any pesky bug carcasses that made it through the washing process, and let you brush them away with an old toothbrush or paintbrush.

Wire Wheels

Cleaning around the spokes of wire wheels can be a thankless task – all those thin rods seem to somehow trap dirt and grime, and it takes forever to clean and polish each one individually. Make your life easier by picking up some canned air and a microfiber “finger” sponge. Use the canned air to blast debris free of your wire wheels after you've washed them, then run the finger sponge all over the spokes. The little strands of microfiber reach between the wire spokes and lift out dust and dirt, without you having to wrap a cloth around each spoke individually.

Interior

Air Freshener

Especially after you purchase a new-to-you collector car, you may notice a scent that isn't exactly that "new car smell." Extended periods of storage, less than ideal care, and the occasional rodent incident can all leave a car smelling a little funky – which certainly isn't something you want to inflict upon a judge, much less upon yourself when you're driving the car.

But those little pine-scented tree air fresheners just aren't very appealing, dangling from the rearview mirror of your restored gem. Rather than simply masking the stale odor in your car by using commercial air fresheners and sprays, get rid of it completely using a couple of simple solutions.

For really stubborn odors, cut an onion in half and place it on a dish or a piece of aluminum foil. Stick half the onion in the front passenger compartment and half in the back; leave it there, closed up in the car, for a couple of days. Take the onion out and leave the car doors open for another day or so. By the end of three days, all the odors – onion and otherwise – should be gone. You can also use this trick to freshen the trunk or luggage compartment – just close half an onion in there, then air the compartment out again.

For less intense odors, you can place a small dish of vinegar mixed with lemon juice in the car for a day or two. By the time it evaporates, the smell should be gone.

To keep smells at bay once you've gotten rid of them, fold a dryer sheet in half and either tape up the sides or stitch them. Leave an opening at the top, and pour in some baking soda, then seal up the top the same way you did the sides. Put these sachets under the seat and in the trunk, and they'll absorb any odors without leaking baking soda all over the place.

Upholstery

Since you spend a lot of time on the seats of your car, you'll need to know how to clean the upholstery. Using seat covers and brushing the seats off with a soft-bristle brush after driving can help eliminate debris and stains, but accidents still happen. Be prepared with an arsenal of spot-cleaning tips and tricks.

Cloth

Cloth upholstery is surprisingly easy to clean. The best cleaner for the job is a simple mix of liquid dish detergent – try to find one labeled “oxygen cleaner,” if you can, and try to stick to clear detergents that don’t have any added colours. Whatever you do, don’t use dishwashing detergents that have “bleaching action” or “lemon cleaner” listed in big letters on the front – these can fade or discolour your upholstery.

In a bucket, mix together 2¼ cups of hot tap water with a quarter-cup of dish detergent. Get a large spoon, hand mixer, or drill with a mixer attachment and beat the daylight out of the mixture until a few dry suds appear. Dip a clean cloth into the mixture and gently rub it onto the upholstery. Lightly scrub any problem areas with a soft bristled brush or an old, clean toothbrush.

Wipe away any dirty suds with a fresh cloth, and then give the entire upholstered surface a wipe down with a clean cloth dipped in fresh, non-soapy water.

With a clean, dry towel or cloth, gently blot and wipe away all excess moisture, and let your upholstery dry.

If you have any stubborn stains on your cloth upholstery, try gently blotting it with a baby wipe – just make sure to test the wipe in a hidden area first, to make sure that it won’t leave any stains behind. You can also try blotting the stain with a half-and-half mixture of plain vinegar and water, then blotting with plain water, then drying.

These same tricks work to clean a fabric convertible top.

Leather

Leather upholstery is both easier and harder to maintain than cloth. It’s harder to snag or stain leather, but you also have to regularly treat it with dressings and oils to make sure that it stays supple and doesn’t crack. Leather requires essential oils to keep its luster, but some products can leave a greasy residue, and can even darken the colour of your upholstery – always be sure to test any product, whether commercial or homemade, somewhere inconspicuous before treating the entire surface.

