

Making It Shine

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Polish. As an adjective, it's a really good type of sausage. As a verb, it's the process of making something smooth and shiny. In our context, it means the process of making our cars shine! While waxing is important to protect the paint, it typically does little to clean the paint, add gloss, correct defects, remove oxidation or increase the depth of color. Those things are best accomplished by polishing.

I realize that there are entire handbooks written on polishing and caring for automotive paint. Some of it you just have to learn by doing. With that in mind, I'll do my best to distill it all down to some important points and direct you to where you can find more info if you like.

First, we'd better have some common terminology to use. In this article, a Polish is a product used to clean and level the paint and doesn't really provide any protective qualities. It should be followed by a Wax or Sealant. A Wax or Sealant is used as the last step to provide a sacrificial layer of protection. For ease of discussion, let's refer to those as the Last Step Product (LSP). Yes, I know there are "cleaner waxes" out there and polishes designed to be used as the last step, so let's use the terms above to concentrate on the process and keep it all straight, OK?

Next, we'd better define the end result and defects that might need to be addressed. The result we're looking for is smooth, clean paint with sharp reflections. Along the way, we may have to correct things like oxidation and fading, swirls, scratches, dullness and stains. The bottom line is that it's all in the preparation. If the car doesn't look really good before you put the LSP on it, the Wax or Sealant isn't likely to help much.

Keep in mind that all of the single-stage paints oxidize much more readily than the basecoat/clearcoat cars. Seen a red NA with flat-looking "pinkish" paint? Or a white that looks "chalky"? That's oxidation. All of the solid colored NA models used single-stage paint, along with some of the '99 cars. If you have single-stage paint and have never polished it, you're really missing out! All of the metallic/mica colors used clearcoat, but even they get duller over time without you realizing it. Polishing will bring back clarity and depth of color in all paints.

So where to start? First, wash the car to get the paint surface clean. Next, you can use a clay bar if you like. We could have a whole 'nother article on clay bars. You can find them at most places that sell car detailing supplies. Mother's, Meguiars and Clay Magic all sell a clay bar product. Clay is used to get bonded contaminants off the paint, such as tree sap, overspray, rail dust and more. The result is much smoother paint. If you've never clayed your car, I highly recommend it. Clay is easy to use, just follow the instructions. If you'd like to speed the process, you can wash and clay at the same time. You simply wash a panel, use the clay bar, wipe again with your wash mitt and rinse.

Once all that's done, you're ready to polish. At this point, you'll need some product. If you want to short-cut a bit, you can try one of the many "cleaner wax" or "one-step" products out there. Some good one-steps I know of are Meguiar's *Color-X* and their *Cleaner Wax*. Mother's and Eagle One also have decent one-step products. Otherwise, you'll be using a polish and following it with your LSP.

The one rule to remember is to start with the least abrasive polish and work your way up only if needed. Most labels will give a sense of how much "cut" the product has. For oxidation (nearly any red NA), or swirlmarks (most dark colored cars), you may need a more abrasive polish, followed by a less abrasive one. If your polish leaves a hazy finish, you'll need to follow with another less abrasive polish. If your polish doesn't do everything you want on the first pass, another pass may get you the result without resorting to a more abrasive polish. I've found Mother's Power Polish to work very well in all but the worst situations.

For the actual polishing, follow the directions on the bottle and do one panel at a time in the same sequence we discussed when washing the car. Break the panel up into 2'x2' sections to make it more manageable. If doing it by hand, you should be using a foam, terrycloth or micro-fiber applicator. Keep in mind that terrycloth typically provides a bit more cutting action. Regardless of how you apply it, you need to work the polish until it breaks down and begins to dry up. Do not work the polish after it's dried. Once finished, wipe away the residue with a cotton towel or micro-fiber cloth and review that section. Be careful around trim pieces, the polish can be hard to clean off.

I really recommend using a powered orbital-type buffer, such as the Porter-Cable Dual-Action Sander Polisher or Cyclo Polisher. A \$25 buffer from Wal-Mart isn't bad, just don't expect it to last a long time, have adjustable speeds or interchangeable pads. The advantage of the former is the selection of different pads available that are all safe for your paint. PLEASE stay away from wool pads and bonnets. They just aren't safe for a beginner and it's too easy to end up with more swirls or burn the paint when using wool. Stick with terrycloth bonnets and foam pads designed for polishing paint. Bonnets can be found wherever you bought the buffer, foam pads and backing plates can be sourced through a bodyshop supply house. Keep the speeds low, keep the buffer moving and the pad flat on the paint, and you'll do fine.

What about the products; the polishes, waxes and sealants themselves? Well, I've mentioned a few brands in this discussion, mainly because they are readily found on the shelves of your local autoparts store. However, there are many other great products out there available locally, through distributors and online (Zaino, Klasse, Duragloss and Menzerna to name but a few). These days, you really aren't going to find any truly bad products out there, but some may work better for your situation than others. How you use them, and how often, are usually more important than the brand you choose. On well-prepped paint, nearly anything is going to look good!

Don't forget, this article is intended to whet your appetite and make you dangerous. There's plenty more information out there to be found on polishing and caring for your paint. Here are a few websites that might help: www.autopia.org, www.meguiars.com, www.showcarshine.com and the detailing handbook at www.griotsgarage.com/pdfs/DetailersHB_BW.pdf.

Disclaimer: Not responsible for accidents. Polishing and detailing your Miata can be addictive. It may cause side effects which include shortness of breath, joint pain, delayed backache and sudden urges to try new detailing products. Contact your doctor if you begin sniffing waxes as you may be experiencing a rare, but serious, side-effect. :O)