

## **DIY Projects & Tips**

### **Convertible Tops – April '06**

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#### **Introduction**

Lately, I've heard or been asked a number of questions regarding the Miata's convertible top. I thought that perhaps it would be a good topic for a newsletter article. I've replaced 3 Miata tops over the past two years and completed a number of related projects. Even so, there's plenty more information to be found out there. Remember, the online resource for all things Miata is [www.miata.net](http://www.miata.net). I suggest you have a look around there, especially the forum and garage sections. That said, let's get started on the questions!

#### **Help! I'm getting wet!**

**Q.** My top is torn/has a hole in it. Can I fix it?

**A.** Probably... Pinholes can be sealed with glue, larger holes and tears will require a patch. A patch can be made from just about any flexible, water-proof material and should be applied from the inside. For glue, you need something strong, but flexible so it won't give when the top is folded. I've had good luck with a product called "Power 'Poxy", others have used GOOP or Seals-All. Check your local hardware or boat supply store. Duct tape will work in a pinch if you're not concerned about the look!

**Q.** My trunk is wet!

**A.** Most likely, the drains are blocked. With the top up, look for a small (3/8") drain hole behind the seatbelt tower on each side of the car (you may have to pull some carpet back). There may or may not be a small plastic screen over the hole. Water from the rain rail is routed to these drains and runs through a small tube that exits under the car. Occasionally, these drains get blocked by leaves and other debris, causing water to back up and overflow into the trunk. To clear the drains, carefully snake a few feet of thin wire down the drain from above until it emerges from the exit under the car.

The other possibility is that the rain rail is cracked. The rain rail is located around the back of the top and runs all the way from side to side. To get to it, you'll need to pop a few carpet fasteners and pull back the carpet on the rear shelf. The rain rail is the black, plastic-looking piece beneath the metal retaining bars. The retainers can be removed for access to most of the rain rail. Epoxy, glue, caulk or duct tape can be used, depending on the nature of the repair. Installation is the reverse of removal. Rain rail repairs are usually temporary. Don't forget to dry out the trunk!

**Q.** My windows are leaking!

**A.** For leaks around the top of the triangle window or near the top of the windshield, the top latches can be adjusted. Pulling the top tighter to the windshield can help stop leaks around the edge of the windshield or the top of the door. See the next question for an explanation of how to do this.

For leaks along the top of the door window, the weatherstrip around the windows is adjustable. First determine which weatherstrip is leaking. Squeeze the rubber and pull gently. The front-most weatherstrip has a few screws in it that have to be removed. You'll see how it comes away from the metal retainer. The retainer is held to the frame by screws. Loosen the screws and move the retainer toward the door window. Tighten them up, reinstall the rubber weatherstrip and wait for the next rain! Or grab a water hose and play rainmaker...

For leaks near the triangle window, check the weatherstrip on the A-pillar at the side of the windshield. You'll note that there's actually a little drain hole in the cup of the weatherstrip near the top. Trust me, it's hard to describe but makes sense when you see it. Make sure that little hole is clear.

And remember, it's a convertible, not a coupe. A few drips aren't a big deal.

**Q.** My latches are hard to close/won't stay closed

**A.** The latches are very easy to adjust. First, open the latch. You'll see a small, square metal cover in the middle of the latch mechanism. The cover is hinged, so pry it up and swing it out of the way. Moving the cover reveals an adjusting nut. Turning that nut shortens or lengthens the "claw" of the latch that grabs the striker on the windshield header. After turning the nut, push the cover back in place and try the latch.

### **When that old ratty top just won't do...**

**Q.** What does it cost to replace my top?

**A.** It depends on whether you want to do it, or pay to have someone else do it for you. A club member told us that he recently paid about \$1,100 (part & labor) to have his replaced. I've heard other quotes in that ballpark. Buying the replacement top yourself is going to run anywhere from about \$350 to \$650, depending on the vendor and the features you want. You can choose color (many), material (vinyl or fabric), rear window (glass or plastic).

**Q.** Where can I get my top replaced?

**A.** I've not used an installer, so I can't recommend one. Ask other club members, friends or check your local yellow pages. A few club members have experience with replacing tops, you can also check with them. They may be able to install it for you or provide the help you need.

**Q.** Can I replace the top myself?

**A.** Sure! It's not rocket science, but good instructions and lots of patience are required. It's a full day's work, most of it being tedious, that is, until you're ready to re-install the rain rail retainers! A helper is recommended. Keith Tanner's book, "Miata Performance Projects" has the instructions I like to use.

**Q.** Can I replace just the window?

**A.** Yes and no. There are window-only kits available that will replace or upgrade your old plastic window. Unfortunately, the kits I've seen are nearly the price of a new top and require nearly the same amount of effort as replacing the entire top. On the other hand, if you need to replace a plastic window cheaper, you can try an upholstery shop and see if they can sew in a new panel of plastic. If that's too expensive, some folks have cut their plastic window out and glued in a new piece. You can check [www.grassrootsmotorsports.com](http://www.grassrootsmotorsports.com) for more information on that solution. They featured it in a project car article about six months ago, but it's only recommended as a stop-gap measure until you can replace the top.

