

## SATURDAY MECHANIC

# PREPPING YOUR CAR FOR PAINT

BY JOHN DECKER

● Junior has asked to borrow the keys for his big date on Friday. So you reach into your pocket for the keys to your pickup, traditionally his weapon of choice for cruising with the big guys. But this time he demurs—Betty Sue thinks the truck is too nasty-looking, and he'd prefer to use Mom's car.

After the shock of rejection wears off, you stroll out and examine the pickup. After all, when a teenager thinks your truck needs cosmetic improvement, it's time to pull off the blinders and think about a little bodywork.

### Painting is for pros

Prep work aside, automotive painting couldn't be easier. With a little experience, spraying an entire car should only take about 20 minutes.

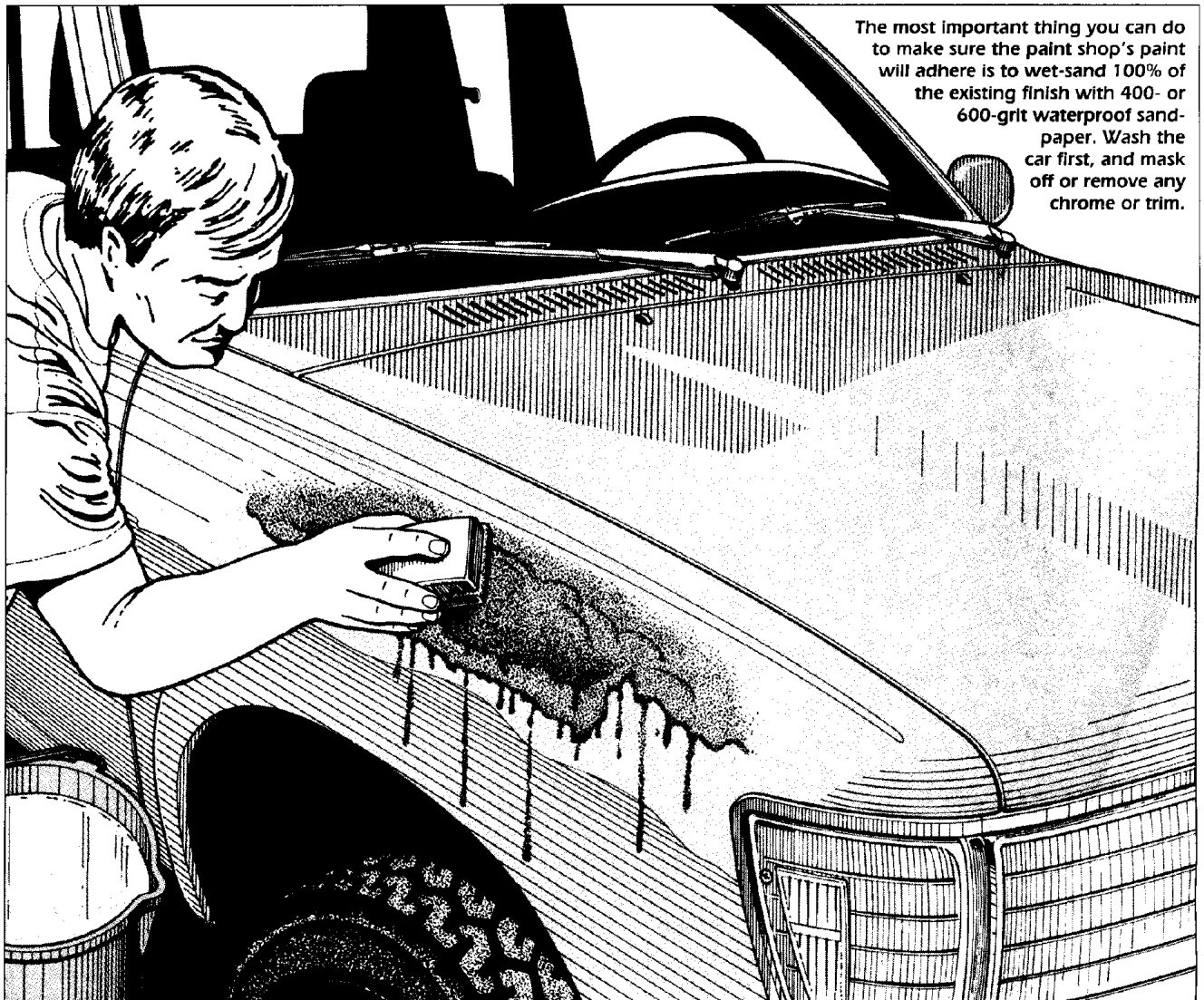
All you need is an air compressor and a spray gun. Oh yeah, you'll also need a \$30,000 downdraft spray booth (with baking cycle), a supplied-air respirator and a real knack for smoothly flowing on paint without runs, sags or orange peel.