For general cleaning, your best bet is a simple bar of Dove soap, or any other moisturizing soap. Lather it onto a soft cloth, then wipe into the leather, being careful not to get it too wet. Don’t rinse the leather after you wipe it down with the soap – just buff it with a clean, dry cloth. This lets the conditioners in the moisturizing soap penetrate and soften the leather, helping to keep it supple.

If road salt has stained your leather upholstery, try dipping a cloth in a mixture of equal parts white vinegar and water and blotting at the stain. You may have to do this several times, but it should eventually eliminate or at least minimize the spot, after which you can use a tiny bit of paste shoe polish to condition and protect it.

Ink spots and other stains can be treated with a cotton swab dipped in rubbing alcohol, or with a paste made by mixing one part lemon juice with one part cream of tartar. Work the paste into the spot with a soft cloth and let it sit for a few hours. Come back and apply a little more paste, work it in, and then wipe clean.

Scuffs in leather can be touched up with an eyebrow pencil or a tiny bit of paste shoe polish applied with a cotton swab.

Once your leather upholstery is cleaned and buffed, you'll want to treat it with a "hide food" or dressing to keep it from cracking. There's a number of leather dressings made just for cars, but the best commercial product you can use is saddle dressing, which can be obtained from a feed store or tack shop. It's cheap, it's easy to apply, and it does a great job of conditioning your leather seats.

Another option is to make your own dressing by mixing one part vinegar with two parts linseed oil in a jar. Cap the jar and shake it well to mix the ingredients, then apply to the leather using a soft cloth. Work in a circular motion, covering the entire surface. Rub in thoroughly, let it sit overnight, then buff with a soft cloth to bring a shine to the leather.

In a pinch, you can use a touch of mayonnaise on a clean cloth to buff and dress leather, but I really don't recommend this if you're going to be out in the un – it can get a little smelly if you don't buff it out well enough!

Vinyl

Vinyl, a type of soft, flexible plastic, has many uses throughout our collector cars. Vinyl upholstery is common on many cars built after World War II, and vinyl trim pieces and dashpads are also quite common.

Vinyl is just as easy to clean as plastics and leather, although it should be regularly polished and treated to keep its faint sheen and flexibility.

Vinyl upholstery can be cleaned with the same sudsy dish-detergent mixture that you use to clean cloth upholstery – just wipe the soapy mixture onto the vinyl, then wipe it off again with a cloth dipped in clean water before buffing dry with a towel.

Don't despair if you find a scratch on your vinyl dashpad or interior trim. Just raid your wife's cleaning supplies for a Mr Clean Magic Eraser or other cellulose eraser. These dry cleaning sponges are really handy for detailing a car – they're not overly abrasive and they're designed to be used dry, so you can use them to gently buff smudges and stains out of upholstery and vinyl surfaces. To treat a superficial dash scratch, gently buff the area with the cellulose sponge, then lightly fill in the scratched area with a crayon, carefully matched to the colour of your dash. Gently stroke the crayon into the damaged area, working in the direction of the scratch and using very light pressure. While this isn't a perfect fix, it has the advantage of being removable – you can carefully scrape the wax off with a razor blade later, if you decide to have the dash professionally restored or seek a more permanent fix.

Rather than using expensive vinyl dressings on your interior, you can clean and treat your vinyl at the same time with a simple home recipe. Mix a quarter-cup of vinegar and a few drops of baby oil with a liter of warm water in a spray bottle. Spritz down your vinyl upholstery and trim, or spritz a clean cloth and wipe it onto your vinyl. The vinegar will clean the surface, while the baby oil will protect it.

This same mixture works wonderfully on vinyl tops, too, and can keep your tires looking fantastic.

Wood and Woodgrain Trim

Many of our collector cars, both family and luxury models, feature wood or woodgrain trim. This can be a little trickier to clean and maintain than synthetic materials, but fortunately, it's still not hard for the creative detailer.

To clean real wood trim, mix together equal parts of vegetable oil and vinegar, then add a few drops of lemon juice; wipe it into the wood and buff well. This will both clean and polish the wood, and help it keep its shine longer by penetrating into the wood fibers. Use broad strokes when polishing your trim, to help distribute the oil evenly.

