

From Soft Tops to Hard Tops

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Does it get any better than Central Ohio in October? It's my favorite time of year! While we're all enjoying the cooler days and beautiful fall colors, some of us start preparing for the kinds of weather that can start in the next month or so. I always wait as long as I can before switching to my hardtop and winter wheels! So now is a good time to talk about hard tops, and get those tops ready for action. For those of you who store your Miata in the winter... perhaps you should go find where you put your battery charger last spring! :O)

So, what's the purpose of having a hard top in the first place? Do you need one? Well, if you drive year-round, your Miata can survive the winter without it, but it's REALLY nice to have. It's more insulated than the soft top, so it holds heat better, making you more comfortable. It adds a bit of rigidity to the car, making it a bit better over bumps. It features a large glass rear window, making it easier to see and easier to scrape on those frosty mornings! Last, but certainly not least, hard tops look really cool! I swear I get more looks and more comments about my car when the hard top is installed...

Here are a few tips I've learned about using and caring for a hard top. First, use a black towel to cover the soft top while it's down. The sun can beat through the back window, even in winter, and fade the lining of your soft top! Using a black towel prevents reflections of the towel in the rear window and looks better too! :O) With the hard top on, it's no problem to go through the car wash. I've done it dozens of times. Just stick with the "touchless" or pay-n-spray washes... stay away from the brushes and soft-cloth car washes as you normally would! Lastly, the leading edge of the hardtop tends to chip over time. An easy fix/cover-up is to install black rubber door-edge guard on the leading edge of the top. It covers and protects from further chips and it looks like it came from the factory that way.

Where to store your hard top is always a good question. Out of harm's way is the right answer, so here are a few ideas. A few vendors sell a hard top hoist that allows you to hoist the top off the car and store it hanging from the ceiling (see the Moss catalog for a picture). Next, you can easily make a pair of "H" out of scrap 2x4s, and set the back of the top in the "H" while leaning the front against the wall. In my garage, the top hangs from a side wall. Simply (and securely) install a few lag screws and hang the top from the rear latches. Measure the distance between the Frankenstein bolts on the rear deck to get the spacing you need for the screws.

OK, so now it's time to get the top ready to put on the car. Let's assume that you've already washed the top inside and out and waxed the paint. If you have a hard top, you already know how to put it on the car. If it needs adjusting, here are a few tips. First, latch the front before latching the sides, to help seat the top front to rear. If needed, the latches can be adjusted like the latches on your soft top. If you still need a little more adjustment, the latches on the rear of the top can be opened and tweaked. Simply remove the screw and open the latch. It's pretty obvious from there. This can help the sealing around the windshield header and especially around the windows.

So let's assume I've piqued your curiosity and you've decided to look for a hard top. I'm not sure if they're still available through the dealer, so you're most likely looking for a used top. Used tops seem to run from about \$800-\$1200, depending on condition and color, and average around \$1000. Better condition or rare colors tend to cost more. Used tops can be found in the classifieds on Miata.net, E-bay and elsewhere. The popularity of spec-Miata racing has made finding a used top a bit tougher than it used to be.

All '90-'05 tops are compatible with all '90-'05 cars, though the later tops include a rear defroster if you want one. A rear defroster is a nice-to-have, but not a necessity. Depending on the year of your car, you may need some additional hardware to attach the top to your car. Having a top painted to match your car typically runs a few hundred dollars. Painting one yourself is a good DIY project if you have the tools and don't mind a lot of wet-sanding along the way. The trick with a DIY paint job is the gasket around the rear window. Instead of removing the window, stuff a piece of nylon rope under the edge of the gasket. That

will lift the edge of the gasket off the surface of the top, allowing you to paint around and underneath the edge! On the other hand, having an off-color top can look pretty cool, like a black top on a white or silver car.

Here's hoping the cold weather holds off for a while and we get as much top-down time as possible this year! As always, happy motoring!