There's the rub. You may have a compressor and spray gun, but even large body shops can barely afford the

other stuff. And when you consider that chain refinishers such as Earl Scheib and Maaco can do an adequate job of painting your current ride for \$150 to \$300, it makes sense to leave paint work to the pros.

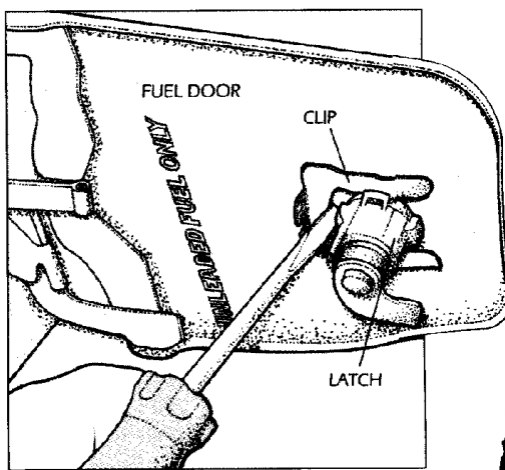
Besides, for absolutely optimum results, 90% of a good paint job is not in the painting anyway, it's in the pre-painting preparation. And you can do that yourself.

As you might guess, budget paint jobs don't include a whole lot of prep work. For \$149.95, Earl Scheib's preparation includes machine sand-



The most important thing you can do to make sure the paint shop's paint will adhere is to wet-sand 100% of the existing finish with 400- or 600-grit waterproof sandpaper. Wash the car first, and mask off or remove any chrome or trim.

# CAR CARE



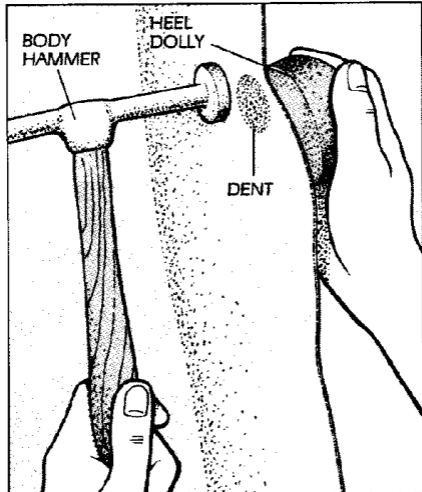
Remove as much of the hardware and trim as you can, instead of masking.

ing, chemically cleaning the body, spot priming areas that need it and masking over things that aren't supposed to be painted—like the windows. At some cut-rate shops, chrome and badges are negotiable. Any necessary bodywork costs extra.

Doing your own light bodywork such as fixing small dents and door dings or repairing rusty areas (see "Repairing Body Rust," page 101, June '94) can save you a lot of money and help ensure the quality of the finished job. You can also greatly improve the quality of a budget paint job by removing and sanding under items that the painters would normally mask over, such as badges and assorted trim. But don't start sanding and dismantling your car first. A body shop will be much more receptive to your plan if you let them know what you're going to do ahead of time.

## Paint prep primer

Unless you really hate the color of your vehicle, you'll save yourself work



PM ILLUSTRATIONS BY RON CARBON

Use a body hammer and dolly to smooth out minor dents. Take your time.

and aggravation if you plan to keep it the same color. Among other things, you can avoid the hours of prep work and extra expense of painting doorjamb and the underside of the trunklid and hood. You also avoid the chance of unpainted spots rearing themselves unexpectedly.

Start your paint prep by taking your vehicle to a do-it-yourself car wash. Pressure washing the engine, doorjamb, wheel wells and other under-body areas will help to ensure a dust-free paint job later. Cleaning the vehicle's outside will prevent you from sanding into the paint-finish-ruining dirt and grime.