The same treatment can be applied to most woodgrain trims, so long as they're intact and not cracked – if your woodtrain trim is cracked and you can see bare metal underneath, you should use just oil to polish it, as the vinegar could etch or dull the metal, causing the cracks to be more noticeable.

Wood trim, while beautiful, scratches fairly easily. Luckily, it's just as easy to touch up superficial scratches. If the wood that's been scratched is actually wood, rather than woodgrain, touch it up with a walnut or pecan. Break the meat of the nut open and rub it into the scratch – the oil from the nut will darken the scratch and blend it into the wood. Be careful to rub in the direction of the scratch, and only in the scratch, as the nutmeat will darken the surrounding wood as well. Then apply your oil-and-vinegar polish to the area, buffing thoroughly, and the scratch should vanish.

Veneer is a thin layer of split wood applied to a non-wooden surface; it's sometimes used as trim in classic cars. In many cases, the glue that holds the veneer to the surface below it is often not water-resistant. Prolonged humidity or exposure to water can soften the glue, letting the veneer blister, crack, or peel. Veneer is also easily damaged from the surface, and old veneers are often cracked, buckled, or broken, with chips or entire pieces missing.

When veneer is too damaged, it has to be repaired or replaced, rather than simply touched up. If you notice a blister forming while you're detailing your car, though, you can often take care of it before it gets worse.

If you find a small blister in a veneered or woodgrained surface, you may be able to flatten it with a little bit of heat. Put a sheet of wax paper and then a sheet of smooth cardboard on the damaged area, then cover the cardboard with a clean cloth. Using a medium-hot iron, press firmly over the blistered area, being careful not to touch any exposed surfaces. Check the damaged area every few minutes as you work, and stop as soon as the blister has flattened. Leave the cardboard in place and put a heavy weight on the area and leave it for at least 24 hours. Then wax and polish the trim as usual.

Carpet

Now that the rest of your car is spotless, make sure that where you put your feet also stands up to scrutiny. Your car's carpet is an often-neglected surface, but that doesn't mean that you can get away without detailing it. In fact, this is a critical area to keep fresh and clean – because carpet takes so much abuse and tends to gather so many stains and spots over the years, a gleaming carpet can really catch a judge's eye at a concours.

Stains in carpet can be a hassle to remove. Never rub a stain, just blot, because rubbing breaks down the fibers and spreads the stain. Shaving cream works remarkably well to remove most minor stains, although you should still test it in a hidden area first, just to make sure. Just spray the cream on and resist the temptation to rub it in. Let it sit for 15 minutes, then blot it up with – you guessed it – a mixture of equal parts vinegar and water.

Believe it or not, something you already have in your garage can do a great job of removing organic stains from your car's carpet: brake cleaner. Brake cleaner contains the same chemical professional dry cleaners use to clean stains in clothing, so it easily breaks up food stains, pet messes, and other organic oopsies – just be certain that the brake cleaner you choose lists “hexane” as its sole ingredient (many cheap brake cleaners cut corners with other chemicals that won't do the trick for cleaning messes). It can sometimes get out grease and salt stains, too. Just dab a little on a clean cloth and gently blot the stain; follow up by blotting with a cloth dipped in soapy water, and then by blotting with a cloth dipped in clean water. The stain should be gone. Whatever you do, don't pour brake cleaner right onto the carpet – it could dissolve the adhesive that holds the carpet down.

For fresh grease spots, sprinkle cornstarch onto the spot, then wait for about half an hour before vacuuming it up. If there's still a stain on the carpet, mix together ¼-cup each of salt, borax, and white vinegar to form a paste. Rub the paste into the carpet and leave it for a few hours, then vacuum the dry powder up. Use a vinegar and water solution to blot the spot and finish cleaning it.

Conclusion

Congratulations! You've just detailed the bejeezus out of your car. It's sparkling, shiny, and ready to knock 'em dead the next time you take it out, whether to a show or for a spin. Best of all, now that you've gotten the hang of home detailing, you have all the tools and tricks you'll need to keep your car looking this good all the time with minimal effort, leaving you more time to enjoy actually driving it.