

Restoring a Wheel

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Gunk. Yup, gunk. That's what I call the stuff I get off my steering wheel once or twice a year. I don't know how it gets there, or how it multiplies... but it gets on there. I bet you get some weird stuff on your steering wheel too. Or, at least I hope I'm not the only one! Does your wheel ever get kind of sticky or feel greasy when it damp out? That's what I'm talking about. In extreme cases, the wheel begins to turn brown or gray in spots. Let's talk about how to get that wheel clean and how to restore a worn steering wheel.

Miata steering wheels are typically covered in leather. Interestingly, the leather on the wheel is good old-fashioned dyed leather, whereas the Miata leather seats are painted leather. We need to know this in order to clean or restore the wheel properly. Keep in mind that the center "hub" area of the wheel is merely covered in vinyl.

So let's start with cleaning. Dyed leather should be cared for as you would care for your own skin. Make up some warm soapy water in a container, or use a cleaning agent designed specifically for leather, such as Lexol. Most of the over-the-counter leather cleaner/conditioner products (especially wipes) don't clean well enough to clear up the long-term gunk that builds up on a steering wheel. Use a wash cloth to get started; you might need a "soft" brush for any really tough stuff and to get around the stitching. I usually sit in the driver's seat with a towel over my lap to catch the drips and drops.

Once the wheel is clean, you can use a towel to help dry it off, but really, it's going to take all day or overnight to really dry out. Once it's dry, you can apply your favorite leather conditioner. Lexol, Leatherique, Duragloss and Zaino all make some great leather care products. Applying them while the leather is damp just keeps the conditioner from soaking in. Multiple applications of conditioner can help an old wheel that's dried out. Let it soak in as long as you can, overnight works for me. Have you noticed this process takes a while? Once you've conditioned the wheel, use a clean towel to buff off any excess and you're ready to go!

OK, but what if my wheel is scuffed up, scratched and needs some refinishing? Well, after the wheel is clean, completely dried and conditioned, you can do your touch-up work. There are two ways I know of going about it. If your wheel has just a few nicks and scratches like mine, I think the easiest solution is a little black shoe polish. I rub it in with a rag and buff it off with another. Buff it well and it blends right in; and won't come off on your hands or clothes. For serious restoration, you can recolor the wheel with black shoe dye. Let the wheel dry out for a few days after the conditioning step and buff with wheel off a few times to be sure there's no conditioner on the surface. Be careful with the application sponge, or use a rag to apply the dye. Let it dry and follow with a little shoe polish and a good buffing. By the way, black dye and shoe polish look really bad smeared in a tan interior, so be careful... ☺

With winter weather starting to move in, now's a great time for projects like this. For those of us who drive our Miatas year-round, it's getting time to swap wheels and think about putting that hardtop on. Remember, safety first! In either case, let's be thankful for the good fortune of having toys like these. Happy Thanksgiving to all!

Now, the fine print: Not responsible for accidents. The ideas and instructions stated above are not entirely original and are provided for your information and convenience. Use at your own risk. Your results may vary. Contents may settle during shipment. See dealer for details.