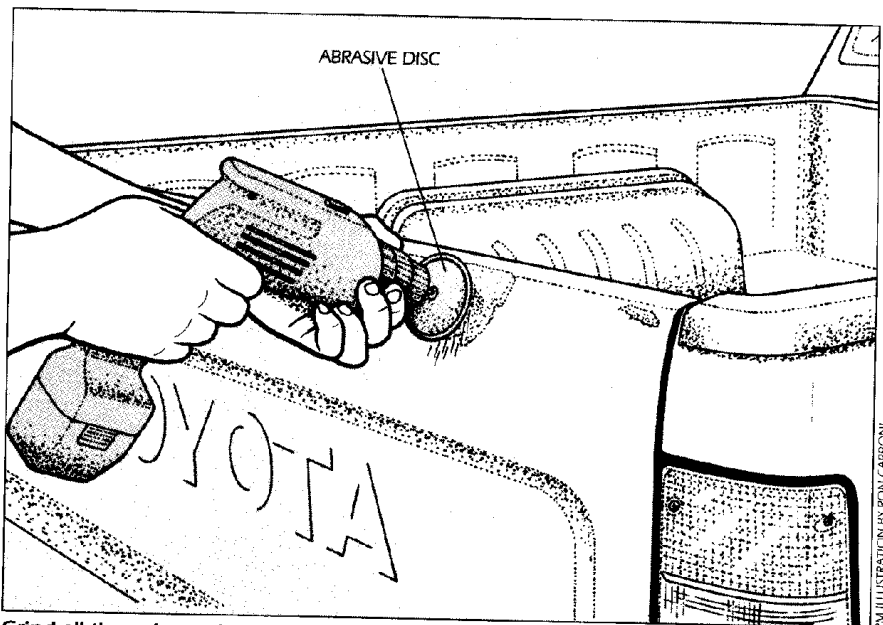
Nothing makes paint stick better or last longer than a thorough sanding. Paint needs a microscopically rough, craggy surface to latch on to—professional painters call this effect “tooth”—or the new paint will eventually loosen and fall off the old paint. Sanding large painted surfaces is easy. Problems crop up around areas like badges, antennas, bumpers and door mirrors. That's because no matter how careful you are, it's impossible to remove all traces of shine where the part meets the body. And paint that is applied next to a part instead of underneath causes a paint ledge to form, where dirt, water and ice start prying away. Sooner or later, the paint comes loose. After that, paint-peel is just a car wash away.

The only effective way to keep paint from peeling is to remove each part and sand under it. To have a body shop remove all these pieces can cost hundreds of dollars in labor—which is why the discount shops mask off all those parts. You can remove them yourself, however, and make a discount paint job look like a top-dollar custom paint job and have the paint finish last years longer. It's not practical to remove the windshield, rear window and door glass. But you can remove items that are common starting points for peeling problems, such as lock cylinders, door handles, luggage racks, radio antennas and rearview mirrors.

### **Take it all off**

To remove these parts, it's best to consult your vehicle's factory shop manual, but here's some general procedures. Make sure the window is rolled up, then remove interior door hardware such as the armrest, window crank and inner handle, then pry (or unscrew) the inner panel off the door. Lock cylinders are usually held in place with a spring clip. Door handles and mirrors are usually held

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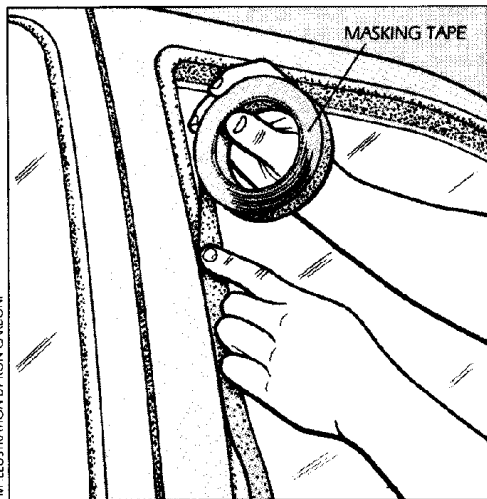
PM ILLUSTRATION BY RON CARBONI

**Grind all the paint and rust out of dents and creases before applying body filler.**

by small bolts. The radio antenna, hood emblems and body badges are other places where paint can peel. Usually, it's not necessary to completely remove the antenna. Simply loosen the top retaining nut that holds the antenna in the body, mask the antenna shaft and lower the antenna

into the fender or quarter panel. Hood emblems unbolt from under the hood. On older vehicles, badges and letters are mounted through holes in the body and fastened with spring nuts. On newer vehicles, these parts are often fastened with double-sided foam tape and are easily pried off with

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PH ILLUSTRATION BY RON CARBONI

**Use fresh masking tape to carefully mask all the body trim on the entire car.**

a 1-in. putty knife. If necessary, some time under a heat gun will help convince the adhesive to let go.

Of course, you'll also want to remove all large brightwork, such as chrome bumpers, the grille, headlight doors and taillight bezels. Once everything is removed, dents and dings can be repaired.

But before you start, make an honest assessment of your abilities. Your

vehicle is going to end up at a body shop, right? It might make sense to leave those big dents and rust holes for the pros.

## **Smooth 'n' fill**

For smaller dents that you can reach from behind, use a body hammer and dolly to tap the dent out. To avoid over-stretching the metal, start at the outer edges first and work to the center. Pound down any high spots in the dent, then use a 36-grit sanding disc in a portable drill to remove all traces of paint and primer, and to also help prepare the surface for plastic filler.