**Q.** Where can I buy/order a new top?

**A.** Your Mazda dealer can order an OEM top for you. Alternately, there are many online vendors who sell tops. I'm sure one could be ordered locally through an installer as well. Other than OEM, there seem to be three major manufacturers of tops for the Miata: Robbins, Cabrioworld and AABest. All the online vendors sell tops from these makers. I've personally installed two Robbins no-zip glass tops and one from Cabrioworld. I've also heard good things about the AABest tops. I suggest that you be sure to get a top with a new rain rail attached. Yes, you can reuse your old rain rail, but it's a pain to move from the old top, and you'll likely damage it when you remove it from the car anyway.

**Q.** Are other colors available?

**A.** Yes, check the catalogs. I've seen black, tan, blue, red, white and others.

**Q.** Can I get a glass window for my '90-'97?

**A.** Yes, many aftermarket tops with glass windows are available, with and without zippers. Also, glass window upgrade kits are available for the '90-'97 tops, but they cost almost as much as a new top. The no-zip glass tops for '90-'97 cars work very well, but the top doesn't fold down quite

as far as before. It's no problem really and the boot still fits. If I hadn't told you, you probably wouldn't notice.

**Q.** Will a glass window work with my roll/style bar?

**A.** Generally, yes. Please double-check with the vendor or manufacturer of the top to be sure.

**Q.** Will the top from a '99 and up (w/glass) fit on my '90-'97?

**A.** Generally, yes. There are a few caveats though. First, get the top and frame together, that way, the whole replacement process only takes a couple hours. Second, if you're buying from a wrecked car, be sure the top frame is straight and not bent! The same applies if you have the top shipped across country. The frame can get bent slightly in shipping and then not fit properly on the car. This has happened more than once to folks on the Miata forum. Get a return guarantee if you can. Lastly, I wouldn't buy a used top from a '99. Some of them had weak springs in the frame that caused other wear issues. If you can work around all that, putting a newer used top on an older car can be a good solution and a quick way to upgrade to a glass window.

### **Care & Feeding of your top...**

**Q.** How do I care for my current/new top?

**A.** Vinyl tops should be treated with a vinyl treatment such as Vinylex, 303 or similar vinyl protectant. Be sure to follow the directions on the container. Usually, excess protectant should be buffed off after application to prevent streaking and smearing in the rain. Personally, I use and recommend 303 Aerospace Protectant. 303 products can be found locally at The Anderson's and Pickups Plus.

Fabric tops should be washed with car soap and a soft brush. They can be treated with 303 Fabric Protector or the Raggtopp products. Raggtopp can be ordered online. Google is your friend!

**Q.** How can I get a tan vinyl top clean?

**A.** Tan vinyl tops can be a bit difficult to get clean. Start with car soap and a good stiff brush. For more cleaning power, you can step up to a degreaser like Simple Green, Orange Power, Fantastik, etc. Be sure to rinse thoroughly. Degreasers can strip wax, so you may need to re-wax the car when you're finished. Small spots can be gently rubbed with a Mr. Clean Magic Eraser. Follow up with protectant.

**Q.** How can I clean/restore my plastic window?

**A.** Plastic windows are easily scratched, aren't they? To minimize scratching, they should only be washed with a soft wash mitt and plenty of soap and water. Dab the window to dry it, don't pull or wipe anything across it. Meguiars' Plast-X or Novus plastic polish can be used to help restore the soft plastic window. Plast-X can be found at most local auto parts stores. Be sure to start with a clean window before polishing. Realize that some scratches and brown spots are too much to remove with polish.

**Q.** How can I restore the faded inside of my top?

**A.** If you or the previous owner drove and parked too much without using the boot, the inside lining of the top can fade from sun exposure. While the damage to the canvas lining can't be reversed, it can be made to look much better with a little fabric paint/dye. I've used Duplicolor's Vinyl & Fabric paint in an aerosol can to successfully re-color the lining like new. The material can be found at most local auto parts stores.

First, park the car outside. Simply raise the top without latching it and open both doors. Use drop cloths to drape over both doors, then drape another over the windshield, across the interior and onto the rear shelf, effectively covering the interior of the car. Use newspaper to wrap around the exposed parts of the top frame and the latches. Carefully mask a plastic window with newspaper and painter's tape. Masking a glass rear window is optional since any overspray can be easily

removed with lacquer thinner. Spray the dye according to the directions on the can, being careful to not breathe too much of the fumes. Let dry. This dye is also excellent on faded fabric seats.

**Disclaimer**

Use this information at your discretion and be sure you thoroughly understand any project before you start! Your mileage may vary, see dealer for details. Measure twice, cut once... or if you're like me, continue cutting as long as necessary!

**Did you know???**

You can reduce wind noise with the top down by raising the windows just to the tops of the side mirrors. A lot of the noise is caused by air turbulence between the side mirror and the triangle door window. Raising the window to this level smoothes the air and makes conversation or listening to the radio easier. Happy Motoring!