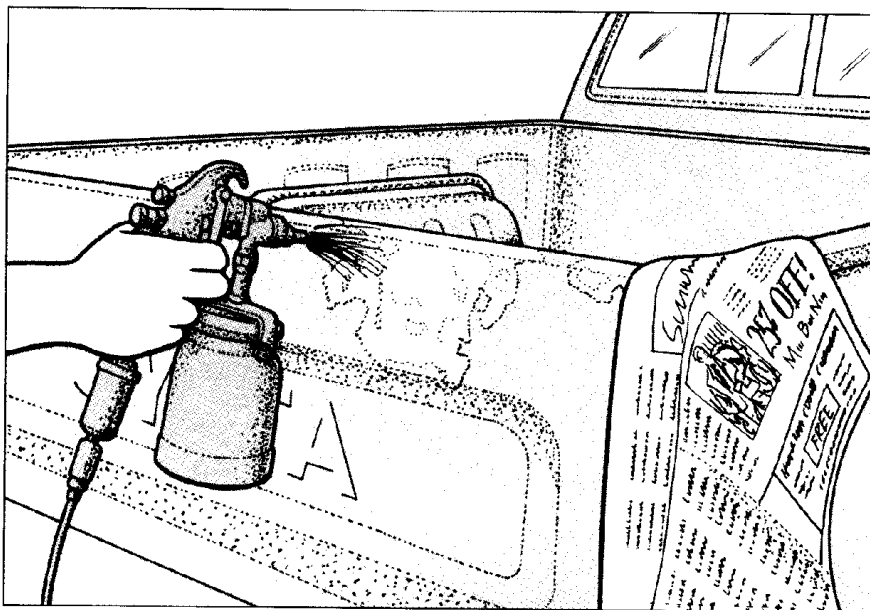
Mix the filler and hardener according to the instructions on the can, then, working in one direction, apply the filler to low areas using a plastic squeegee. Plastic filler hardens in two stages. First, it hardens to a consistency approximating that of cheddar cheese and remains that way for a few minutes—exactly how long depends on how much hardener you've added and the ambient temperature and humidity. During this critical time, you can use a perforated Surform file—commonly called a

“cheese grater” by the pros—to file away large portions of the filler until it's level with the surrounding area.

After filing, the filler will cure to its full hardness and it can be machine sanded smooth with 100-grit paper. Check the contour of the repaired area with your hand. Gently tap down high spots in the filler with the hammer and then refill these areas, file and sand again. Now the area is ready for primer. In addition to providing a surface for paint to adhere to, primer allows you to build up the area so it can be finish-sanded smooth.

Don't waste your time using lacquer primer from a spray can. These primers are very heavily thinned so the paint can easily pass through the can's miniature nozzles. The result is that primer buildup is minimal. Two-part polyester primer-surfacers, such as Marson's Poly-Fill, are by far the easiest to use and give the best surface buildup. Mix the hardener and primer according to the directions, then spray on two or three coats. Once the primer hardens, machine-sand the primer with 180-grit sandpaper to remove heavy scratches and small waves in the body. Then wet-sand the repair with 400-grit paper.

## CAR CARE



Prime and resand the areas you've worked on, then sand again before painting.

### Sand, sand, sand

After all dents and dings are repaired, the whole body should be sanded. The object here is exactly the opposite of what you normally try to do to your car's finish—you want to remove every trace of shine from the body. To do that, wet-sand the entire vehicle

using 400-grit waterproof sandpaper. Flood the area with plenty of water while you sand, and don't forget to sand all the areas from where you removed parts. Feather-edge nicks and scratches, paying particular attention to chipped areas around door edges and rocker panels.

Once there's no more shine on the body, wash the vehicle with warm soapy water, rinse it and let it dry. You'll be amazed at how much shine there still is.

Before you hit these areas with the sandpaper again, spot prime any feather-edged areas as well as any areas where you've sanded through to the metal. After the primer has hardened, wet-sand these areas and the leftover shiny areas with 400-grit paper, then repeat the wash and rinse.

Still have some shiny spots? Guess what. Do it again!

### Getting to the shop

While the body shop can mask the large areas that shouldn't be painted, like the windshield and the rear window, it pays to run the first layer of masking tape yourself around areas that are immediately adjacent to the body, like the trim around the windshield and rear window, since you can take the time to be extra careful.

Since a well-prepped car is devoid of just about everything that makes it legal for driving on the street, such as mirrors, headlights and taillights, you should seriously consider having your car towed to the shop. **PM**